

This week in history: April 4-10

4 April 2016

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25 years ago: Mass workers movement defies Moscow bureaucracy

On April 10, 1991, leaders of striking Soviet workers won the right to 15 minutes of live air time in an unprecedented broadcast on Byelorussia's television station. Strike committee member Georgi Mukhin declared, "The Communist Party of the Soviet Union is guilty of the collapse of the economy, lies about Chernobyl and annihilation of the peoples and their languages." He added, "The April robbery of the nation was the last straw for us," referring to the drastic increases in government-set prices on most consumer goods that took effect April 2.

The growing movement of Soviet workers against the attacks on their living standards by the Stalinist bureaucracy began to take on nationwide dimensions and pose a direct threat to the regime of Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev.

A six-week strike of coal miners that began in the western Soviet republic of Byelorussia gained strength, closing all mines in the Kuzbass region of Siberia, continuing unabated in the Donbass in Ukraine and spreading to Sakhalin Island in the Soviet Far East.

Over 200,000 striking Byelorussian workers defiantly joined the 300,000 coal miners who began their strike one day after Gorbachev made a nationally televised speech presenting his proposals to deal with the worsening economic crisis and ordering an end to all strikes and antigovernment demonstrations. The strikes spread from the capital of Minsk to three more cities in the western Soviet republic, affecting over 60 plants.

The miners' strike shut down 184 out of 600 Soviet mines. Minister for Metallurgy Serafim Kolpakov said that the production of coking coal, pig iron, steel, rolled stock, pipes and nonferrous metals had declined sharply, fueling the downturn in the national economy. Kolpakov said the losses of the metallurgical industry were 2 billion rubles, with the

total losses from the six-week strike at many times that.

In Georgia, the Soviet Union's two key ports on the Black Sea, Batumi and Poti, were shut down by a warning strike and the critical rail junction of Samtrediya was paralyzed, as workers protested the presence of Soviet army troops in the Ossetian area. Together with economic demands, they took up the call of the coal miners for the resignation of Gorbachev.

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50 years ago: Police attack Mississippi civil rights protest

On April 5, 1966, Mississippi State Police used rifle butts, nightsticks and tear gas to brutally suppress a protest by black students, housewives and workers at Alcorn College in the town of Lorman.

One thousand men, women and children were forced to flee for cover into nearby woods, pursued by over 100 troopers who hurled scores of canisters of tear gas as they ran. Many received cuts, gashes and bruises in the police rampage that began on the second day of protests called by the NAACP. Many who sought refuge in a store and cafe were also attacked with tear gas. A squad of patrolmen smashed the windows of a car to get at protesters who had locked themselves inside to escape the melee.

The attack took place at the entrance to the historically black college after police ordered demonstrators off the main highway. Earlier in the day campus security police used tear gas and a fire hose to break up a group of demonstrators from a nearby high school. The students mocked the police, waving their coats in toreador style in front of them. Two hundred fifty National Guardsmen were meanwhile mobilized to guard the home of the Alcorn president.

The protests at Alcorn College were called by Charles Evers, brother of Medgar Evers, the murdered leader of the Mississippi NAACP, to demand the ouster of the president of the black college, John D. Boyd. They began following the dismissal of several students and staff members who were involved in civil rights activities.

Evers complained that many of the teachers in the college did not have degrees and were not qualified to teach. “This is my alma mater. I went here four years and right now I couldn’t pass a sixth grade examination,” he said. Students complained about poor food, the infirmary and the grading system, as well as being subjected to humiliating searches at the library.

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75 years ago: Germany invades Yugoslavia

On April 6, 1941 Adolf Hitler’s armed forces launched a blitzkrieg attack on Yugoslavia after a mass rebellion against the Yugoslav government’s adherence to a pact with Nazi Germany. Wave after wave of the German air force passed over the capital city of Belgrade, dropping bombs on homes, hospitals, churches, schools and libraries. The three-day air campaign caused an estimated 10,000 to 17,000 deaths in the civilian population.

Hitler feared that the insurrectionary movement of the Yugoslav masses against the pact would endanger German security on the Balkan flank and delay his plans for invasion of the Soviet Union. He retaliated by seeking to both punish and dismember the Yugoslav state. Combined with the air attack, the bulk of the German army invaded through Bulgaria while other forces complemented attacks of the Romanian, Hungarian, and Italian armies.

During the two weeks from the time of the defiance of the pact to the German invasion, nothing was done to prepare the defense of the country. As the German forces advanced through Zagreb, Belgrade and other cities, the bourgeois government fled. Military leaders abandoned their posts or tacitly supported the Nazi invasion. When Yugoslav workers under the direction of the Communist Party demanded weapons to defend themselves, they were refused and threatened with arrest. By April 17, the Yugoslav Army had been defeated.

Under Hitler’s direction, Yugoslavia was carved up, with Italian divisions occupying Montenegro, Dalmatia and the greater part of Slovenia. Hungary seized the fertile Backa plain in the north, while Bulgaria took Macedonia and parts of Serbia. Germany occupied the northern part of Slovenia. An independent state of Croatia was set up under Italian control, where the stooge regime of Ante Pavelic launched grisly pogroms against Serbs. In other areas the invaders incited nationalist elements against Croats, Muslims and Jews.

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100 years ago: Mass strike of Puerto Rican sugar workers

On April 6, 1916, the Puerto Rican Free Federation of Laborers, affiliated to the American Federation of Labor, issued an appeal to workers in the US and internationally calling for support for striking agricultural workers. It denounced the “reign of industrial tyranny and oppression [which] is governing supreme over life and labor.”

Under conditions in which sugar was selling at record high prices, the federation declared a general strike in the sugar-producing region of Puerto Rico, demanding wages of \$1 for an eight-hour day. More than 20,000 agricultural workers had been on strike since January for better conditions, wages and the eight-hour day. Police and local magistrates collaborated with the major sugar trusts against the workers.

In the town of Juana Diaz, police fired on strikers and other townspeople without provocation. One was killed instantly while two more died in the hospital. Four women, two boys and 10 men were wounded. In the town of Rio Grande, police fired upon, clubbed, and cut strikers.

Police also opened fire on and clubbed striking workers in Loiza, “killing one like a dog,” according to the reports. Several others were wounded. In Arecibo, police killed one striker, wounded many more and made numerous arrests. Peaceful parades of women were also broken up with gunfire. In Bayamon police fired on the assembly hall of the AFL. The workers’ appeal stated that “clubs and bullets are used freely to frighten poor laborers in the country.”

At the same time it was reported that industry and commerce were booming in Puerto Rico, with net earnings of \$80 million from the beginning of US colonial rule in 1898 to 1916. Property values tripled over the same period. The workers’ appeal also denounced the lack of schools for 250,000 children on the island, due to budget and tax cuts.

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