

This week in history: May 18-24

18 May 2015

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25 years ago: Polish workers rebel against “shock treatment”

About 2,000 employees of the Polish State Railways walked out May 19, 1990 in solidarity with 40 coworkers who began a hunger strike May 10 in Slupsk to protest low wages and skyrocketing prices of basic necessities. The strikers had demanded an immediate 85 percent pay increase above their wage of \$37 a month.

The purchasing power of Polish workers’ wages had been cut by more than 40 percent in the previous four months, under the Solidarity government’s policy of “shock treatment,” which unleashed the forces of the capitalist market against the working class, through runaway inflation and the creation of mass unemployment.

The cost of living rose at an annual rate of 1,100 percent since prices were freed on January 1. Unemployment soared from 9,000 to 400,000 in the same period, with estimates that the jobless total would reach 2 million by the end of the year.

The strikes began in Pomerania, in northwest Poland, and spread into the central region of the country, with rail workers walking out in Torun, Poznan, Bydgoszcz and Inowroclaw. Both passenger and freight service were disrupted, and strikers cut the main north-south rail line linking the port complex of Gdansk and Gdynia with the industrial centers in Silesia. Other rail strikers blockaded Szczecin, Poland’s largest port, on the Baltic seacoast at the East German border. In a separate action, 3,000 workers at the Gdansk shipyard, the birthplace of Solidarity, staged a wildcat strike May 18 to press demands for higher wages.

The rail strike was called in defiance of the Solidarity union and the leadership of Lech Walesa, and workers rejected appeals by Solidarity leaders, officials of the Solidarity-Stalinist coalition government and the Roman Catholic bishop of Slupsk to return to work.

Walesa sent a telegram to the strike headquarters in Slupsk, urging an end to the strike, while admitting that the workers’ demands were justified. He called on the government to act decisively, saying, “The people are getting impatient and

everything has to be done to show them what is allowed and what is not allowed. Such conflicts must be solved and they should be eliminated.”

A government spokeswoman complained that the strike was undermining Poland’s international image as a stable country and would frighten away potential capitalist investors.

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50 years ago: Bolivian tin miners battle troops

On May 23, 1965, government troops sent to seize the country’s tin mines from occupying Bolivian miners met heavy armed resistance. The ruling military junta ordered the action in an

effort to break a week-long general strike by the Bolivian Workers Confederation that had reached a point of insurrection.

Miners were resisting a government plan to modernize the state-controlled tin mines at the expense of the workers through wage cuts and the elimination of 7,000 jobs. Investments by the United States, West Germany and the Inter-American Development Bank were being held up pending the implementation of the cuts.

The general strike broke out following the arrest of Juan Lechin, executive secretary of the Bolivian Workers Confederation. Thirty thousand miners and 6,000 industrial workers answered the strike call, which junta officials claimed was part of an “international communist plot.”

Fighting was heaviest in the workers’ districts of La Paz and in the mining areas south of Potosi. Government forces used American-built Mustang fighter planes to bomb and strafe the

miners’ positions. Workers in La Paz fought back with automatic weapons and several machine guns. About 300 workers were barricaded in the Villa Victoria and El Tejar districts. The army admitted that workers had seized the railroad center of Atocha, while 9,000 miners armed with dynamite were still holding out at the huge mining complex of Catavi and Siglo Veinte.

Union leaders, meanwhile, called for an end to the general strike in exchange for a cease-fire and negotiations.

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75 years ago: GPU makes first attempt on life of Trotsky

In the early morning of May 24, 1940, the Stalinist GPU made an unsuccessful attempt on the life of their most implacable Marxist opponent, Leon Trotsky. Remarkably, none of Trotsky's household was killed and the leader of the Fourth International, his wife Natalia and grandson Seva, escaped with only minor injuries from the attack upon their residence in Coyoacan, Mexico City.

