

This week in history: May 16-22

16 May 2016

25 Years Ago | 50 Years Ago | 75 Years Ago | 100 Years Ago

50 years ago: Major wage strikes in UK, France

Indian leader Rajiv Gandhi assassinated

On the evening of May 21, 1991, Rajiv Gandhi and at least 14 other people were killed by a suicide bomber as he was about to address an election meeting in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. The force of the blast was so powerful that Gandhi was only identified by his clothing.

The bloody assassination of the Congress leader and former Indian prime minister marked the end not only of the Nehru dynasty, but a whole era in India's political history.

The assassination took place in the final days of the most violent election in the 43-year history of Indian bourgeois democracy, amid the eruption of communal, national, religious and caste antagonisms. While the Congress Party under Gandhi had been favored to win the largest number of seats at the election, it had not been expected to command an overall majority, raising the prospect of a "hung" parliament and a deepening of the political crisis which had seen three governments in the previous 18 months.

In 1975, Indira Gandhi, Rajiv's mother, set up her own Congress (I) Party (the I standing for Indira), after splits developed within the previous Congress Party over her government's imposition of emergency rule and jailing of tens of thousands of striking railway workers.

Rajiv Gandhi took office in 1984 after his mother was assassinated by her own Sikh bodyguards following her government's dropping the mask of secularism to promote Hindu chauvinism against Sikh separatism.

In the elections of 1989 Congress (I) lost more than half its 415 seats and was forced out of office when the Stalinist parties rejected Gandhi's appeal for their support.

After Rajiv Gandhi's assassination, in a desperate attempt to hold the old order together, the Congress Party chiefs gathered in New Delhi to appoint his Italian-born widow Sonia, designated a "wife of the Nehru-Gandhi family," as the new president of the party, without even asking whether she was willing to run. She declined, however, to place her head on the chopping block.

[top]

At midnight on May 16, 1966, 62,500 British seaman, members of the National Union of Seamen (NUS), went out on strike for a 40-hour workweek and increased wages. The strike brought to a virtual standstill exports and imports to Great Britain, and achieved, in the words of one anti-working class commentator, "what German submarines failed to accomplish in two world wars," by crippling the Royal Navy.

British seamen had a base pay of just £27 for a 56-hour workweek. The strike continued through mid-July. The movement toward a general strike had come from below, in opposition to the national union leadership, which was closely identified with the shipping firms. Rank-and-file Committees were organized and had carried out non-sanctioned strikes in 1947, 1955 and 1960.

The Labour Party government of Harold Wilson accused the NUS of being infiltrated by "communists" and insisted that any wage increase would undermine its inflation target of 3.5 percent. The national Trades Union Congress (TUC), while mouthing sympathy for the strike, refused to mobilize the working class for a general strike that would force a direct confrontation with the Labour government, which the TUC backed.

A day later, on May 17, 1966, 7.5 million French workers began a 24-hour strike for higher wages in opposition to the anti-inflationary wage policies of President Charles de Gaulle. The entire French economy was brought to a standstill in a powerful anticipation of the general strike movement that would bring France to the brink of revolution in 1968.

The dominant trade union in the strike, the Communist Party affiliate CGT (*Confédération générale du travail*) insisted that it be run as a "decentralized" affair, in which local workers would formulate their own demands. It also insisted that its rank-and-file members avoid undue *gauchisme* (leftism) so as not to "offend less militant sectors of the working class," in the words of one historian. In other words, every effort would be made to channel the strike so as to avoid a collision with the Gaullist state.

[top]

75 years ago: World war intensifies in Middle East, Africa

This week in 1941 saw the intensification of the major imperialist powers' struggle for domination of the Middle East and east Africa.

In Iraq, the British Army, comprised mainly of Indian colonial troops, drove on Iraqi positions in Fallujah, and the Royal Air Force conducted bombing raids in neighboring Syria on the ancient city of Palmyra. Justifying the attacks, the *Times* of London asserted in an editorial, "In everything but name, Vichy has joined the Axis," accusing the puppet Vichy regime in Paris of facilitating the movement of German military supplies through Syria, which the Sykes-Picot agreement at the end of World War I had given to France, into Mosul and Kirkuk in northern Iraq.

The leader of the new Iraqi government, Rashid Ali, sought assistance from Nazi Germany and was furnished with a number of German fighter and bomber planes. But the Messerschmitt and Heinkel bombers were soon unserviceable because of the local climate. On May 20, Germany, now posturing as an anti-colonial power, launched its own military mission to Iraq, which was rationalized on May 23 by "Fuhrer Directive No. 30" from Hitler declaring "The Arab Freedom Movement in the Middle East" to be Germany's "natural ally against England."

In North Africa, on May 16, in the border area of Libya and Egypt, General Erwin Rommel beat back a British attack at Halfaya Pass, where German forces had been sent to prop up the defeated Italian Tenth Army. On May 20, German paratroopers landed on the Greek Island of Crete and within seven days had captured this strategic position in the eastern Mediterranean.

Elsewhere in Africa, Italian positions continued to crumble in the face of British attacks. On May 18, Italian forces under the Duke of Aosta, Viceroy of Italian East Africa, surrendered Amba Alagi, a high ground position in northern Ethiopia. On May 21, Ethiopia, brutally invaded by Mussolini's fascist regime five years earlier, was surrendered to Great Britain.

[top]

100 years ago: Britain and France sign Sykes-Picot agreement to carve-up the Middle East

On May 16, 1916, the Sykes-Picot agreement was ratified by Britain and France, after protracted negotiations that extended from November 1915 to March 1916. The secret agreement provided for the carving up of southwestern Asia should Britain, France and Russia (the Triple Entente) be victorious over the Ottoman Empire and its allies in the imperialist world

war that had broken out in August 1914.

Officially known as the Asia Minor Agreement, it was authored by two diplomats, Mark Sykes of the British War Office and Francois Georges-Picot of France. It was signed on May 16, 1916 for the respective governments by British foreign minister Edward Grey and French ambassador to London Paul Cambon, with the assent of the Tsarist Russian Empire.

The purpose of the agreement was to define future "spheres of influence" and control in the Middle East. Under the agreement, parts of the Ottoman Empire were to be divided between Britain, France and Russia. The agreement consisted of a list of the areas that would be directly administered by the colonial powers, and was accompanied by a map detailing the boundaries of each "sphere of influence." It guaranteed British and French claims over the oil-rich areas of the region.

It also outlined areas that would be placed under the nominal leadership of Arab ruling elites, but where Britain and France would have an exclusive hold over finance and industry in order to expand their colonial holdings. The controlling powers were left to decide where to place national boundaries within these areas.

The agreement conflicted with other pledges that the British government had made to Arab nationalists, including Sherif Hussein bin Ali of Mecca, for the establishment of an Arab-controlled homeland in return for Arab help in defeating the Ottoman Empire.

Following the October Revolution in Russia, the Bolsheviks found copies of a number of secret agreements that had been entered into by the Triple Entente. The Sykes-Picot agreement was published by the Bolsheviks on November 23, 1917 in *Pravda* (the official paper of the Communist Party) and *Izvestia* (a daily national Russian government broadsheet), exposing the secret agreement to the world.

[top]



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