

This week in history: September 15-21

15 September 2014

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25 years ago: Strikers jailed in International Falls, Minnesota

On September 15, 1989, 12 of 28 strikers remained in jail in the iron range town of International Falls, Minnesota, while state and local authorities threatened to arrest hundreds more. The workers, with bonds set at up to \$50,000, were held in overcrowded and inhuman conditions. Cells meant to hold three were packed with five men without necessities such as blankets, razors and towels since the previous Saturday, when hundreds of union construction workers stormed a trailer camp set up to house scab workers.

Since then, the small town of 8,500 on the US-Canada border was overrun with agents of the FBI and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. Gun-toting agents from the notorious private security company Vance used Gestapo tactics against strikers, running them down on the picket lines and beating them up at their homes.

Construction workers had launched a wildcat strike against Boise Cascade Corporation the previous July when the company hired strikebreaking labor contractor BE&K to provide non-union labor for a massive expansion of its International Falls paper mill.

The Democratic governor of Minnesota, Rudy Perpich, notorious for sending the National Guard in 1986 to smash the strike of Hormel meatpackers by United Food and Commercial Workers Local P-9, pledged to send the National Guard to International Falls in the event of what he termed as “further labor riots.”

Newspapers in Minnesota conducted a vicious witch-hunt against the workers, branding them “terrorists” and demanding mass arrests to crush the strike. The bureaucracy of the Minnesota building trades and AFL-CIO, who had signed an agreement with Boise Cascade allowing the scab labor project, refused to defend the jailed workers. Instead, they joined the hysterical attack on the workers. Bill Peterson, the president of the state Building Trades Council, called trades councils around the state to demand that they boycott any future rallies in International Falls.

On September 16, the union bureaucracy conducted its own toothless rallies across the state as a cover for the betrayal of the International Falls strikers.

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50 years ago: Strom Thurmond quits Democratic Party

On September 17, 1964, South Carolina’s reactionary senator Strom Thurmond officially quit the Democratic Party and joined the Republican Party in order to campaign for its nominee for the presidency, Sen. Barry Goldwater of Arizona.

In announcing his decision on a statewide television broadcast, Thurmond declared that the Democratic Party was “leading the evolution of our nation to a socialistic dictatorship.” Goldwater, who was touring the South, said that politically “a piece of paper [could not be] put between” himself and Southern Democrats like Thurmond, who shared the Arizonan’s opposition to civil rights and to the Kennedy-Johnson’s administration’s supposed “softness” on Vietnam and Cuba.

Thurmond, then 61, had previously bolted the Democratic Party in 1948, when he ran for the presidency as the States Rights or “Dixiecrat” candidate against party nominee Harry Truman, carrying the states of South Carolina, Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi in the process. In subsequent presidential years he threatened to repeat this performance, but always returned to the Democrats in order to maintain seniority positions in the Senate and House committees which kept civil rights legislation bottled up.

Thurmond’s move to the Republican Party, coupled with Goldwater’s nomination for the presidency, presaged a major shift in US ruling class politics. Since the 1880s, the Southern states had been subjected to a *de facto* single-party monopoly by the Democratic Party based on white supremacy and bitter opposition to any social reform—a political setup ultimately enforced by the terrorist violence of Southern “lawmen” and the Ku Klux Klan. Nationally, the Southern Democrats blocked with the corrupt northern urban “bosses” like Tammany Hall in New York City.

In the 1930s, when the Democratic Party under Franklin Roosevelt engineered its “New Deal” coalition, including the

newly formed CIO unions, the alliance with the Southern reactionaries became increasingly unstable. With the upsurge of the civil rights struggles from the mid-1950s on, the southern Democrats began to jump ship.

Goldwater's nomination in 1964, over the bitter opposition of a more liberal-minded Republican establishment that had rallied behind Nelson Rockefeller, represented a shift in the Republican Party's center of gravity to the West and the South, and the erosion of its traditional basis of strength, dating back to the Civil War, in New England and the Midwest.

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75 years ago: Stalin orders Soviet army into Poland

Two and a half weeks after Poland was invaded through its western border by Nazi Germany, on September 17, 1939, Soviet armed forces, comprising as many as 33 divisions, crossed Poland's long eastern frontier. The dismantling of the central European state had been agreed in a secret protocol to the Hitler-Stalin pact less than a month earlier. Already routed by the German invasion in the West, the Polish government gave up any further pretense of military defense against invasion, and fled to Romania. By October 6 Poland ceased to exist as an independent state.

Like the Nazis, the Stalinist bureaucracy in Moscow cynically claimed that Polish provocations had forced the Red Army to intervene to protect ethnic Belorussians and Ukrainians. With the utmost cynicism and disregard for the opinion of the international working class, the Kremlin bureaucracy claimed that the Soviet Union was no longer bound by its non-aggression pact with Poland because the Polish government had ceased to exist.

On September 20 Hitler, impatient for the fall of Warsaw, ordered the Luftwaffe to begin an intensive bombardment of the Polish capital and the city of Modlin, using some 620 planes.

On September 21 SS Obergruppenfuhrer Reinhard Heydrich issued an order of "preliminary measures" for dealing with Poland's 3.5 million Jews. Those who remained on German-controlled land would be concentrated in urban areas with good rail links.

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100 years ago: US "peace" treaties delay entry into World War I

On September 15, 1914 William J. Bryan, United States

Secretary of State under Woodrow Wilson, signed treaties for the "advancement of peace" with China, France, Great Britain, and Spain. Russia signed essentially the same treaty two weeks later. In total Bryan signed treaties for the "Advancement of Peace" with 30 countries between August 1913 and October 1914, mostly in the Americas and Europe. Bryan said of his treaties that "while the treaties do not make war impossible they make it a remote possibility."

The treaties all contained the same preamble and stated the contracting countries as "desirous to strengthen the bonds of amity that bind them together and also to advance the cause of general peace." The treaties provided for the submission of all disputes between the signatory nations to an international commission that would have a year to arbitrate the controversy.

According to Bryan, Austria-Hungary, Belgium and Germany endorsed his "peace plan" but they did not enter into treaties embodying it. During this period Bryan said "the same earnest effort was put forth to negotiate treaties with them which was employed in securing treaties with the other nations and the plan was offered to all nations alike." In other words, Bryan would have signed to his "peace plan" all of the parties who were, at that time, ordering their respective armies to slaughter each other by the thousands.

Despite his pacifist stance, Bryan supported the US military aggression in the civil war in Mexico early in 1914. In September 1914 he wrote to Wilson, urging his mediation in World War I, saying, "It is not likely that either side will win so complete a victory as to be able to dictate terms, and if either side does win such a victory it will probably mean preparation for another war. It would seem better to look for a more rational basis for peace." However, "pacifists" like Wilson turned into the most aggressive warmongers three years later when US imperialism entered the conflict seeking to advance its interests against the exhausted combatants.

As Trotsky explained, when World War I broke out the Americans were content, at least for a certain period, to turn the blood of the European "madmen" into dollars. But when the prospect of a German victory emerged, the US intervened directly to counter the threat posed by its most dangerous potential rival.

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