

This week in history, June 18-24

18 June 2018

25 years ago: Supreme Court rules against Haitian refugees

On June 22, 1993, in the case of *Sale v. Haitian Centers Council*, the US Supreme Court upheld the Bush and Clinton administrations' policy of intercepting fleeing Haitians at sea and returning them to Haiti without asylum hearings, where many were imprisoned, tortured and even murdered by the US-backed military dictatorship.

The decision was particularly significant because it came by an 8-1 margin, overriding the usual liberal vs. conservative divisions, with only Justice Harry A. Blackmun dissenting. The majority ruled that neither US law nor UN resolutions applied to actions taken by agents of the US government in international waters. In effect, they declared that the Coast Guard could have sunk the boats filled with refugees and allowed them to drown, and there would have been no legal recourse.

President George H. W. Bush initiated the policy with the "Kennebunkport Order" of May 1992, decreeing that the US Coast Guard should intercept boats filled with refugees while they are still at sea and force them back to Haiti. This overturned a previous policy in which the Coast Guard conducted interviews on board the ships and allowed those with seemingly valid refugee claims to proceed to Florida. In just the first month, more than 11,000 refugees were sent back to Haiti by US forces.

In his presidential campaign, Democrat Bill Clinton condemned Bush's policy as "cruel" and "shameful." But his first policy decision, announced even before the January 20 inauguration, was to reaffirm the blockade, and his Justice Department continued the defense of the quarantine in the courts.

The Haitian Refugee Center and civil liberties groups had argued that the Bush-Clinton policy violates both US law, which requires a hearing before an immigrant claiming political refugee status is deported, and a United Nations convention on the treatment of refugees.

In his scathing dissent, Justice Blackmun pointed out the flagrant contradiction between the court ruling and the past legal norms on the democratic rights of immigrants. "What is extraordinary in this case," he wrote, "is that the Executive, in disregard of the law, would take to the seas to intercept fleeing refugees and force them back to their persecutors and that the Court would strain to sanction that conduct."

In a speech given only three days before the decision, Clinton sounded a populist note, presenting his vicious assault on helpless refugees as a defense of American workers. He said, "under the pressures that we face today we can't afford to lose control of our own borders or take on new financial burdens at a time when we are not adequately providing for the jobs, the health care and the education of our own people."

50 years ago: Police assault shuts down the Poor People's Campaign

On June 24, 1968, after six weeks of protest, Resurrection City, the encampment created by the Poor People's Campaign on the mall in Washington DC, was forcibly shut down by police. More than one thousand police were mobilized for the action, ordered by the Democratic Party administration of President Lyndon Johnson.

Resurrection City was no small project. With a population high of about 3,000 residents, the city offered its citizens many amenities including day care, a barbershop, mess hall, and a city hall. Architect John Wiebenson designed the city's shanty buildings to be sturdy but simple so the many unskilled volunteers could quickly make homes for thousands.

The city sat on the iconic lawn of the Washington mall where it served as a "counter capital." When Martin Luther King, Jr. conceived of the project, he envisioned Resurrection City as headquarters from which the Poor People's Campaign could lobby Congress to pass an Economic Bill of Rights. After King's assassination on April 4 the movement was delayed, but eventually carried out under the leadership of Reverend Ralph David Abernathy.

Some senators and congressmen visited the camp in a gesture of sympathy, largely for show. Even Vice President Hubert Humphrey remarked that the Poor People's campaign was, "going to produce results" and that "I think we can learn a lot here." But President Johnson was hostile, as was the bulk of Congress. One Democratic senator from Arkansas, John McClellan, went as far as to say the city was "a premeditated act of contempt for and rebellion against the sovereignty of government."

The largest event in the campaign around Resurrection City came on June 19, when 150,000 people gathered to rally in support of Poor People's Campaign and hear speeches from the movement's leaders. But the population of the city fell to about 500 as the June 24 expiration date for the protest's permit approached. Abernathy, however, remained committed to the project and said Resurrection City would remain regardless of a permit.

When June 24 arrived, the local authorities in the District of Columbia deployed 1,000 police to tear down Resurrection City. Using tear gas and wearing masks and body armor, police arrested 288 people, including Abernathy. Later that night, the mayor declared a curfew and deployed the National Guard to enforce martial law.

The Poor People's Campaign was an attempt to connect the struggles of the most distressed sections of the working class across racial lines and to mount a peaceful and democratic protest against poverty and inequality. The response from the US government was tear gas and jail cells.

75 years ago: Fascists instigate race riots in Detroit

On June 22, 1943, violent clashes took place in Detroit, Michigan, as a result of racist agitation by the Ku Klux Klan and other fascistic groups, whose activities had been tacitly endorsed by the police and government authorities. Within the space of three days, 32 people were killed and over 400 were injured. The vast majority of them were African-American workers and youth.

