

# This week in history: July 18-24

18 July 2016

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## 25 years ago: Wife of Greyhound strike frame-up victim appeals to New York union body

Karen Cawthra, the wife of imprisoned Greyhound driver Roger Cawthra, addressed a meeting of the Executive Council of Hospital Workers Local 1199 on Friday, July 19, 1991.

The Greyhound striker's wife was invited to the Executive Council after the 1199 Delegates Assembly, representing more than 80,000 hospital and health care workers in New York, voted at its previous meeting to defend Roger Cawthra and called on the leadership to provide the funds needed to secure his release on bail while he continued to fight his frame-up conviction.

The resolution was introduced by a registered nurses' delegate from Manhattan. The motion, adopted without opposition, stated: "This delegate body of Local 1199 denounces the frame-up of Roger Cawthra; demands that the ATU and the AFL-CIO adopt this case and provide full legal and financial support for Roger and his family while he fights this frame-up; and that 1199 advance the \$15,000 needed to pay the punitive bail and get him out of prison so he can fight his appeal and then seek contributions from other unions."

In introducing Karen Cawthra to the Executive Council, the delegate briefly reviewed the main facts of the Cawthra case. She explained that Roger had been framed-up for allegedly shooting at a scab bus near Hartford, Connecticut, that the sole evidence against him was the testimony of a longtime professional scab, and that Cawthra had been prevented from presenting evidence which would have proved that he could not have been at the scene of the alleged shooting. The Greyhound striker was arrested in March 1990, convicted in May 1991, and sentenced on June 25 to the maximum term of six years and three months on one felony and two misdemeanor charges.

Karen Cawthra then read a statement to the Executive Council, first explaining to the union officials that it had been drawn up together with her husband, and that it represented "everything he would tell you if he were able to be here."

At that time Cawthra had served three-and-a-half weeks in prison. By the time the Executive Council finally provided his

bail bond, due to pressure from the membership, he would serve another seven weeks.

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## 50 years ago: North Vietnam proposes war crimes trials

On July 19, 1966, the government of North Vietnam announced that US airmen held as prisoners of war would be tried as war criminals for the savage bombing raids carried out against civilian population centers by US imperialism.

Following the stabilization of the US-backed puppet regime in the South, which had successfully smashed the Buddhist-led opposition after two months of strikes and mass protests, the Johnson administration ordered an escalation of the air war against the North. Beginning in late June, air strikes were carried out by US warplanes against Hanoi and the port city of Haiphong, resulting in massive destruction.

Following these raids, the Stalinist authorities decided to more aggressively publicize the horrific crimes being carried out by imperialism against the North Vietnamese people. A public parade of captured American pilots through the streets of Hanoi drew crowds of angry workers who jeered at the prisoners.

Pacifist and liberal organizations in America rushed to the aid of US imperialism, hypocritically denouncing the Ho Chi Minh regime in North Vietnam for initiating the trials. Norman Thomas, leader of the reformist Socialist Party, issued a personal appeal to Ho Chi Minh to forego the trials, while the anticommunist peace group SANE issued a lengthy public statement warning of the negative impact on the "public climate" in the United States.

Meanwhile the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union agreed to transmit an appeal from US Ambassador at Large Averill Harriman. The Johnson administration refused to release the names of the men that it knew were being held prisoner, listing all the captives together with the missing. The press estimated the number at close to 200.

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## 75 years ago: Churchill denies Stalin's request for a Western front

On July 18, 1941, with the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union still only in its first phase but with the German Wehrmacht already punching deep into the USSR, Stalin wrote to Churchill, "It seems to me that the military position of the Soviet Union, as well as that of Great Britain, would be considerably improved if there could be established a front against Hitler in the West—Northern France, and in the North—the Arctic."

Wishing the war in the east would bleed white both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, and concentrating on the defense of the British Empire in the Middle East, Churchill wrote back to Stalin on July 20 refusing his demands. "To attempt a landing in force would be to encounter a bloody repulse, and petty raids would only lead to fiascos doing far more harm than good to both of us," he wrote.

Under mortal threat from Hitler, Stalin desperately sought military alliance with Britain and the United States. But neither Churchill nor Roosevelt intended to commit themselves, in the summer of 1941, until it was clearer who would emerge victorious from the war on the Eastern Front.

By mid-July 1941 Operation Barbarossa had achieved enormous territorial gains brought about by crushing German victories over an unprepared Red Army. Two days before writing to Churchill, Stalin's eldest son Yakov was captured by the invading German forces. On July 21, 127 Luftwaffe planes bombed Moscow for the first time. On July 24, Operation Munchen, a joint German and Romanian offensive, ended in Axis victory and the reincorporation of Bessarabia and North Bukovina into Romania.

At that moment Hitler had command over a greater portion of the European peninsula of the Eurasian landmass than any ruler since Napoleon.

However, while General Halder, intoxicated from stunning German victories at Bialystock and Minsk as well as Smolensk, confidently wrote in early July of a swift victory over the Soviet Union being achieved within the first two weeks of Barbarossa, the end of July brought the crushing recognition that the operational plans for Barbarossa had in actual fact failed.

Early in July Halder told Hitler only 46 of the known 164 Red Army divisions were still capable of combat. This calculation involved poor intelligence about Red Army numbers before the German invasion, an overestimation of Soviet losses and a gross underestimation of the Soviet Union's ability to replenish its forces. By July 23 Halder had revised his figures to a total of 93 remaining Soviet divisions. The Red Army had been "decisively weakened" but not "finally smashed" he wrote.

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## 100 years ago: Mass transit strike in New York

On July 22, 1916, streetcar workers in the suburbs of Yonkers, Mount Vernon, and New Rochelle, in New York City, walked off the job at 5 a.m., precipitating what one historian described as "the era's greatest industrial crisis." The strike by the transit workers, who were members of the Amalgamated Association of Steel and Electric Railways of America, quickly spread to all surface lines in Manhattan, the Bronx, Queens and Richmond County (Staten Island). It shut down all surface transit in New York City, with the exception of Brooklyn.

The president of the Amalgamated Association declared, "Working conditions in New York are the worst in the world, and that goes for Europe too." A listing of the scales of wages paid on transit lines in 42 major cities in the US showed that New York's pay scale was by far the lowest.

The Interborough Rapid Transit Company (IRT) employed 634 motormen who received \$3.67 per day for ten hours work, seven days a week. Another 3,180 conductors and guard received just \$2.23 per day for a 12-hour day. The lowest paid workers, porters, received \$1.71 a day, while working 12-hours, seven days a week.

On the Third Avenue Line, conductors received a wage averaging 23, 24 and 25 cents an hour. Their average wage was \$16 a week or \$867.51 a year. They worked 10-hour days, seven days a week, with no holidays or vacations. They also were often forced to work 14 or 15 hours a day to secure their 10-hour pay, because workers were only paid for car runs. It was not unusual for a worker to spend 80 hours on the job, in order to receive 70 hours pay.

The transit corporations were largely controlled by the House of Morgan, August Belmont and Cornelius Vanderbilt, which dominated the board of directors of both IRT and the New York Railways Company. All were notorious opponents of any form of workers organization.

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