

This week in history: November 19-25

19 November 2018

25 years ago: Clinton intervenes to halt American Airlines strike

The American Professional Flight Attendants union called off a five-day strike against American Airlines on November 23, 1993, after the Clinton administration brokered a deal to submit the strikers' demands to binding arbitration. The powerful walkout by 21,000 workers had crippled the second-largest US airline, and government, company and union officials were all determined to bring it to an end to avoid setting an example for other workers.

Underscoring the political importance of the deal, President Clinton announced the end of the strike at a White House press conference only 20 minutes after the airline and union agreed to it. He cited the urgency of restoring normal operations in the air travel system before the Thanksgiving holiday, traditionally the busiest travel period of the year.

Union officials were unanimous in hailing the intervention of Clinton and portraying the end of the strike as a triumph. They spread illusions among the flight attendants, who initially greeted the deal with euphoria. The *International Workers Bulletin*, newspaper of the Workers League (predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party) warned that "workers' illusions will be rudely shattered as they see their jobs, living standards and working conditions gutted under the terms of the new contract."

The strike was undermined by the unions from the start, as the pilots' union ALPA and the AFL-CIO as a whole refused to honor the picket lines of the flight attendants. The agreement on binding arbitration essentially outsourced to the government the task of imposing cost-cutting measures demanded by American Airlines management, which neither the bosses nor the unions felt themselves strong enough to impose on their own.

American Airlines CEO Robert Crandall had opposed government mediation efforts because any deal reached in this way would be subject to a ratification vote by the rank-and-file flight attendants. The company agreed to arbitration because the resulting contract would be imposed by government edict and the working flight attendants would have no say.

In a clear indication of the pro-company stance of the Clinton administration, Secretary of Transportation Federico Pena said, after the return to work, that airlines must "find a way to reduce their costs and become more competitive." Under conditions where starting flight attendants were making less than \$15,000 a year, Pena's statement amounts to endorsing poverty wages for workers facing conditions of enormous stress and superexploitation.

The shutdown of the American Airlines strike was only one of a

series of actions by the AFL-CIO unions to sabotage resistance by the working class to corporate cost-cutting and the right-wing policies of the new Democratic administration of Bill Clinton and Al Gore. The United Mine Workers of America ended a six-month strike against the major coal companies. On November 14, the United Auto Workers ended a three-day strike by workers at Caterpillar plants across the country, called in response to the firing of a union official in Mossville, Illinois.

50 years ago: West Virginia disaster kills 78 US coal miners

On November 20, 1968, a series of explosions at the Consolidation Coal (Consol) No. 9 mine in Mannington, West Virginia, killed 78 miners. It was the worst US coal mine disaster since 1951, with a death toll unsurpassed to the present day.

The fires set off by the explosion were massive, with flames reaching as high as 150 feet in the air. The disaster was also brutally deadly. Only 21 of the 99 miners working the midnight shift survived. Efforts to rescue the other men, trapped 600 feet underground, were initially blocked by explosions and fires.

The explosion was caused by high concentrations of methane gas. The mine sat on top of an oil and natural gas field, and the area was dotted with dozens of operating gas wells. A report from the US Bureau of Mines revealed that the coal seam released 8 million tons of methane gas every day.

Federal inspection records showed Consol guilty of repeated safety violations. The No. 9 mine had been found in violation of rock dusting requirements on every inspection over the preceding five years. In August of 1968, a federal inspector found numerous additional infractions.

The news media and capitalist politicians played down the company's disregard of safety. The reaction of Democratic Governor Hulett Smith of West Virginia was to portray the event as nothing out of the ordinary. In a press conference following the explosion, he called the tragedy "one of the hazards of being a miner." Smith emphatically rejected offers of federal assistance in locating the trapped miners.

United Mine Workers President Tony Boyle travelled to Mannington and issued a statement praising Consol as "one of the better companies as far as safety and cooperation with our union is concerned." The union did nothing to address the safety conditions that killed 78 workers and instead came to the side of the company.

