

This week in history: July 14-20

14 July 2014

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

25 years ago: Soviet coal miners defy Stalinist regime

By the end of this week in 1989, the wildcat strikes of Soviet coal miners spread from Siberia to regions as far as Ukraine, involving hundreds of thousands. Among the areas affected were Karaganda in Kazakhstan, Vorkuta in the Ural Mountains, Rostov on Don in European Russia and Dnepropetrovsk in Ukraine.

The strikers in the Kuznets basin of Siberia presented a list of 40 demands, including increased supplies of sugar, soap and detergent, meat, condensed milk, tea, coffee and cocoa, and warm winter clothing. The workers also demanded better working conditions and more concern for the environment.

The Workers League Political Committee issued a statement in the July 21 issue of the *Bulletin*, one of the predecessors of the *World Socialist Web Site* :

“The mass strike movement of miners in the Soviet Union, the largest strike wave since the consolidation of Stalinist rule in the 1920s, is a historical milestone for the world working class. The Soviet working class is directly challenging the power and privileges of the bureaucratic caste which usurped power from the proletariat, murdered the Bolshevik leaders of the 1917 October Revolution and has served ever since as the main counterrevolutionary force within the international workers’ movement.

“The strike by hundreds of thousands of coal miners is a rebellion, not against communism and socialism, but against Stalinism. It expresses the grievances of the working class which have accumulated for decades against the parasitic bureaucracy, with its police-state despotism and criminal mismanagement of the planned economy, which now find their culmination in Gorbachev’s plans to restore capitalist property relations and destroy all the gains of the October Revolution.”

A Siberian striker, Alexander Kusaimov, was interviewed by the press: “Finally, the time came for us to wage war with the bureaucrats. In the mines, bureaucrats are useless. They just take, take, take. And we work our lives away, and for what? We hear every day about reforms from Moscow, but in Kemerovo, we don’t feel it. Everything is rationed. You can’t

even find a damn match to light a cigarette with—if you can find any cigarettes.”

Other workers expressed their anger at the bureaucrats: “They sit on their butts and get double and triple what we make in the pits.”

While reported in the official media, the strike was met with unconcealed hostility by the Stalinist leadership under Gorbachev, warning against possible government intervention. Of particular concern was the appeal by miners for railroad workers to join their strike on August 1. “Such a development of events poses a threat to the implementation of perestroika,” he said.

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50 years ago: Urban uprising in Harlem

On July 18, 1964, thousands of black workers and youth poured into the streets of Harlem in rioting sparked by the brutal police murder of 15-year-old James Powell. Over the ensuing five days, one man was killed, over 100 were injured, and nearly \$1 million in property damage took place in an eruption of the pent-up social grievances of black workers and youth in America’s biggest city.

The uprising began after a rally organized by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) to protest the unprovoked killing of Powell by off-duty police officer Lieutenant Thomas Gilligan in Yorkville. Protesters attempting to force their way into the police station demanding Gilligan’s arrest were blocked by police who pushed the crowd across the street as hundreds of spectators gathered.

Ignoring the poverty and racism faced by black workers, acting New York City mayor Paul Screvane wildly claimed that the uprising was the work of “fringe groups fronting the Communist Party.” James Farmer, president of the middle-class civil rights group CORE, rallied to the side of the authorities, calling for the deployment of National Guard troops, while offering proposals for “civilian review boards” and the hiring of black police officers.

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75 years ago: US miners union betrays workers' struggle in "Harlan County War"

A protracted and bloody strike by 13,000 coal miners in Harlan County, Kentucky was betrayed by the United Mineworkers of America (UMWA) union leadership on July 19, 1939. After previously all but ignoring the dispute, UMWA President John L. Lewis stepped in to encourage federal intervention when the struggle waged by striking Harlan mine workers threatened to break beyond the union's control.

When an armed battle between striking workers and the National Guard signaled the outbreak of guerilla warfare tactics against scabs by strikers, Lewis intervened to sell out the workers' demands.

During a gun battle at the Mahan-Ellison Coal Company near Harlan two workers were shot to death, and more were seriously wounded. In addition, some 265 miners were arrested, one of whom was the UMWA secretary treasurer in the local Harlan County district. Striking workers had been enraged by the actions of a scab who not only signed warrants against a total 223 pickets but was placed in government custody without charge after shooting dead a striking worker.

During the 1930s Harlan County, Kentucky was the scene of protracted and ferocious class struggle that exploded between the coal miners, their families and supporters on one side, fighting for the right to organize, against the combined forces of the mine owners and the capitalist state.

Federal troops occupied Harlan County six times between 1931 and 1939. Many mine workers lost their lives during a decade of virtual civil war marked by the frequent use of extreme violence against the workforce by goons employed by the mine owners, the local police and National Guardsman. In the early years of the decade the county earned the sobriquet "Bloody Harlan."

The latest violence came after Lewis ended a national strike May 13 and signed an agreement with mine owners over a union shop clause in contracts covering over 250,000 Appalachian miners. Some Harlan County mine owners refused to sign the contract and recognise the union, and on May 15 the National Guard, under the command of General Ellerbe Carter, was ordered by Kentucky Governor A. B. Chandler to Harlan to support the mine operators in breaking the strike.

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100 years ago: Preparations for war escalate in Europe

This week in July 1914, the major European powers escalated their preparations for war in the wake of the assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand by a Serbian nationalist in

Sarajevo the previous month. Following the assassination, Germany quickly indicated that it would support any measures, including military attack, that Austria-Hungary might take against Serbia, and officials from the two nations made detailed preparations for war.

At the center of their military preparations were plans to issue a series of ultimatums to the Serbian regime that would provoke conflict and legitimize Austro-Hungarian aggression. On July 14, Count Tisza, one of the few Austro-Hungarian diplomats who had voiced tactical reservations about a full-scale war, indicated to the German ambassador that his concerns had largely been assuaged, and that the ultimatum to Serbia was to be "so phrased that its acceptance will be practically impossible." At the same time, Austria-Hungary began secret preparations for full-scale military mobilization.

The escalation occurred in the wake of a report issued on July 13 by Austrian investigators into the assassination of Ferdinand, which concluded that various claims alleging Serbian government involvement in the killing were without foundation.

In an indication that the assassination was only a pretext for war, and not its cause, German Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg told the state secretary for Alsace-Lorraine in private messages that he was unconcerned about who had killed Ferdinand, and that he was anxious for Austria to launch an attack as it would be favorable to Germany's geo-political ambitions. He anticipated that an Austrian attack would result in a general European war, which he foresaw Germany winning, or the fracturing of the Triple Entente, the alliance between Russia, Britain, and France.

At the same time, however, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Sazanov made clear his government's support for Serbia, its principal ally in the Balkans, warning Austrian officials that Russia would not accept "any blow to Serbia's independence."

While the ultimatum was drawn up and dispatched to the Austrian ambassador in Belgrade on July 20, it was not issued for three days, so as not to coincide with French President Raymond Poincaré's visit to Russia. Poincaré had arrived in Russia in the midst of major social upheaval, with workers engaging in a three-day general strike. While the strike had been spurned by a police attack on a workers' demonstration, Petrograd's working class expressed its hostility to the preparations for war, tearing down decorations celebrating the Franco-Russian alliance, and heckling the French president.

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