

This week in history: September 5-11

5 September 2016

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

25 years ago: Greyhound striker freed on bail

Roger Cawthra, the framed-up Greyhound bus lines striker, walked out of a Connecticut prison September 5, 1991, free on bail. His release followed an intense two-month campaign initiated by the Workers League, predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party, in which rank-and-file members of the Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU), Local 1199 hospital workers and other sections of the working class movement challenged and defeated the conspiracy of the trade union bureaucracy to bury Cawthra's case and leave him to languish in jail.

Cawthra, a lifelong trade unionist, 46-year-old father of three and grandfather, had been convicted the previous May on charges of criminal mischief, reckless endangerment and unlawful discharge of a firearm. No proof was ever produced that the crime, shooting at a scab-driven bus, took place, and the judge refused to allow evidence proving that Cawthra was nowhere near the scene. On June 25, the Greyhound striker was sentenced to the maximum prison term of six years and three months.

Cawthra's union, the ATU, abandoned him to the frame-up organized by the government and Greyhound. The ATU bureaucracy of James La Sala refused to defend Cawthra or pay his bail. When La Sala was challenged by ATU strikers in Windsor, Ontario, he told a barefaced lie, claiming the union had already paid Cawthra's bail.

The campaign launched by the Workers League won widespread support from workers who were angered by the frame-up of a militant worker and disgusted by the collaboration of the trade union bureaucracy in railroading him to prison.

Thousands of workers, including autoworkers, steelworkers, coal miners and transit workers, as well as Greyhound strikers, striking transit workers in Windsor and others, signed petitions directed to La Sala demanding that the union defend Cawthra and pay his bail.

Hundreds of workers from several New York hospitals signed petitions directed to the leadership of Local 1199 (hospital workers), declaring themselves "outraged" over the attempts by the union's executive council to stonewall a July 10 decision of the Delegates Assembly to pay Cawthra's bail and launch a campaign in his defense.

In a statement on his release, Cawthra said, "[T]he problem is that you have the Lane Kirklands [then president of the AFL-CIO], the La Salas and the Dennis Riveras [then president of Local 1199]

sitting on top of the unions. All of them just want to pass the buck. They pat you on the back, shake your hand and sell you down the road. It's not just Greyhound, but it's been done with PATCO, the UAW, UMW and other unions."

His wife, Karen added, "If it wasn't for the *Bulletin* and the Workers League, there would have been no fight for Roger Cawthra's freedom. That's clear. The Greyhound drivers themselves weren't even told that he was in prison."

Significantly, the Local 1199 leadership sent no representatives to the Superior Court in Hartford to greet Cawthra on his leaving prison. Nor did any official from the La Sala bureaucracy of the ATU show his or her face.

[top]

50 years ago: President Johnson rejects Vietnam withdrawal

On September 5, 1966, US President Lyndon Johnson rejected a proposal by French President Charles de Gaulle for the United States to establish a timetable for the withdrawal of its military forces from Vietnam.

De Gaulle argued that the US had to pull its troops out on a definite schedule to draw North Vietnam into an imperialist peace conference. The recommendation came after a meeting with the leaders of the Western Powers-backed government of Cambodia. De Gaulle was seeking to strengthen France's role as an independent imperialist power. Earlier in the year, de Gaulle had taken France out of NATO and ordered all its forces off the country's soil.

Responding to de Gaulle, US Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara declared that American forces would be built up to whatever strength was necessary to defend the puppet South Vietnamese regime. At the same time, McNamara sought to assure the People's Republic of China that the US military buildup was not aimed at them. Radio Beijing charged the US with attempting to provoke war. The Chinese regime had recently reported that US warplanes sank one of its cargo vessels, killing nine crewmen.

Speaking at a Labor Day event, Johnson also rejected proposals by the Senate Democratic policy committee for a cutback of troops in Western Europe to reduce military expenditures. Johnson spoke at rallies in Detroit and other Midwestern industrial cities. The tour, sponsored by the AFL-CIO, sought to mobilize support for Democratic Party candidates in the mid-term elections.

