

This week in history: October 29-November 4

29 October 2018

25 years ago: Maastricht Treaty establishes European Union

On November 1, 1993, the European Economic Community (EEC) was officially transformed into the European Union (EU) as the Treaty on European Union, informally known as the Maastricht Treaty, went into effect. The accord, initially of 12 nations, later expanded to 28, increased the power of Brussels over the national states and laid the basis for the creation of the single European currency, the euro.

The Maastricht Treaty, initially agreed in late 1991, went into effect after a two-year campaign by the ruling classes of Europe to force through approval by the population. In nine of the 12 initial countries, parliamentary approval was all that was required, and presented no difficulty given the bourgeois character of all the ruling parties. But France, Denmark and Ireland required ratification by popular vote in a referendum.

While the Irish referendum on Maastricht passed easily, with 69 percent of the vote, Danish voters rejected the treaty the same month, with 50.7 percent voting against. The French referendum in September 1992 gave a narrow 50.8 percent margin for ratification. After minor changes were made in the treaty, mainly to provide the pretext for a second referendum, Danish voters narrowly ratified the treaty in May 1993.

The formation of the European Union had two basic purposes. Externally, it aimed to weld together the countries of the European continent, following the collapse of the Soviet bloc, in an economic entity dominated by Germany and France that would be able to compete on a world scale with American imperialism and the rising powers of Asia, primarily Japan and China. Internally, it sought to instigate a continent-wide drive against the working class, slashing social programs and driving down wages and benefits.

For the struggle against the working class, the EU countries adopted what became known as the Maastricht criteria or “convergence criteria,” defined by the Treaty in terms of inflation rates, public debt and deficits, exchange rate stability and interest rates. In effect, the poorer and weaker economies were subjected to financial constraints imposed by the stronger economies, above all Germany, whose consequences eventually became apparent in the Greek debt crisis some 20 years later.

The most notorious of the criteria was the requirement that the ratio of the annual government deficit to a country’s gross domestic product could not exceed 3 percent a year. The ratio of gross government debt to GDP could not exceed 60 percent. Most EU countries were in breach of one or both of these ratios, and the threat of EU sanctions was used to force through right-wing

austerity policies throughout the continent.

50 years ago: Johnson announces temporary halt in bombing of North Vietnam

In a nationally televised speech on October 31, 1968, President Lyndon Johnson announced that the United States was halting the bombing of North Vietnam, which had been continued more or less without pause since 1965.

Coming just five days before the presidential elections, the announcement was timed to bolster the flagging campaign of Vice President Hubert Humphrey by appealing to antiwar sentiment. The Democratic presidential candidate had been trailing badly in the polls following the police crackdown on protesters at the Democratic National Convention. During October, Humphrey had almost closed the polling gap with the Republican candidate Richard Nixon.

The agreement to stop bombing the North came after days of intensive secret talks between the United States and the Stalinist regime in North Vietnam. In exchange for the bombing halt, North Vietnam agreed to the US demand that the puppet regime in South Vietnam be allowed to join the peace talks opposite representatives of the National Liberation Front. It was tacitly understood by both parties that the bombing would resume if the NLF carried out attacks against Saigon or other major cities in the South.

The agreement to participate in the negotiations was a significant diplomatic concession on the part of North Vietnam. Hanoi had previously demanded an unconditional halt to the bombing.

It is now known that Nixon’s campaign sabotaged these talks by promising South Vietnam that they would receive greater concessions if they held off on an agreement until after his election to the presidency.

As the details were finalized, General Creighton Abrams, the US field commander in South Vietnam, was flown to Washington to brief Johnson personally. The general reported that military pressure by the NLF had eased over the past month. Significant numbers of the enemy had been withdrawn from the northern part of South Vietnam and combat had almost ceased. On that basis the military command said it would support the decision to end bombing of the North.

The bombings, not only air but also naval and ground-based artillery fire, stopped on the morning of November 1. Before this, the United States had maintained a regular bombardment of the North since February 1965. The only significant pause was a

37-day suspension ordered by Johnson between December 1965 and January 1966.

