

This week in history: May 13–19

13 May 2019

25 years ago: Teamsters cut off strike benefits for freight drivers

On May 17, 1994, the executive board of the Teamsters union approved the cutoff of \$200-per-week strike pay following the betrayal of the freight drivers' strike in April. The board also voted to impose an emergency dues levy on the membership to increase the union's net worth back to a minimum of \$25 million.

The cutoff impacted around 1,500 strikers immediately. The 23-day strike was the longest trucking strike in the United States. The Teamsters accepted a deal that new workers would start at 75 percent of regular pay and get full wages only after two years, a cut from the previous contract where new hires began at 80 percent and went to full wages after 18 months. The union also negotiated a miserable \$1.30 an hour pay increase over four years.

The Teamsters union deliberately isolated the freight drivers. The union accepted the demand of the trucking companies to make them more competitive with nonunion companies by allowing them to ship 28 percent of their freight by rail, up from 10 percent. The guarantee of full-time employment applied only to current employees, not future hires, meaning that companies would be free to hire masses of casual employees as the workforce aged.

The Clinton administration entered into the talks as a representative of big business. President Clinton declared only a few months before the strike that in the new "global economy," workers should prepare to change jobs seven or eight times in their lives.

After betraying the strike, Teamsters President Ron Carey told the press, "We won on the key issues by not letting them change good, full-time jobs to low-wage part-time jobs ... I think the members are smart enough to see this as a victory," adding that "there will be some out there stirring the pot and trying to demean the results." Carey was expelled from the union four years later by a federal oversight panel for his role in the diversion of hundreds of thousands of dollars from the union treasury to finance his 1996 reelection campaign.

The announcement of the elimination of strike pay while 120,000 freight drivers and dock workers were voting on the tentative settlement in a mail ballot amounted to a warning to the workers that rejecting the contract would mean being left with nothing.

50 years ago: Chinese-Malay clashes after Malaysian election

On May 13, 1969, following national elections that resulted in a sharply reduced majority for the ruling Malay-dominated Alliance Party, riots broke out in Kuala Lumpur that targeted and attacked Chinese neighborhoods. About 200 people, mainly Chinese, were killed in the riots by both Alliance Party supporters and the Malaysian military.

The national election which was held on May 10 resulted in large gains for the two opposition parties, the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and the Parti Gerakan. Both parties drew much of their support from Malaysia's large Chinese minority. The Alliance Party failed to win a majority of the total vote, but gained a narrow majority of seats in parliament.

On the following days of May 11 and 12 the DAP and Gerakan held many victory rallies.

In response the Alliance Party and the United Malay National Organization (UMNO), its largest bloc, and their affiliated newspapers, called for a counter-demonstration on May 13. Heavily steeped in anti-Chinese racialist ideology, one Alliance-backed paper wrote that the demonstrations were needed because the election results "jeopardized the future of Malay rule."

Riots broke out on the May 13 even before the official march was set to begin. Alliance supporters broke off from the main demonstrations and marched through Chinese neighborhoods terrorizing homes, shops, and individuals. Armed with machete-like blades called parangs and kris, the groups attacked and killed many Chinese bystanders and burned down buildings and vehicles.

Some small groups of Chinese organized a response that was initially the defense of homes and shops but quickly escalated, with some attacking the UMNO headquarters.

The government imposed a curfew in Kuala Lumpur and issued shoot-to-kill orders for the police and military. The military was deployed and entered the areas of the riots to enforce the curfew, firing on anyone still in the streets and into Chinese homes and shops. The staff of Kuala Lumpur General Hospital reported that most of the deaths were Chinese and that most were killed after 10:30 p.m. when the military entered into the Chinese neighborhoods.

Following the riots government leaders formed the National Operations Council (NOC) which declared a state of emergency, dissolved parliament, and effectively ruled the country under martial law for the next 18 months. This inaugurated a sharp turn to the right in Malaysian politics, in which UMNO systematically whipped up Malay nationalism and ruled in a dictatorial fashion for nearly four decades.

