

This week in history: October 19-25

19 October 2015

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25 years ago: Economic crisis over Gulf War provokes strikes

On October 24, 1990, over 1,000 riot police were mobilized to force the reopening of the key Basque crossing point into France after the blockading of border crossings to both France and Portugal by striking Spanish independent truckers.

Violent confrontations took place between strikers and scabs as truckers paralyzed automobile production throughout Europe and disrupted ports, factories and food supplies in Spain itself. The strike was triggered by the leap in oil prices which accompanied the US buildup towards war in the Persian Gulf. In Spain, this meant a 24 percent increase in the price of diesel fuel, bringing it to the equivalent of \$2.81 a gallon and making it impossible for the independents to continue operating.

The workers demanded a hike in haulage rates to compensate for the rise in fuel prices.

The ports of Barcelona, Bilbao and Malaga were brought to a virtual standstill. Many cities ran short of perishable goods like fish, meat, fruit, vegetables and dairy products.

Assembly lines in the automobile and home appliance industries were reduced to a third of their normal capacity because of the strike. In the northeastern province of Zaragoza alone, the General Motors subsidiary and the home appliance firm Balay shut down and together laid off more than 10,000 workers because of a lack of spare parts.

In Belgium, both union officials and economic analysts predicted a possible winter of strikes as French-speaking teachers launched a two-day strike on October 22 and transport workers threatened industrial action.

Belgian employers responded to workers' demands by declaring that the looming war crisis in the Persian Gulf threatened to wipe out markets and trigger an international economic slump. Under those conditions, they insisted, Belgian capital must increase its competitiveness by slashing workers' wages and working conditions.

Also on October 24, the major union federations of the Pacific island nation of the Philippines called a general strike against attempts by the government of President Corazon

Aquino to force workers to pay for the country's mounting economic crisis through sharp cuts in real wages. In a radio broadcast on the eve of the national strike, Aquino said the Philippines faced a "serious economic crisis" as a result of the developments in the Persian Gulf.

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50 years ago: Klansman acquitted in Liuzzo murder

On October 22, 1965, an all-white jury in Haynesville, Alabama acquitted Leroy Wilkins, a member of the Ku Klux Klan, of the murder of civil rights worker Viola Liuzzo. The jury included six admitted white supremacists and eight present or former members of the racist White Citizens Council. The first trial of Wilkins had ended in a hung jury the previous May.

Viola Liuzzo, the mother of five children and the wife of a Detroit Teamster official, was shot while returning from the Selma-to-Montgomery Freedom March. The key government witness was self-confessed FBI informer Gary Rowe, who participated in the murder of Liuzzo. Rowe, along with the other Klan assassins, escaped punishment for the murder. In both trials, attorneys for the defense openly appealed to the racial prejudices of the rigged juries. Wilkins was represented at his first trial by an attorney who proclaimed himself to be the Imperial Klonsel of the United Klans of America.

On news of the acquittal, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. cut short a trip to Europe to return to the United States. Presenting the failure of the prosecution as simply an example of "Southern justice" and ignoring the fact that a government agent had participated in the killing, King announced that he would begin a campaign to demand legislation giving the federal government jurisdiction in civil rights murder cases.

One week later, Selma Sheriff Jim Clark arrested 15 black civil rights workers in nearby Montgomery, Alabama on frame-up charges of raping a 12-year-old girl during the Selma-to-Montgomery Freedom March. All but two of the charges carried the death penalty on conviction. The arrested men included James Webb, a field secretary for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and members of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee.

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75 years ago: Lewis denounces Roosevelt, endorses Willkie

On October 25, 1940 John L. Lewis, head of the United Mine Workers and president of the CIO, denounced Democratic President Franklin Roosevelt for being prowar and antilabor in a nationwide radio broadcast. But rather than putting forward an independent alternative for the working class, he concluded by endorsing the other major capitalist candidate, Republican Wendell Willkie.

Lewis declared, “The president has said that he hates war and will work for peace, but his acts do not match his words.... In the Congress, the unrestrained baiting of labor by the Democratic majority has become a national pastime.” After seven years of the Roosevelt administration and despite surplus farm products and increased industrial production, Lewis pointed to 45 million working people who qualified as hungry, 20 million required to live on a food budget of 15 cents a day and over 9 million unemployed.

Behind the scenes, Lewis had tried to obtain from Roosevelt a position for labor in the cabinet. He had also sought to get Roosevelt to deny defense contracts to corporations that had violated labor laws. But Roosevelt refused to make any concessions. This led Lewis to swing his presidential endorsement to the utilities’ magnate Willkie.

Large numbers of militant workers in the United States harbored the illusion that Lewis was different from the rest of the AFL and CIO bureaucrats. As 30 million workers listened to Lewis in the most extensive nationwide radio address ever given by a labor leader, many hoped that Lewis would refuse to endorse either capitalist candidate and call for a labor party.

Just two months earlier, Lewis had declared before a UAW convention, “Some day in this country the people are going to lose confidence in the existing political parties to a degree that they will form their own party.” But Lewis regarded this prospect with as much dread as the rest of the bureaucracy, and he was unwilling to break with capitalist politics on the eve of imperialist war.

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100 years ago: Italy and Russia declare war on Bulgaria

On October 19, 1915, Italy and Russia declared war on Bulgaria, following the latter’s attack on Serbia. Of the Balkan states, Bulgaria was the first to come into the war on the side of the Central Powers, Germany and Austria-Hungary.

Between 1815 and 1915 the “Eastern Question” was a major

point of contention in European affairs. As the Ottoman Empire began to disintegrate, the European great powers, Britain, France, Austria-Hungary and Russia, vied for control over the Balkan Peninsula and the fate of the territories that it contained. The question of control of the region was strategic due to the peninsula’s geographic location, at the crossroads of the Russian, Ottoman and Austria-Hungary Empires and with access to several important waterways.

As a Bolshevik manifesto issued in 1912 to the Russian workers and peasants said: “In Eastern Europe, the monarchs still share out the peoples, exchange and trade in them, putting together different nationalities into patchwork states to promote their own dynastic interests, very much as the landowners under the serf system used to break up and shuffle the families of their subject peasants.”

Of the Balkan states, Serbia and Montenegro had been at war since the beginning of World War One, in alliance with Russia, Britain and France. Bulgaria had maintained a neutral stance, still suffering economically from its involvement in the Balkan wars. Its strategic location meant that it was seen as a desired ally by both warring sides who courted it by offering territory in return for support. By September 1915, Germany, Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire were able to meet Bulgarian demands and an alliance was struck. Bulgaria called for a general mobilisation of its armies and declared war on and invaded Serbia on October 14.

The agreement signed with the Central Powers involved a coordinated attack on Serbia from the north by Austria Hungary and the east by Bulgaria. Bulgaria’s entry into the war enabled Germany to provide material support to the Ottoman Empire, thus sustaining the Empire’s war efforts.

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