

# This Week in History June 4-10

4 June 2018

## Eight immigrants die in wreck of *Golden Venture* on Rockaway Beach

On June 6, 1993, the wreck of the freighter *Golden Venture* on the shores of Rockaway Beach, New York revealed a modern form of the slave trade, in which Chinese immigrant workers were packed into the holds of ships and smuggled into the United States to work as sweatshop labor.

Eight young immigrant workers died when the ship went aground in the early morning hours. Six drowned as they attempted to swim ashore and two died of heart attacks induced by exposure to the frigid waters. Another 276 were captured by New York City police, then turned over to the Immigration and Naturalization Service and placed in detention camps, pending their deportation to China.

The immigrants told a story of terrible hardship. They were locked below deck for up to four months in a journey that began off the coast of Fujian province and extended for 17,000 miles. They ate only one meal a day, of rice and vegetables. They had no running water and only a single toilet for nearly 300 people, including 27 women.

Under virtual slave labor conditions in the US, they were to work off the cost of their passage, laboring 100 hours a week or more for no pay in restaurants, laundries and garment factories. Many of the women workers were to be forced into prostitution. Immigrants who failed to pay off the gangsters in charge of the smuggling operation faced being beaten, kidnapped, and tortured, with some murdered as examples to terrorize the rest.

The Clinton administration also sought to “make an example” of these brutally exploited workers, announcing it would seek to deport all the survivors of the wreck. An INS spokesman told the *International Workers Bulletin*, “We have to prevent others from trying the same route.”

One Democratic congressman, Charles Schumer of Brooklyn, New York—the future Senate Democratic Leader—went even further, holding a press conference after the shipwreck to call for redrafting of American immigration laws to limit the number of Asian and Latin American workers entering the US.

## Yugoslav students protest over jobs and inequality

Throughout the week of June 3-10, 1968, students at the University of Belgrade began a protest movement, marching

against economic reforms that had created high unemployment and holding meetings to debate and discuss the political situation. The protests spread to other Yugoslav cities like Sarajevo and Zagreb.

In 1964 the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (LCY), the Stalinist ruling political party, introduced an economic policy to allow the resurgence of a market economy and build stronger relations with the west. After the Tito-Stalin split between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, the Yugoslav bureaucracy was in need of new allies to replace the loss of trade with Russia. The result of the economic “reforms” was a large growth in unemployment and growing income inequality.

The student movement began on the night of June 2 after police denied students entry into a free play being held in a Belgrade theater. Students refused to comply with the police and violent clashes broke out. The protesters erected barricades of overturned cars to defend themselves from the police. The next day, 4,000 students marched on Belgrade to begin negotiations with the LCY. Before any progress was made, the police fired on the march wounding 70 students.

The students then returned to the University to plan and organize a seven-day strike. The demands of the student protesters were:

“The rapid solution of the employment problem facing new university graduates, most of whom have to go abroad if they want to find any sort of employment; The suppression of the great inequalities in Yugoslavia; The establishment of real democracy and self-management relations; The immediate release of all arrested students; The resignation of the chief of police; Convene the Parliament to discuss the demands of students; The resignation of the directors of all Belgrade newspapers, radio and TV for having deliberately falsified the events of the June 2.”

After making their headquarters in the Department of Philosophy, the strikers put out a statement to clarify the purpose of the protest: “We do not have our own program. Our program is the program of the most progressive forces of our society—the program of the LCY and the constitution. We demand that it should be put consequently into practice.” The Belgrade students opposed the Yugoslav state not from the right but from the left, because it was carrying out policies that were not in the interests of the working class and did not represent an advance toward socialism. They instead called for political reform to meet the immediate needs of students and workers.

On the last day of the strike, President Tito announced his support for the students and promised he would see to it that their demands were met. This was a lie, for the purpose of bringing the protests to an end. Instead the regime banned films, newspapers, books and other media while unemployment continued. Some university professors who supported the students also found it

difficult to continue their careers as punishment for their involvement in the affair.