75 years ago: Stalin deports the Crimean Tatars

On May 17, 1944, the Soviet secret police, at the direction of Stalin, launched a three-day punitive operation rounding up the entire population of 500,000 Crimean Tatars and deporting them to Central Asia, Kazakhstan and the Ural regions. The action came only days after Soviet forces completed the reconquest of the Crimean peninsula and the last German and Romanian soldiers surrendered.

NKVD units allowed Tatar families only half an hour to collect personal belongings, after which they were then transported in overcrowded freight cars to the east under inhuman conditions. Tens of thousands perished from hunger, thirst and disease on these trips, which could last for weeks. In the barren regions of exile, more continued to die. It is estimated half the Tatar population perished as a result of the deportation.

The mass reprisal against the “disloyal” Tatar nationality was meted out because a section of Tatars collaborated with Hitler and served in police forces under the Gestapo. They hunted down Soviet soldiers who had gone underground after the German armies occupied the Crimean Peninsula in the summer of 1942. But among the deportees were Tatar families whose fathers and sons had heroically fought and died defending the Crimea against Hitler in 1942 and others who continued to serve loyally in the Red Army.

Hitler had originally seen occupation of the Crimea as essential to preventing a Soviet attack on German oil sources in Romania. It also served as a supply base and strategic stepping stone for German entry into the Caucasus and seizure of its oil regions. Hitler continued to occupy the Crimea, hoping for another opportunity to reach the Caucasus. But in April and May 1944, the Red Army unleashed a ferocious assault against the Peninsula and wiped out the German forces.

Stalin’s reactionary policy toward the Tatars in the Crimea was an attempt to remove the possibility of imperialism’s future manipulation of this nationality. Later the Crimea would be incorporated into the Ukraine.

100 years ago: Canadian workers begin general strike in Winnipeg

On May 15, 1919, more than 30,000 workers in Winnipeg, Manitoba, walked off the job in support of a strike by metal tradesmen which began on May 6. The membership of 70 union locals, affiliated to the Winnipeg Trades and Labour Council, voted in favor of the general strike, motivated largely by wage demands.

The strike sentiment was so widespread in the city’s population that even the Winnipeg police force voted to join in, but remained on the job at the request of the union leaders. At first, deliveries of bread and milk were suspended, but on the fourth day of the strike they were resumed with the approval of the leadership.

The One Big Union (OBU), established in Calgary, Alberta, in March 1919, had a significant influence on the Winnipeg labor movement. The OBU was a syndicalist organization which resembled the Industrial Workers of the World in program and outlook. The general strike began under the leadership of a committee of five.

The ruling class across North America reacted to the strike with alarm, with the *New York Times* carrying the headline, “Bolshevism Invades Canada.” The Winnipeg strike, following closely on a similar general strike in Seattle, Washington, fueled the mood of hysterical panic over the danger from the working class, already demonstrated in the Russian Revolution and further revolts in central Europe.

As the strike wore on, the local capitalist establishment, which had set up a “Committee of One Thousand” to oppose the workers, pushed for harsher repressive measures. The entire Winnipeg police force was sacked, replaced by volunteers recruited for their hostility to the strike. These immediately engaged in violent attacks on picket lines. The Canadian federal government sent the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and then army troops to Winnipeg to intimidate the strikers. Demobilized soldiers began parading in support or in opposition to the strike.

The employers in the metal trades announced on June 16 that they would deal with members of unions through elected committees but would continue to refuse to recognize the Metal Trades Council. At the same time, the railroad carmen on both the Canadian Pacific and Canadian Northern railroads voted to return to work.

The arrest of eight strike leaders provoked a new confrontation with police (“Bloody Saturday” on June 21) in which two workers were killed and thirty injured. On June 25 the Trades and Labour Council capitulated and called off the strike. Of the eight leaders arrested, six were convicted of seditious conspiracy. Five were sentenced to a year in prison and one to six months. One of the accused, J.S. Woodsworth, was tried separately and acquitted. The OBU, despite the defeat of the strike, continued to gain support. By the end of 1919 it had over 41,000 members, 101 local unions and eight central bodies.



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