

# This week in history: June 16-22

16 June 2014

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## 25 years ago: US wildcat strikes support Pittston coal miners

Wildcat strikes in coalfields broke out in Alabama, Illinois, Missouri and Ohio on June 19, 1989, despite a back-to-work demand by the union leadership. The strikes were in support of the strike of miners at the Pittston Coal Company, which began in April over the company's termination of health care benefits for some 1,500 retirees, widows and disabled miners, and refusal to make contributions into a trust established for older retirees. Initially, the strike stopped production at mines in Virginia, West Virginia and Kentucky. Pittston miners had been previously working without a contract for 14 months

By the end of the week, more than 40,000 coal miners were on strike in at least 10 states, with the vast majority of union mines in the Eastern coalfields shut down. Roving pickets spread the strike from the Charleston, West Virginia area, where the wildcats broke out June 13. By June 22, the strike was joined by 16,000 miners in West Virginia, 6,600 in Pennsylvania, 8,000 in Illinois, 5,000 in Alabama, and thousands more in Indiana, Ohio, Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee and Missouri.

The United Mine Workers (UMW) broke its silence on the wildcats June 20, when Vice President Cecil Roberts told the media that "telegrams had gone out," calling for a return to work. He said the wildcat strikes were in violation of a national UMW contract.

The wildcat strikes began after a UMW rally the previous week in Charleston, SC, to protest Pittston's failure to sign a nationwide contract and to protest fines and jail terms assessed against union members in Virginia.

A statement in the June 23 issue of the *Bulletin* newspaper, one of the forerunners of the *World Socialist Web Site*, declared: "Since the 1960s, the miners have been repeatedly forced to carry out bitter struggles, not only against the coal

bosses, but the leaders of their own union. First, they rebelled against Boyle and replaced him with Miller, who promised a more democratic union. After the betrayals of the national strikes of 1973-74 and 1977-78, Miller was replaced with Sam Church. He, in turn, was thrown out and replaced with Trumka, who has proven to be the biggest traitor of all, whose policies have brought the union to the brink of destruction."

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## 50 years ago: Three civil rights workers murdered in Mississippi

On June 21, 1964, three young civil rights workers were kidnapped and murdered in Philadelphia, Mississippi, their bodies later found buried beneath an earthen dam outside the town. The three were James Chaney, 21, a young black man from Meridian, Mississippi, and Andrew Goodman, 20, and Michael Schwerner, 24, two Jewish youth from New York City.

The three were in Mississippi as part of the Freedom Summer campaign to register blacks to vote. They were traveling through Philadelphia en route back from Longdale, Mississippi, where they had gone to investigate the burning of a black church by the Ku Klux Klan. In Philadelphia they were stopped, allegedly for a traffic violation, and held in the Neshoba County jail, where their murder was being organized by lawmen and members of the Klan.

Shortly after their release from jail, as they attempted to drive out of town, their car was stopped again, and the three were abducted and beaten to death. The men who committed these murders, one of the most notorious crimes of the civil rights era, included a local deputy sheriff, Cecil Price, and Klansmen from Philadelphia and the nearby city of Meridian. The search to find their bodies lasted for two months.

The murders took place two days after the US Senate passed President Lyndon Johnson's civil rights bill by a margin of 73-27. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 would ban

discrimination in places of public accommodation, publicly owned facilities, employment and union membership, and would grant the federal government new authority to enforce school desegregation and voting rights. Voting against the bill were 21 Democrats, including Robert Byrd of West Virginia, William Fulbright of Arkansas, Albert Gore Sr. of Tennessee, and Sam Ervin of North Carolina.

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### **75 years ago: Goebbels makes violent threats in Danzig**

German Nazi Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels visited the Free State of Danzig (today Gdansk, Poland) to present his regime's Culture Prize and make a speech June 18 to the ruling Danzig Nazi party at their third annual rally. Goebbels told the audience of 100,000 to remain in good spirits because Hitler would not be prevented by any combination of foreign powers from bringing the city and its ethnic German population into the Third Reich. Danzig had been established as a free state in the Treaty of Versailles, but in a binding customs union with Poland.

Goebbels described it as the misfortune of the "German city" of Danzig and its people to lie at the mouth of the Vistula "and according to Warsaw's theories, cities on estuaries always belong to the countries through which the rivers flow," he declared, before revealing more than he intended when he added, "By this theory Rotterdam would belong to Germany." The Dutch city of Rotterdam, the Netherlands and indeed the whole of western Europe would, within months, be militarily invaded and placed under Nazi control.

In a clear case of the criminal seeking to pin its planned crimes on the victim, Goebbels went on to portray the Polish government, not German fascism, as the aggressors. He asserted, "The Poles know they are wrong, and because of that they resort to abuse ... I am surprised that they do not demand the Elbe or even the Rhine, where they would meet their new ally, the English, whose frontier, as we know, is on the Rhine."

Goebbels reminded the audience that in his last Reichstag speech Hitler had unambiguously declared "Danzig is a German city and will come to Germany." He also took the opportunity to rattle sabers at the British, accusing them of military designs to encircle Germany and warned them that that Nazi Germany now possessed the most powerful army in the world.

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### **100 years ago: Major coal mining disasters in Canada and Belgium**

On June 19, 1914, coal miners and their families faced tragedy in two separate incidents in Canada and Belgium. The two disasters, occurring on separate continents on the same day, underscored the perilous conditions confronting coal miners internationally. In one case, the miners were buried alive; in the other, the workers were saved by heroic rescue efforts.

At Hillcrest Mines in Hillcrest, Alberta, in western Canada, some 196 coal miners were killed when a massive explosion ripped through the No. 20 mine. Around six hundred workers were in the mine at the time of the blast.

Newspapers reported that miners' wives rushed to the site in an attempt to find their husbands, but were barred from the area. The widespread anger erupted in a riot which was quelled by government troops. Rescue work was halted shortly after, because of dangerous gases and heavy smoke present in the mine. A relief train had been sent, but little was reportedly accomplished.

On June 23, the United Mine Workers union announced the grim toll of the disaster: 41 workers rescued alive, a total death toll of 196, with 188 bodies recovered, just 162 identified. The search continued for the remaining eight bodies, and the Canadian government offered \$50,000 to the families of the dead as compensation.

The explosion was the worst coal mining disaster in Canadian history, and devastated the population of Hillcrest, which was just 1,000 at the time of the blast.

On the same day as the Hillcrest tragedy, 200 miners were trapped in the Vieille Marihay mine in Liege, Belgium, after a major explosion ignited a fire in the mine. Four hundred miners had been at work at the time of the disaster. Those closest to the mine elevators reached safety, but the 200 left behind were trapped behind a wall of flames. Firefighters worked courageously to put out the blaze, and all the miners survived to be rescued.

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