## **75 years ago: Military coup in Argentina**

On June 4, 1943, military forces staged a coup d'état, overthrowing the Argentine government of President Ramón Castillo and preventing the installation of his hand-picked successor Robustiano Patrón Costas, an oligarch in the sugar industry.

The action was outcome of protracted machinations by senior figures in the military who had formed a secret United Officers' Group to prepare the ouster of the government. The immediate trigger was Castillo's demand on June 3 that his Minister of War, General Pedro Pablo Ramírez, resign because of a meeting he held with the Radical Civic Union, an oppositional party that had offered to endorse him as a candidate in upcoming presidential elections.

On the morning of June 4, a force of 8,000 soldiers was mobilized from the Campo de May by senior army generals. The only serious resistance they faced was at the Navy Petty Officers School of Mechanics, where forces loyal to the government opened fire. The clashes left 30 dead and over 100 wounded. Castillo fled to Uruguay and his government collapsed.

General Arturo Rawson, a right-wing Catholic and member of a prominent aristocratic family, declared himself president. Rawson's reign lasted just three days, however, ending with his ouster by Ramirez on June 7, following opposition to Rawson's attempts to stack his cabinet with personal friends.

The coup was an expression of deep-going social and political tensions. Over the "infamous decade," initiated by the military overthrow of the democratically elected government of President Hipólito Yrigoyen, Argentina had been dominated by a series of authoritarian regimes. Popular discontent had grown amid a rapid industrialization and substantial growth of the urban working class. The Argentine ruling elite was also bitterly divided over demands from Britain and the United States that it dispense with its position of neutrality, adopted at the beginning of the Second World War in 1939, and support the Allied powers.

The Ramirez dictatorship immediately jailed workers' leaders, banned oppositional groups, and moved to institute state control over the trade unions. At the same time, it made limited social concessions aimed at diffusing popular discontent, included a freeze on increases to rural rents and leases. The government was to be divided on a host of domestic and foreign policy issues, setting the stage for further upheavals and conflicts.

## **100 years ago: Czech Legion backs formation of first anti-Soviet government in Russia**

On June 8, 1918, the first anti-Soviet government was established on Russian territory under the protection of the Czech Legion, an armed force of some 60,000 former prisoners of war captured by Tsarist armies in World War I who revolted against the Bolshevik regime in mid-May. The anti-Bolshevik government was set up in Samara, a city on the Volga, by four former members of the Constituent Assembly, which the Soviet Government had dissolved in January.

The Committee of Members of the Constituent Assembly, known by its Russian acronym, Komuch, were members of the Social Revolutionary Party (SRs) and led by Vladimir Volsky. By September, Komuch had grown to 96 members, including the veteran SR leader Victor Chernov. Komuch formed a "People's Army" and extended its authority to the provinces of Kazan, Saratov, Simbirsk and Ufa.

While the new Soviet government offered the Czech Legion safe passage through Siberia to Vladivostok, where they could board ships to return home, or the option of settlement in Russia as Soviet citizens, nationalist Czech officers, after communication with Czech leaders, who in turn were in close contact with British and French imperialism, refused to disarm and staged a revolt instead. The Legion occupied the rail route into Siberia, the main supply for foodstuffs for areas of the country under Soviet control, which were experiencing widespread famine.

What followed was, as the Commissar of War for the Soviet government, Leon Trotsky, noted in July, "a question, in the direct and immediate sense of the word, of life and death for the working class in Russia. And the Czechoslovaks had to seize a whole series of towns and provide a point of support for the White Guards and monarchists ... either we vanquish the Czechoslovaks and all those around them, or they will destroy us." The Czechoslovak Legion provided critical military support for Komuch's People's Army.

Trotsky later released captured letters from Samara that showed the role of French officers in widespread corruption and influence over Komuch, as well as their general contempt for both Czechs and Russians. Samara was retaken by the Red Army on October 7. Komuch had liquidated itself into the Provisional Siberian Government in September which in turn was dissolved in November by a coup lead by Admiral Kolchak, one of the leaders of the White Armies.



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