

This week in history: November 24-30

24 November 2014

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25 years ago: Pilots and flight attendants abandon Eastern Airlines strike

After eight and a half months on the picket line, Eastern Airlines flight attendants voted within a day of the pilots to end their strike, on November 24, 1989. This action left the 8,500 machinists and ground crew isolated to continue the strike on their own.

There had been overwhelming support for the strikers in the working class against the attack by Eastern boss Frank Lorenzo, who filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy just days after provoking the strike. Eastern demanded \$150 million in concessions, amounting to some \$20,000 annually per employee. Machinists, baggage handlers and ground crew, organized by the International Association of Machinists, rejected Lorenzo's threat of bankruptcy and struck on March 4, 1989. Pilots and flight attendants joined the strike the next day.

Even before the strike began, it was a political struggle. President George H.W. Bush's newly-appointed transportation secretary, Samuel K. Skinner, warned that the government would not let labor struggles "hold the economy hostage" and if the strike caused widespread disruption, the administration would seek emergency action "to ensure that this country never faces such a peril again."

With strikers fighting a full-scale government assault involving every agency of the capitalist state, from the White House, to the Supreme Court, to Congress, the union leadership, particularly the highest levels of the AFL-CIO bureaucracy, blocked any serious mobilization of the working class.

Eastern Airline strikers and their supporters fought bitterly, organizing pickets and mass rallies at airports across the country as the strike dragged on. The Air Line Pilots Association placed its hopes in appeals to the courts, Congress and ultimately Bush to remove Lorenzo from

control of Eastern. When that failed, striking pilots voted to return to work November 23. The next day, flight attendants, organized by the Transport Workers Union, voted to return to work.

Eastern's response was that it intended to retain all the strikebreakers it had hired and both pilots and flight attendants would have to sign up on waiting lists.

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50 years ago: US drops Belgian paratroopers into rebel-held Congo

On November 24, 1964, under cover of a hostage rescue mission, a battalion of Belgian paratroopers, transported and backed by the 322nd Division of the US Air Force and joined by Cuban and South African mercenaries, stormed Stanleyville, the capital of the recently-proclaimed "People's Republic of the Congo," overwhelming its defenders.

The attack, dubbed Operation Dragon Rouge, was instigated by the United States with the backing of its European NATO allies to crush the nationalist "Simba rebellion" led by followers of the late Patrice Lumumba, the country's first elected president who was assassinated with the connivance of the American CIA, Belgium, and United Kingdom. It was the first direct military involvement by US forces on behalf of the government of imperialist stooge Moise Tshombe.

The paratroopers linked up with Tshombe's forces, who were being led by white mercenaries, advancing by land from the south. Encouraged by the success of the aggression, the US and Belgium announced they would continue their operations, in spite of an earlier pledge to pull out within 24 hours.

Claims of concern over the fate of whites still held captive by the nationalists were a pretext for the attack, which in the event led to the execution of 24 Europeans and Americans as threatened by nationalist leader Christophe Gbenye. The nationalists had taken hundreds of hostages as a bargaining

chip in retaliation for the systematic torture and murder of their supporters by Tshombe's troops.

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75 years ago: Mounting confrontation between Finland and USSR

On November 26, 1939, four Red Army personnel were killed and nine wounded as a result of artillery fire near the Soviet-Finnish border, in an event staged by Stalin to provoke hostilities between the two countries.

Soviet Commissar of Foreign Affairs Molotov branded the incident a "provocatory discharge of artillery, taking place from Finnish territory and directed at Soviet forces." Molotov demanded the Finnish government immediately withdraw its forces from the border to a distance 20 to 25 kilometers west of the line.

The action brought to an end seven weeks of intense negotiations between the two countries. Throughout October and November, Stalin and Molotov had conducted talks with Finnish representatives over the cession of territory for the military defense of the Soviet Union, in the certain event that the European war would eventually engulf the USSR. Stalin's maneuvering against Finland had been triggered by imminent German operations against Denmark and Norway, which would leave Hitler in control of the Baltic and Leningrad isolated and vulnerable to attack.

In early October, Stalin had used threats to secure military bases in the Baltic states on the southern shores of the Gulf of Finland. Now Stalin sought to close the gulf to possible invaders by establishing bases on the gulf's northern shore, the Finnish mainland, as well as on Finnish islands near the approaches to Leningrad. He also demanded that the Soviet-Finnish border be moved back from Leningrad from 32 kilometers to 70 kilometers in order to place it out of artillery range.

While making certain concessions, the Finnish regime stubbornly asserted its neutrality and refused to accommodate all of Stalin's demands. The right-wing regime had been established in 1918 with German support after the murder of tens of thousands of Finnish workers who had established a brief Finnish Soviet Republic. On November 28, two days after the border incident, Molotov unilaterally renounced the Soviet-Finnish nonaggression pact.

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100 years ago: Russian war losses pass one million

This week, one hundred years ago, the European press reported that Russian losses during the first three months of World War I amounted to over one million dead, wounded, deserted, or taken prisoner.

The reports, originally published in the Viennese *Wiener Rundschau* and subsequently republished in various German newspapers, attributed 420,000 Russian casualties to battles with Austro-Hungarian forces, and 340,000 to various battles against the German army. The military experts of the Vienna newspaper added an estimated 380,000 deaths due to disease, bringing the complete total up to 1,150,000 as of November 4, 1914. The heavy toll of those dead or incapacitated from sickness was reached on the basis of the known prevalence of cholera during the period of the mobilization. The *Wiener Rundschau* commented that if anything, the estimates of Russian losses were low.

The scope of the bloody slaughter of Russian workers and peasants in the interests of the Tsarist regime and its allies is indicated by the figures for individual battles. In the battle of the Masurian Lakes in East Prussia, 200,000 Russian casualties; in battles north of Vistula, 85,000 dead, wounded or captured; in the battles southwest of the line from Warsaw to Ivangorod, 60,000 casualties.

The *Frankfurter Zeitung*, a leading organ of German imperialism, commented: "Up until now the Russian Army Staff has been able to replace all losses in its ranks, so that its numbers are today as large as at the beginning of the campaign. But among the combatants ... there are already ... masses of insufficiently trained and poorly armed men who can be regarded as only conditionally efficient for battle purposes."

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