Even after Johnson issued his call for peace talks in March 1968, US military forces had continued limited bombing raids to the region south of Hanoi.

75 years ago: US coal miners win contract in fourth wartime strike

Members of the United Mine Workers union launched their fourth wartime strike after an October 31, 1943 deadline passed without an agreement. President Franklin Roosevelt ordered that all coal mines be placed under government control and instructed the secretary of the interior to quickly negotiate a contract between the government and UMW President John L. Lewis.

In two days an agreement was reached and the 530,000 miners were called back to work. The contract was little different from two previous ones rejected by the Roosevelt administration and the War Labor Board as inflationary.

Temporary government seizure of the mines was an expedient resorted to on several occasions during the war, with Roosevelt stepping in to enforce concessions from the coal operators to the miners in return for agreement by the UMW to end strike action and resume production. In each case, the mines were returned to the private owners, who frequently reneged on the concessions, provoking more walkouts.

This is what took place from August to October, after a previous widespread miners' strike was ended by the UMW in return for government takeover with the promise of concessions to the miners' demands.

The November agreement was ultimately ratified by both the operators and the union. It called for a basic 8¾-hour day, including 45 minutes of travel time to be paid for at two-thirds the basic wage rate of \$1 per hour. All time in the mines each week in excess of 40 hours, including travel time, would be paid for at the rate of time and one-half. The weekly basic wage rate was thus raised from \$52 to \$57.06 a week, although time spent at the coal face remained the same.

CIO President Philip Murray, addressing the labor federation's annual convention on November 1, denounced the strike and called the miners the tools of Hitler and the Mikado. The Stalinists of the American Communist Party called the struggle "the greatest treason against America," and even sent organizers to the mining regions in a futile attempt to recruit scabs and organize a back-to-work movement.

Behind this hostility was the fear that the miners' strike would inspire other sections of the working class to defy the government and launch militant struggles.

100 years ago: British poet Wilfred Owen dies in battle

Wilfred Owen, one of the most significant poets of the First World War and one of the great anti-war poets of any time, was killed in action on November 4, 1918 while crossing the Sambre-Oise Canal in northern France. His death came only a week before the cease-fire of November 11 which ended the war.

Owen was born to a middle-class family in Shropshire in 1893 and raised in Birkenhead and Shrewsbury. His family was too poor to send him to university, but he took courses at the University of Reading and became proficient in English and French literature.

After 1912, he was teaching at a language school in Bordeaux, France, where he later became a private tutor. He only returned to England to enlist in the military in October 1915. He was commissioned as a second lieutenant.

He saw action at Serre and St. Quentin in France from January to April 1917, which included several deeply disturbing experiences. After a mortar exploded near him, he lay unconscious for days among the remains of his comrades. He was diagnosed with what is now called Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and sent to recover in a hospital in Edinburgh, Scotland.

It was there that he befriended the anti-war poet, novelist and memoirist Siegfried Sassoon, also a second lieutenant. Sassoon introduced him to writers such as Robert Graves (whose own war memoir *Good-Bye to All That* is one of the sharpest expressions of the experiences of the generation that fought in the war). Through Sassoon, Owen also met H. G. Wells and Arnold Bennett.

Sassoon encouraged Owen to bring his experiences in the war into his poetry and commented on his drafts. Manuscripts from 1917 show a rapid development of Owen's ability to artistically grasp his experiences and to universalize them.

Owen, against Sassoon's strident objections, returned to active duty in the summer of 1918, although he was not obliged to. He performed heroically in battle and was awarded the Military Cross. His mother received notification of his death on the day of the November 11 armistice.

Owen composed most of his poems from August 1917 to September 1918. Although he published only four of his poems in his lifetime, his poetry was championed after his death by Sassoon, Edith Sitwell and others, and his place as an important literary figure was assured by the 1930s, partly because he captured so well the horrors of the first imperialist war as the second one was being prepared.



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