The US ruling class relied on the support of the trade union officialdom for the neo-colonial Vietnam War, while at the same

time insisting the labor bureaucrats hold back workers' wage demands in the face of rising inflation. Massive government expenditures on the war, combined with the cost of Johnson's Great Society programs, were provoking strong concerns over the growth of inflation and the increase in the American balance of payments deficit.

[top]

75 years ago: Nazi Germany lays siege to Leningrad

On September 9, 1941 German armies encircled Leningrad and launched a supposed final blitzkrieg to take the city. General Wilhelm von Leeb ordered the siege after the last Soviet army front barring the approaches to Leningrad crumbled under the powerful onslaught of German tank forces.

With Leningrad facing imminent attack, the local Stalinist bureaucrats were compelled to invoke the revolutionary heritage of October 1917, issuing an appeal to the city's workers: "A threat hangs over Leningrad. The insolent Fascist Army pushes towards our glorious city—the cradle of the proletarian revolution—our holy duty is to bar the road to the enemy at the gates of Leningrad with our breasts."

Nearly every stratum of the city's population went into action. Volunteer workers' battalions, some of whom were armed with only pistols, knives and Molotov cocktails, were combined with defeated remnants of the Red Army to launch wave after wave of counterattacks to slow the advancing German force.

One million workers—mostly women, along with the elderly and the youth—worked 24 hours a day on an elaborate system of internal and perimeter defense structures. Workers turned out military equipment in the factories by day and served in the workers' battalions at night. Mechanics and technicians had to operate tanks as they emerged from the factories due to the enormous losses of personnel suffered by the Soviet army.

Throughout the first period of the German invasion of the Soviet Union, Stalin had appealed to the population to defend the country on the basis of Russian nationalism rather than the October Revolution, recalling past victories against foreign invaders going back to Napoleon and even the Teutonic knights of the 12th century. He opposed the establishment of a council for the defense of Leningrad, fearing it might be transformed into a workers soviet that could turn against his dictatorial rule.

[top]

100 years ago: Mass transit strike in New York

On September 6, 1916, the second phase of a mass strike by transit workers in New York began, with a meeting of Division 731 Amalgamated Street and Electric Railway Employees voting unanimously to walk off the job on the Interborough Rapid Transit

Company (IRT) subway, elevated and surface lines. The strike was a response to the company's violations of an August 8 truce, which had ended industrial action initiated in July. The employers had tried to force workers to join a company union and to sign "yellow dog" contracts.

The IRT bosses welcomed the strike as an opportunity to break the transit workers. IRT president Thomas P. Shonts declared, "All agreements are off. This is a fight to the finish and we are 100 percent prepared." Company attorney, James F. Quackenbush appealed to the police to smash the strike: "If there are enough blue coats and brass buttons and nightsticks ... where they are needed, the strike won't last long."

The union distributed a leaflet to transit passengers which stated, "Shonts and [IRT general manager Frank] Hedley want to break the union. They want to control the wages and lives of the men and their families, just as they have done. The men want to be free ... Shonts and Hedley are only the tools. They must enforce the will of the masters. [John D.] Rockefeller and [J. P.] Morgan want the men subjugated. They want unionism destroyed. They want to control their employees like chattel."

By September 10, the strike had spread to the New York Railways Co. and the Third Avenue Transit Company, despite existing contracts between the workers and their employers. The administration of Mayor John P. Mitchell backed the companies, providing police protection on every scab-driven streetcar. An army of professional strikebreakers was mobilized, using thugs and gangsters who had been assembled in anticipation of a national rail strike that had been cancelled by union leaders.

Rank-and-file workers and Socialist Party members rallied to the transit strike. On "Sash Day," 5,000 young women socialists did picket duty wearing "Don't be a scab" sashes.

[top]



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