

This week in history: July 7-13

7 July 2014

25 Years Ago | 50 Years Ago | 75 Years Ago | 100 Years Ago

25 years ago: US coal miner rebellion spreads

On July 8, 1989, 2,500 striking coal miners and their supporters rallied in Logan, West Virginia to back the wildcat strikes that had been spreading throughout US coalfields. The leadership of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) union, headed by Richard Trumka, worked might and main to end the wildcats that had begun a month earlier in solidarity with the miners at Pittston Coal Company, who had been striking in defense of health benefits.

Trumka called a three-day “memorial cooling-off period” for July 10-12, hoping for a concerted return to work at the end of it. The plan was a complete failure as it was met with defiance by the miners, whose numbers off the job grew to 60,000. Clashes between strikers and scabs, company goons and state police took place in West Virginia, Kentucky and Pennsylvania.

On July 12, 400 miners picketed the New Beckley Mining Company entrance in Glen Daniel, West Virginia and the company responded by using helicopters to bring in scabs. A company spokesman told local television news, “We own this mine and we’re going to work it. If there has to be bloodshed let it start here.” July 13, A.T. Massey boss Morgan Massey appealed to the governor of West Virginia to call out the National Guard “before it is too late.”

As the battles in US coalfields were heating up and the wildcats were spreading, against the betrayals of the UMWA, coal miners in the Soviet Union began a wave of strikes that would challenge the Gorbachev regime.

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50 years ago: Leftists sentenced to prison in Cuba

On July 12, 1964, the Pabloite revisionist tendency led by Juan Posadas of Argentina reported that three of its members were sentenced to prison terms by the government of Fidel

Castro in Cuba.

Andres Alfonso, a transport worker, received a sentence of five years, while the two others, an office worker and an employee of the ministry of transport, received two-year terms. Alfonso was arrested in November, 1963, while the others, Florida Fraga and Ricardo Ferrera, were arrested while protesting for his release. The three were tried in secret on undisclosed charges.

Idalberto Ferrera, general secretary of the Posadist tendency in Cuba, along with Roberto Tejera, had been held without charges since April, 1964. The arrest of Ferrera followed the publication of an open letter to the Castro regime charging it with “the utilization of Stalinist methods.” Persecution of the Cuban Posadists began in 1961 with the closure of their printing press. The authorities then blocked the publication of Trotsky’s *Permanent Revolution*.

Juan Posadas split with the group headed by Nahuel Moreno in Argentina in 1958. However, all the various factions of Pabloism—a tendency that sought to liquidate orthodox Marxism and subordinate it to various non-working class political formations—glorified Castro, proclaiming his regime a model for all of Latin America.

The repression in Cuba did not evoke any change in policy from the American Pabloites of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). The SWP had justified their split from Trotskyism (the International Committee of the Fourth International) and their unification with the Pabloite International Secretariat largely on the grounds that Castro’s Cuba should be categorized as a workers state. The SWP claimed that Castro was “an unconscious Marxist” (he himself did not make any claim to Marxism until years after the revolution) and that the success of his guerrilla movement showed that it was not necessary to build independent parties based on the working class in Latin America.

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75 years ago: Deportation trial begins for US West Coast longshoremen’s leader

Harry Bridges, the leader of the American West Coast Longshoremen and West Coast director of the Congress of

Industrial Organizations (CIO), faced the US Immigration Service on July 11, 1939. On the opening day of his deportation trial, the Australian-born Bridges denied being a member of the American Communist Party (CPUSA).

Party membership was a deportable offense for an immigrant, since according to the authorities, the CPUSA planned to overthrow the American government through the use of force and violence. However, the thoroughly Stalinist American Communist Party had by the late 1930s long since discarded socialist revolution and adopted, under the direction of the Stalinist bureaucracy in Moscow, the counterrevolutionary policy of the Popular Front alliance with so-called “progressive” sections of the ruling class. In the United States, under the leadership of Earl Browder, this meant the slavish devotion to Roosevelt’s Democratic Party and the New Deal.

Despite the counterrevolutionary role of the CPUSA, Bridges was targeted for removal from US shores because he was associated with the 1934 strike and the powerful section of workers who the shipping magnates and port authorities wished to subordinate. Bridges had played a major role in that historic 83-day longshoremen’s strike, including a general strike in San Francisco, which brought about the unionization of Pacific Coast ports.

At the trial Bridges denied his membership of the CPUSA and instead described himself as a militant trade unionist. While making reformist noises against the exploitation of the working class and naked state repression during the course of the trial, when push came to shove Bridges denied the necessity of socialist revolution and affirmed the sanctity of bourgeois property rights. Bridges promoted illusions in the Democratic administration and the capitalist nostrums of Roosevelt’s New Deal policies.

Bridges’ prostration won him an eventual respite from the US Supreme Court, which stepped in to curtail proceedings and overturn the charges faced by Bridges. The American ruling class had, over the course of the 1930s, taken the political measure of the CPUSA. American Stalinism, and Bridges himself, would conform to those calculations during the course of the Second World War when he and the CPUSA promoted a no-strike agreement for the duration of the conflict and actively subordinated all workers struggles to the victory of American imperialism.

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100 years ago: Austria-Hungary, Germany prepare war against Serbia

On July 7, 1914, Austro-Hungarian diplomat Count Hoyos returned to Vienna bearing news to the Austro-Hungarian Crown Council meeting of Germany’s full support for

preparations for war against Serbia. Germany would support Austria’s bellicose stance, even if its actions “should bring about a big war,” he reported. This period, known as the “July Crisis”, directly precipitated the outbreak of World War I.

The assassination the previous month of Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo provided the pretext for war and the general consensus at the Crown Council meeting was in favor of an attack. Discussion at the meeting was preoccupied with how to go about launching war. Some favored an unprovoked attack, arguing that it would take Serbia off guard, while others argued for ultimatums. In the words of one of the delegates, Count Tizla, such demands would provide the “juridical basis of a declaration of war.”

While there were disagreements at the meeting regarding the severity of the ultimatum to be issued, the Emperor did not deem them unbridgeable. Austrian and German officials collaborated closely, and the ultimatum was eventually issued on July 23.

The major European powers responded to the crisis following the assassination on the basis of the conflicting economic and geopolitical interests that had built up over the previous decade.

The assassination had been viewed by broad sections of the Austrian ruling elite as an opportunity to curtail Serbia’s growing influence in the Balkans, following its victory in the Second Balkan war in 1913, and to reverse the dwindling fortunes of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The German ruling elite, for its part, viewed the crisis as an opportunity to escalate its campaign for a more dominant position on the world stage.

Germany decided to support Austria-Hungary’s campaign, in the knowledge that Russia would come to Serbia’s aid in the event of an Austrian attack, triggering a far broader conflict. Germany viewed the prospect of war with Russia as a means of establishing dominance in Eastern Europe and, therefore, altering the balance of power throughout the entire continent. German Emperor Wilhelm II repeatedly made it clear in private communications that Germany viewed the crisis as a great opportunity to advance long-standing imperialist aims.

France had formed an alliance with Russia to curtail the growth of Germany. Tensions between the major European powers, France, Britain and Germany had simmered over the preceding years, with the ruling classes of each making preparations for war against one another. The socialist movement had long warned that the geo-political conflicts between the major imperialist powers would erupt into a European-wide war unless prevented by the international working class.

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