

This week in history: May 14-20

14 May 2018

25 years ago: Maastricht Treaty to establish European Union passes last hurdles

Denmark ratified the Maastricht Treaty, establishing the European Union, in a referendum vote on May 18, 1993. It was the second attempt at ratification in the small Scandinavian country, after a previous referendum was defeated narrowly in June 1992. The margin in the second vote was 56.8 percent for ratification and 43.2 percent against, a shift in sentiment obtained in part by the adoption of four amendments to the treaty to satisfy nationalist objections.

The four so-called “opt-outs” were outlined in the Edinburgh Agreement, adopted at a meeting of representatives of the 12 members of the European Economic Community in the Scottish capital in late 1992. The most important was to exempt Denmark from the Economic and Monetary Union, allowing the country to keep its own currency, the krone, rather adopting the euro. A similar exemption had been extended to Britain, allowing it to keep the pound.

Denmark is also outside the common military policy of the European Union and does not contribute troops to EU overseas missions. Some areas of domestic law enforcement are also exempted from EU rules.

The political maneuvers to obtain ratification of the Maastricht Treaty—all 12 states had to ratify it in order to bring it into effect—demonstrated the buildup of political and social conflicts within the European Union even at the moment of its establishment. France ratified the Maastricht Treaty by a bare 50.5 percent majority, while Danish voters had to vote twice to get the needed assent.

In Britain, the path was just as tortuous, although there was no referendum vote. On May 20, two days after the Danish referendum, the British House of Commons gave approval to the Maastricht Treaty on its Third Reading, the last step before approval by the House of Lords and the royal assent. A separate vote was to be held later in the summer on whether Britain should be exempt from the EU social charter, as demanded by the ruling Conservative Party, over the opposition of the Labour Party.

Passage of Maastricht by a vote of 292-112 came despite rabid opposition to the establishment of the EU by a right-wing faction of the Tories, spearheaded by former prime minister Margaret Thatcher. The margin of victory was assured by the

decision of the Labour Party to abstain on the vote on final passage, despite its objection to removal of the “social charter.” The social democrats thus gave big business what it wanted—British membership in the EU—while pretending to uphold a more “worker-friendly” system of regulations.

50 years ago: Factory occupations sweep France

Beginning on May 14, 1968, French workers, inspired by mass student protests in the preceding weeks, began a wave of factory occupations that shook capitalist France to its foundations.

One of the first occupations was at the Sud-Aviation factory in Nantes. The plant remained under control of the workers for one month, with red flags flying over the administration building. The regional director, Duvochel, was held captive by the occupiers for 16 days. The company’s general manager at the time was Maurice Papon, a Nazi collaborator, war criminal and head of the Paris police in 1961, when he was responsible for the killing of demonstrators protesting against the Algeria war.

Workers at other factories followed suit in a wave of occupations across the country from May 15 through May 20. Everywhere red flags were hoisted, and in many factories the management was held captive. The actions affect hundreds of factories and offices including the country’s biggest factory, the main Renault plant in Billancourt, and other Renault plants at Flins, Le Havre, and Rouen. Workers shut down the Paris international airport at Orly. They walked off the job from two factories in Lyon, and from several newspapers in Paris.

By May 17, at least 100,000 workers were on strike in France, and the red flag—the symbol of international socialism—was hoisted above a number of factories and plants, including the Berliet truck factory, the chemical facilities of Rhône-Poulenc in Lyon, and the Rhodiaceta textile factory.

On May 18, the Cannes Film Festival was cancelled in its ninth day after judges resigned in sympathy with the wave of factory and school occupations. Film technicians and directors went out on strike the next day, blocking attempts to restart the festival.

Action committees sprang up in the occupied factories and

surrounding areas drawing in local residents, students and pupils alongside the striking workers and technical and administrative staff. The committees took responsibility for the organization of the strikes and developed into forums of intensive political debate. The same was true for the universities, which were to a large extent occupied by students.

On May 20, the whole country was at a standstill—hit by a general strike, although neither the trade unions nor any other organizations have issued a call for such a strike. Factories, offices, universities and schools are occupied, production and the transport system paralyzed. Ten million of France's 15 million-strong workforce are involved in the action—two thirds of the entire working class, the most widespread and effective general strike in the history of France or any other country.

75 years ago: Nazis liquidate Warsaw Ghetto in occupied Poland

On May 16, 1943, Nazi officials in German-occupied Poland officially concluded their brutal suppression of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. Over the preceding weeks, Nazi troops from the notorious SS had unleashed a wave of terror in the Ghetto, after the eruption of an heroic rebellion against the dispatch of hundreds of thousands of Jews to their deaths in concentration camps.

The uprising began on April 19, when Jewish workers and youth in the open air prison resisted deportation orders from the Nazis. Political organisations in the Ghetto, including the left-wing Żydowska Organizacja Bojowa (ZOB), had conducted agitation for a struggle against the German troops, and had made logistical preparations. They were equipped, however, only with a handful of small arms, and improvised weapons, including Molotov cocktails.

The Nazis responded to the uprising by setting fire to most of the Ghetto, and by carrying out indiscriminate killings, including of children and the elderly. In his memoirs, Jack Klajman, who survived the slaughter as an eleven-year-old, wrote, "The ghetto transformed into an ugly war zone. The Germans became particularly vicious. Pregnant women were tortured, and mothers had their babies snatched from their arms and had to watch as soldiers saved bullets by bashing the children's heads against the wall."

On May 8, the Germans had discovered the secret ZOB headquarters. The bulk of the fighters inside committed suicide. On May 16, SS Polizeiführer Jürgen Stroop, who commanded German troops in the Ghetto, personally detonated the bombs that destroyed the Warsaw synagogue.

In a dispatch on the same day to Berlin, Stroop wrote, "The former Jewish quarter of Warsaw is no longer in existence. The large-scale action was terminated at 2015 hours by blowing up

the Warsaw Synagogue ... Total number of Jews dealt with 56,065 including both Jews caught and Jews whose extermination can be proved."

100 years ago: Wilson guts free speech with Sedition Act

On May 16, 1918, US President Woodrow Wilson signed into law the infamous Sedition Act, which outlawed language deemed by state authorities to be "disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive" of the federal government, the military, and the flag.

The Sedition Act amended and deepened the anti-democratic assault launched by the Espionage Act of 1917, which had outlawed forms of speech and political activity authorities construed as interfering with the military. Section 3 of the amended Espionage Act now imposed a jail term of up to 20 years, and a fine of as much as \$20,000 for anyone who did "willfully utter, print, write, or publish any disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language about the form of government of the United States, or the Constitution of the United States, or the military or naval forces of the United States."

This stricture was clearly aimed at socialist opposition to war. It would be used to impose a ten-year prison sentence on the 63-year-old Eugene Debs for his June 18, 1918 Canton speech opposing the imperialist slaughter in WWI. The amended Espionage Act also included language that could be used as a cudgel against the entire working class, by imposing prison on anyone who did "urge, incite, or advocate any curtailment of production."

The Sedition Act, though extreme, was only one of many actions of the American ruling class as it lurched sharply toward dictatorship. Only two days earlier, on May 14, Iowa Governor William L. Harding signed into law an act that effectively outlawed the use of foreign languages in the heavily immigrant state, stating that "only English [was] legal in public or private schools, in public conversations, on trains, over the telephone, at all meetings, and in all religious services."



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