

This week in history: April 30-May 6

30 April 2018

25 years ago: World Wide Web source code released to the public

On April 30, 1993, CERN (European Organization for Nuclear Research) released the source code for the World Wide Web into the public domain and made it available free of any licensing fees. Tim Berners-Lee, who created the web in 1989, urged CERN to release his invention into the public domain. This decision is considered the actual birth date of the World Wide Web and the single most important reason for its rapid international expansion.

The software required to run a web server, a basic browser and the library of code was released by CERN into the public domain with the following statement: “CERN relinquishes all intellectual property rights to this code, both source and binary and permission is given to anyone to use, duplicate, modify and distribute it.”

The concept of free/libre software was in its infancy at that time, having been developed by Richard Stallman, an MIT scientist who founded the Free Software Foundation. The General Public License was developed as a direct challenge to the profit-driven personal computer technology industry led by corporations like Microsoft and Apple.

More than 500 web servers were in existence by the end of 1993. With one year of CERN’s announcement, in April 1994, the World Wide Web had 10,000 servers and 10 million users. Berners-Lee would go on to found the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) in 1994, the body that continues to oversee the development of web standards today.

50 years ago: Student protests erupt in Paris

On May 2, 1968, riot police attempted to quell a student protest against the closure of the arts college at Paris University at Nanterre, a newly-erected suburban campus that had been shut down in response to ongoing student protests. The following day, the protests spread to the prestigious Sorbonne, which included the demand that disciplinary action against Nanterre student Daniel Cohn-Bendit be dropped. Again police were sent in to break up the demonstration.

On the night of May 3, in the words of one press account, “riot policemen using clubs and tear gas fought pitched battles with Sorbonne students” protesting the Nanterre closing. The arrested students totaled 573. In response, authorities ordered the indefinite closure of the Sorbonne, for the first time since its founding in 1253.

On May 5, a French union representing university professors initiated a national strike in response to the closures at Nanterre and Sorbonne and the heavy-handed police actions against students.

On May 6 and May 7 street fighting erupted around a demonstration called by the Union Nationale des Étudiants de France (UNEF). Police attempted to disperse protesters with batons and tear gas. Students responded in Parisian revolutionary tradition, creating street barricades of overturned cars and throwing paving stones as well as homemade gasoline bombs. Street fighting between police and students took place in at least five separate locations in and near the Latin Quarter.

In one instance, more than 10,000 demonstrators blocked Boulevard St. Germain with overturned buses, and “wave after wave of police counterattacks were repelled,” according to the *New York Times* report on the event. “Police vehicles racing reinforcements to the scene were bombarded from roofs with stones and firebombs. The windows of countless paddy-wagons and police busses were smashed in, and scores of overturned and burning cars littered Boulevard St. Germain and Rue de Rennes.”

75 years ago: Half a million US coal miners strike during World War II

Defying a wartime no-strike pledge by the major US unions, on May 1, after midnight, some 480,000 coal miners walked off the job after the expiration of a previous contract between the United Mine Workers union and the major coal companies. The stoppage was part of a wave of labor unrest, reflecting a political radicalization of the working class, and intense hostility to the wartime profiteering of the corporations while wages fell behind rapidly increasing inflation.

The administration of Franklin Roosevelt responded by demanding that UMW President John L. Lewis order a return to

work. When Lewis refused, Roosevelt issued an executive order declaring, “The Secretary of the Interior is authorized and directed to take immediate possession so far as may be necessary or desirable, of any and all mines producing coal in which a strike or stoppage has occurred or is threatened.”

Roosevelt denounced the miners for taking a “gamble with the lives of American soldiers and sailors,” speaking on radio to a national audience. “Every idle miner directly and individually is obstructing our war effort,” he declared. The strike was ended that week, but industrial action resumed the following month.

The coal miners demanded \$2-a-day pay rise, improved safety equipment, vacation pay and other conditions. Many of the miners lived in towns controlled by the major companies. Every aspect of their life was monitored and controlled by the mining magnates, who suppressed wages on the pretext of ensuring maximum war production, while inflating prices for consumer goods.

The miners’ strike followed a walk-out by San Francisco shipyard workers in March, a strike by 55,000 Akron rubber workers in April, and a stoppage of 30,000 Chrysler workers the same month.

The industrial struggles expressed growing hostility to the treacherous policies of the union bureaucracy. Officials from all of the major unions had signed no-strike pledges with the government over the preceding years, pledging to work as an industrial police force for the Roosevelt administration and big business while American capitalism waged war against its German and Japanese rivals.

Lewis, who had previously supported Roosevelt, had been locked in increasingly bitter conflicts with the administration. He was, however, a conscious opponent of socialism, hostile to the fight to mobilize the working class against the profit system and its political defenders.

100 years ago: German imperialism sets up puppet states in Ukraine and Finland

This week in 1918 saw German military intervention to create vassal states in Ukraine and Finland headed up by far-right nationalists.

In Ukraine, on April 30, German forces gained control over the Crimean Peninsula and swept away a short-lived Soviet state, the Taurida Soviet Socialist Republic. Leaders of the revolution in Crimea, including Anton Slutsky and Jan Tarwacki, were handed over to far-right Crimean Tatars and executed. Berlin kept Crimea as a German possession in all but name, holding it separate from Ukraine and setting up its own, nominally independent Crimean Regional Government.

One day earlier, on April 29, Germany dispensed with the

Ukrainian Rada, or parliament, and imposed the dictatorial regime in Kiev, anointing former Tsarist general Pavlo Skoropadskyi as Hetman. In the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, Soviet Russia had been compelled to recognize the German-allied Rada of the Ukrainian People’s Republic as sovereign and independent. After the treaty’s signing on March 3, 1918, German army battalions moved through territories claimed by the Rada, driving underground Bolshevik-dominated soviets and workers’ councils throughout the Ukraine. But by the end of April, Berlin had tired of the inefficacy of the Rada in dealing with the revolution.

Far to the north the German army assisted the nationalist White Army of G.E. Mannerheim, another former Tsarist general, as it crushed the last remnants of the Finnish workers’ revolution.

On April 30, Vyborg (Viipuri), at one time a stronghold of the Russian Revolution due to the stationing of a significant portion of the Russian navy there, surrendered to German forces and their allies among the Finnish White Army and its German-trained Jäger battalions. What followed was a wholesale slaughter of Finnish militant workers and ethnic Russian, Poles, and other national minorities. More than 1,200 were executed, including many boys, as well as some women who were members of the Finnish Red Guard.

On May 2, a long column of militant Finnish workers that had fought its way east in a bid to reach Petrograd was forced to surrender to German forces at Lahti. Afterwards between 23,000 and 30,000 Finnish men, women, and children were gathered at a prison camp at Hennala. Over 500 Red Guards were separated and summarily executed by White Finnish forces subordinate to the German Army. Another 13,000 were kept in a fetid concentration camp, leading to many more deaths.

On May 4, the Finnish Civil War came to an end when a force of 800 Red soldiers surrendered to German forces at Ahvenkoski. As in previous cases, those who surrendered were double-crossed. Upwards of 300 Finnish workers were murdered after the surrender, and the rest were jailed.



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