The violence in Detroit followed pogromist rampages at the beginning of June in Los Angeles, California. US military personnel and right-wing groups attacked Mexican-American young people and workers. Some individuals were targeted because they wore “Zoot Suits,” on the absurd pretext that the amount of fabric required to manufacture them was impacting upon the American war effort.

The June 22 attacks in Detroit followed protracted racist agitation by the Ku Klux Klan, and other fascistic tendencies. They sought to divert widespread anger among workers over a deepening social crisis into attacks on African-American workers who had moved to the north in search of employment. A feature of the Detroit riots, and attacks over the previous months, were false claims by right-wing organisations that African-Americans were sexually assaulting white women.

When African-American workers and youth fought back against the attacks, and the unrest threatened to unleash a broader political crisis, the US administration of President Franklin Roosevelt dispatched 6,000 federal troops, along with national guardsmen and inter-state police reinforcements. They imposed a curfew and virtual martial law, and were responsible for the majority of black deaths and injuries.

The Socialist Workers Party (SWP), then the American section of the world Trotskyist movement, stated that the riots were a result of the attempts of the US ruling elite to divide the working class. The SWP warned that the deployment of federal troops was a test-case for the suppression of growing opposition to social inequality and the war. A June 26 editorial in the SWP’s paper, *The Militant*, called for the working class to “come to the defense of the Negro people.”

It stated: “The Ku Klux Klan and similar groups have long been active in Michigan and their members have worked hand in glove with the superintendent personnel of the auto barons to incite white workers against black.” It warned that the “inevitable consequence of this racial antagonism will be to divide the working masses; to sap the strength of organized labor; and to weaken the unions.” The editorial concluding by declaring, “Solidarity forever!” between white workers and colored must be the watchword of the hour.”

100 years ago: Bolshevik leader Volodarsky assassinated in Petrograd

On June 20, 1918, V. Volodarsky, a leader of the Bolshevik Party’s Petrograd Committee and the editor of the popular *Krasnaya Gazeta* (*Red Gazette*), was shot to death. The assassin was a member the Socialist-Revolutionary Party’s (SRs) “Battle Group,” a small terrorist organization, which, later in the summer, would assassinate Bolshevik leader M. S. Uritsky and seriously wound Lenin.

This faction of the SRs had previously had many followers, particularly among the peasantry, but had dwindled in influence for its

continued support for the imperialist war and its hindrance of land redistribution. It was opposed to Soviet power and had become one of the main organizers of counterrevolution.

Volodarsky’s murder came at a moment when the revolution was in mortal danger. Since the winter, the Germans, with whom the Bolsheviks had made a humiliating peace at Brest-Litovsk in March, threatened to occupy Petrograd. The revolt of the Czech Legion of the former Tsarist army had helped to set up a counterrevolutionary government (Komuch) led by the SRs in Samara, and a hostile Menshevik regime had existed in Georgia since May. Famine reigned throughout the territory controlled by the Soviets. The Allied powers were preparing a military intervention in Siberia.

Volodarsky, whose real name was Moisei Markovich Goldstein, was born in 1891. He joined the Jewish Socialist Bund in 1905 and participated in revolutionary activities. He was imprisoned by the Tsarist government in 1908, released in an amnesty in 1911, and emigrated to Philadelphia in 1913. He worked as a tailor and was active in the American Socialist Party. At the outbreak of the First World War, he took an internationalist position. After the February 1917 Revolution, Volodarsky returned to Russia and joined the *Mezhraiontsy* (Inter-District) organization led by Leon Trotsky, which fused with the Bolsheviks in July.

He immediately played a prominent role in the Bolshevik Party and in the Petrograd working class. Trotsky remarked in his *History of the Russian Revolution* of Volodarsky’s role as an agitator in the massive Putilov works in Petrograd: “Volodarsky was a magnificent mass orator, logical, ingenious, and bold. His American intonation gave a unique expressiveness to his resonant voice, ringing out concisely at meetings of many thousands.”

Anatoly Lunacharsky, the first people’s Commissar for Education, wrote in *Revolutionary Silhouettes*: “It was, however, after October that Volodarsky really came into his own. Then his personality made him to some degree the most striking representative of our party in Petrograd. He owed his position to his outstanding talent as an agitator, to his courageous rectitude, his absolutely superhuman capacity for work and finally to the fact that he combined truly colossal achievements as a speaker with his exemplary work as editor of the *Red Gazette* .”

A workers’ leader with gifts like this was roundly hated by the upper classes and the SRs in particular.

Lunacharsky again: “Tens, perhaps hundreds of thousands of workpeople followed him to his grave on the Field of Mars. What did his SR murderers feel then? Did they know against whom they had raised their hand? Did they admit to themselves how at heart the entire Petersburg proletariat was on his side, on ours, the side of the Communist Party?”



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