Rank-and-file miners were outraged by Boyle's position. The

brother-in-law of a dead miner described conditions in Consol No.9 as “lousy.” He said, “It’s been filled with gas—he knew it and so did everyone else. Something was bound to happen.”

A congressional investigation was launched following the tragedy. The report sought to pin the blame on officials in the Bureau of Mines, the agency that conducted the safety inspections. Later, in September 1970, an investigator found that the disaster was caused in part because a safety alarm on a ventilation unit had been disabled.

75 years ago: Uprising against liquidation of Janowska concentration camp in Poland

On November 19, 1943, Jewish prisoners in the Janowska concentration camp in Nazi-occupied Poland launched a heroic rebellion against the imminent liquidation of the center and the mass murder of all those incarcerated in it.

With an approaching Soviet advance, the German authorities began an attempt to cover up the mass killings that had been carried out at the camp. They forced prisoners to open mass graves and burn the bodies of those who had been buried in them.

A number of those assigned to this task killed a handful of guards on November 19 and sought to orchestrate a mass escape. While some managed to get out of the facility, they were recaptured and executed over the following days. The Nazi SS murdered an estimated 6,000 inmates at the facility in the final weeks of November.

The Janowska camp had been established in late 1941 by the Nazis in Lwów, then in eastern Poland. The city is in modern Ukraine and is now known as Lviv. It was part of a network of forced labor facilities in the city, which were used to produce German armaments and other war supplies. The camp was also a transit camp for the mass deportation of Polish Jews to the gas chambers.

In Janowska, Jews underwent a selection process similar to that at Auschwitz. Those believed still physically able to work were held at Janowska for forced labor. The majority, including children, most women, and the elderly and infirm, were deported for extermination at Belzec or shot in the Paski ravine just outside the camp. Janowska was the site of the murder of most of the Jews deported from the ghetto in Lwów.

During the course of the war, more than 100,000 prisoners passed through the Janowska camp. An estimated 40,000 of those were killed at the center.

100 years ago: Anti-semitic pogrom begins in Polish-Ukrainian city of Lvov

Rioting from November 21-23, 1918, primarily by ethnic Poles and encouraged by Polish armed forces, left scores of Jews dead in

Lvov, the largest city of Galicia, in what is now western Ukraine.

Lvov had been a multi-ethnic city of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, comprised of Poles, Ukrainians, Germans, Jews, Roma, and others who lived relatively peaceably until the first imperialist war. Pogroms against Jews had been carried out by the Tsarist military when Russian troops occupied the city in September 1914.

With the disintegration of the Tsarist Army during the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the defeat of Austria-Hungary the following year, Lvov became a central focus of contending nationalist aspirations in the Polish-Ukrainian War of 1918-19 after an independent Polish capitalist state was established under Marshal Joseph Pilsudski.

Nationalist forces had emerged in Ukraine during the Russian Revolution and had enjoyed German support after the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918, under which the Bolsheviks had been forced to cede Ukraine to the Germans. Although the Ukrainian forces were driven out of Lvov by the Poles in November, they continued to besiege and shell the city until 1919.

The pogrom lasted three days, with the participation of civilians, including Polish criminals whom retreating Austro-Hungarian troops released from prison. Polish soldiers and civilians of other nationalities also participated. One historian notes, “Incidents of violence and pillaging continued for weeks.”

The year 1918 had seen a wave of anti-Jewish pogroms in Galicia. The Jews in Lvov had formed a defensive militia and declared neutrality in the Polish-Ukrainian conflict, but it was disarmed by the Polish Army. According to some accounts, the Polish commander of the occupying forces had issued anti-Semitic pamphlets. Some Jewish survivors told investigators that Polish soldiers said that they had been allowed 48 hours of license in the Jewish quarter. Polish mobs looted Jewish stores and homes and raped Jewish women.

The events were widely reported in the European and American press at the time, and American President Woodrow Wilson appointed a commission to investigate the incident.



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