Trotsky had anticipated an imminent attack by the NKVD. Earlier in the year, on orders from Moscow, the leadership of the Mexican Communist Party had been purged and replaced by Stalinist NKVD executioners like Carlos Contreras, the false identity assumed by the Italian Vittorio Vidali, as a member of their honorary presidium (Contreras-Vidali had been party to the killing of Spanish POUM leader Andres Nin during the mass murders carried out against opponents of Stalin during the Spanish Civil War 1936-39). International sources friendly to Trotsky spoke during the spring of the presence of a nest of Stalinist murderers within Mexico City who had previously honed their trade in Spain.

During their convention in March 1940, the Mexican Stalinists had adopted the slogan "Death to Trotsky" and on May Day the Mexican CP organized a march through Mexico City where the participants amplified the line of the local Stalinists by shouting, "Throw out the most ominous and dangerous traitor Trotsky."

Led by the Stalinist muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros and disguised as policemen, a group of approximately 20 men arrived outside Trotsky's home at 4:00 a.m. and, after overpowering guards, entered the grounds with the assistance of a Stalinist agent within Trotsky's household. Despite an attack lasting approximately 15 minutes, with 300 bullets fired and the use of incendiary bombs designed to destroy Trotsky's archive, nobody within the household was seriously injured.

In the days that followed the attempt on his life Trotsky railed against the slanders of the local Stalinist press who suggested that the lack of fatalities meant the raid was staged to implicate Stalin and the Mexican CP. Trotsky accused the editorial boards of *El Popular* and *Futuro*, both organs of Stalinist organizations, of the "moral preparation of the terrorist act." After directly implicating the Confederation of Mexican Workers President Vincente Lombardo Toledano as the director of the poisonous campaign, Trotsky added, "Permit me also to assume that David Alfaro Siqueiros, who took part in the civil war in Spain as an active Stalinist, may also know who are the most important and active GPU members, Spanish, Mexican, and all other nationalities, who are arriving at different times in Mexico, especially via Paris."

Trotsky dissected the whole affair and the central role of Stalin in his article "The Comintern and the GPU: The attempted assassination of May 24 and the Communist Party of

Mexico."

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100 years ago: Italy enters World War I

On May 20, 1915, Italy's parliament passed a bill giving the government of Prime Minister Antonio Salandra's cabinet full power to act in the growing crisis with Austria. This was viewed as an immediate prelude to a declaration of war. The vote to give the government emergency powers was the identical procedure used in 1850, when the Italian government declared war on Austria.

The government won the vote, giving it a free hand to act, by 365 to 54. Some 45 socialist deputies voted against, but did nothing to mobilize the working class against the war. The parliament was comprised of 318 Constitutionalists, 70 Radicals, 16 Republicans, 77 Socialists, three Syndicalists, and 24 Catholics.

While preparing war, Salandra sought to claim that Italy had done everything it could to maintain neutrality, and had been compelled to revoke its alliance with Austria as a result of the actions of that government. In reality, the allies, including Britain and France, had promised Italy substantial territorial concessions in the event that it entered the war on their side.

Salandra declared, "Austria's ultimatum to Serbia, without consulting Italy, one of her allies, violated all terms of the Triple Alliance, and actually resulted in the outbreak of the Great War. It was contrary to our interests, but nevertheless the Italian government sought a peaceful way out. Negotiations were continued until all our interests and all our decorum were violated by Austria."

On May 21, the bill was unanimously passed by the Senate. Outlining the imperialist interests that underlay Italian entry into the war, Prince Prospero Colonna said, "Italy is most anxious to embrace its daughters Trentino, Trieste and Dalmatia, who have been pining under Austrian rule."

On May 22, the orders for the mobilization of the Italian army were published, calling up some 3.5 million soldiers including the militia. Italy was only capable of mobilizing some 760,000 troops in the opening stages of its participation in the war. The official declaration of war was delivered to Austria by the Italian ambassador on May 23. Fighting in northern Italy between Austrian and Italian troops was immediately reported.

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