

This week in history: May 23-29

23 May 2016

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

seamen's strike

25 years ago: South Korean president announces crackdown on mass protests

On May 28, 1991, South Korean President Roh Tae Woo announced a crackdown on protests admitting “the people’s distrust in politics ... is reaching a dangerous point.” Mass demonstration over the previous months by both striking workers in the shipyards and factories and university students created a deep crisis for the regime, forcing a cabinet reshuffle.

Roh pointed out to his staff that economic discontent led to the political unrest resulting in the fatal beating of a Kang Kyung Dae, 21, a Myungji University freshman, by police April 26.

“During the past month in which a series of demonstrations and social unrest have erupted, the people have not looked kindly upon the government and the ruling party,” the CIA-backed dictator opined. “Whatever the cause of the unrest, demonstrations spread in such extreme in Seoul and other cities because the people’s discontent and frustration were great. I humbly accept this fact and feel deeply responsible for it.”

While giving lip service to the democratic right of free assembly, he said that street demonstrations should be a “last resort” and “should not cause inconvenience to the people.” He added, “Violent, destructive actions in which stones, firebombs, sticks and iron pipes are in abundance will not be tolerated. The government will deal sternly with violence, without flinching.”

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On May 23, 1966, Queen Elizabeth II declared a state of emergency in Britain, giving the Labour Party government of Prime Minister Harold Wilson draconian powers to use against striking seamen.

Wilson praised the Queen’s actions, declaring that the “interests” of British imperialism were threatened by the eight-day-old strike by 65,000 maritime workers, as Britain’s balance of payments crisis mounted and the position of the pound sterling continued to erode. It was the sixth time in the 20th century that the British ruling class declared such a state of emergency. The last previous occasion was a strike by railway workers in 1955.

Wilson had warned that the crisis of Britain’s chronic balance of payments deficit was being sharpened by the strike, stating that trade was being “progressively and very damagingly being disrupted.” He pledged to use the Royal Navy to clear clogged ports in order to allow foreign ships to enter. The British ruling class demanded that the Labour government make an example of the seamen in order to hold back the wages demands of the working class in the face of rising inflation.

The seamen were demanding a reduction in the workweek from 56 to 40 hours, in addition to a modest wage increase. Including overtime payment and bonuses, British seamen still earned only about a third the pay of workers in the US merchant marine.

The general secretary of the National Union of Seamen, William Hogarth, made no call for industrial action by the British labor movement to halt the strikebreaking threat by Wilson. He declared that he would “wait and see” what the government did. British law placed no restrictions on the right of seamen to appeal for and receive such sympathy strike action.

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50 years ago: State of emergency against British

75 years ago: Roosevelt declares emergency

On May 27, 1941, US President Franklin Roosevelt proclaimed “an unlimited national emergency,” citing the danger of a German attack on the Western Hemisphere. The Roosevelt administration was committed to propping up Britain against Nazi Germany until the United States was ready to intervene in World War II. The main purpose of the bill, however, was to give Roosevelt legal authority to smash a mounting wave of strikes that were interfering with US imperialism’s military production.

In his proclamation, Roosevelt said, “I call upon our loyal workmen, as well as employers, to merge their lesser differences in the larger effort to insure the survival of the only kind of government which recognizes the rights of labor or of capital.”

AFL President William Green fell into line behind Roosevelt, saying, “All classes of people must adjust themselves to the change which has taken place and all must make sacrifices to serve our country. ... We realize that abandonment of the strike may entail sacrifices on the part of the workers involved.”

Two days later, Roosevelt invoked his new powers to call for an end to the strike by 1,900 AFL and CIO machinists at a West Coast navy shipyard. Some 18,000 shipyard workers were honoring picket lines, holding up \$500 million in military contracts. Roosevelt also ordered 12,000 lumber workers in northern Washington to resume work in order for military procurement to go forward.

At North American Aviation in Inglewood, California, 12,000 UAW members struck and defied Roosevelt’s mediation board. Roosevelt sent 3,500 federal troops to reopen the plant. Troops clubbed workers with rifle butts and inflicted bayonet wounds to break up mass picketing. By nightfall troops had cleared a one-mile perimeter around the plant, defended by trench mortars, anti-tank guns, machine guns and two anti-aircraft guns.

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100 years ago: Agricultural workers organize in the US

On May 23, 1916, the first conference of the Agricultural Workers Organization (AWO), affiliated to the revolutionary-syndicalist Industrial Workers of the

World (IWW), was held in Kansas City, Missouri. The AWO had been founded in 1915, in response to the horrendous conditions facing agricultural workers in the so-called “grain-belt.”

Workers earned an average of \$2 to \$2.50 for a day’s work, which began at 5:30 a.m. and ended at 7:30 p.m. Harvest workers noted ironically that they worked “an eight-hour day—eight in the morning to eight in the afternoon. An investigator for the Industrial Relations Commission reported that the workers “object to sleeping in granaries full of rats and mice, on the bare ground, in tents or in barns where the odor of the stable is strong and where mattresses and blankets are infested with vermin.” Most workers left the harvest as poor as when they entered it.

In order to counter the influence of the IWW, which had played a role in a series of struggles among agricultural workers, Midwest farmers planned to import 30,000 black workers from the South to harvest the fields. The AWO’s agitation committee issued a warning to “John Farmer,” which explained: “The IWW has some good negro organizers just itching for a chance of this kind. Thirty thousand negroes will come and 30,000 IWWs will go back. The red card is understood as much and its objects understood as well by a black man as by a white man.” The AWO’s fight for the unity of workers across racial grounds cut across attempts to use black workers as scabs, a plan that never materialized.

The AWO conference unanimously reelected Walter T. Nef as secretary and drew up demands for the 1916 season: \$4 a day for 10 hours of work; 50 cents overtime for every hour worked after 10 hours; good, clean board and places to sleep in, with clean bedding. In addition, the AWO demanded that all farm workers be hired through IWW halls or through delegates on the job.

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