

This week in history: May 27-June 2

27 May 2019

25 years ago: Democratic Representative Dan Rostenkowski indicted

On May 31, 1994, powerful Democratic Party Congressman Dan Rostenkowski of Chicago was indicted on 17 felony counts in a massive abuse of office to plunder over \$600,000 from the public treasury. The case was one of a series of corruption charges that were instrumental in allowing the Republican Party to win control of the House of Representatives in the 1994 elections for the first time in 40 years.

In 1981, after 22 years in Congress, Rostenkowski became chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, which has jurisdiction over all tax legislation. He played a key role in enacting the Reagan tax cuts of 1981 and 1986 and other right-wing policies that favored the rich and big business. These services to the ruling class did not save him in 1994 when there was a systematic effort by the corporate elite to engineer a drastic shift to the right by installing a Republican majority in the House.

Rostenkowski, one of the two or three most powerful Democrats in the House, was charged in a relatively minor corruption scandal, not for the billions he helped funnel into the pockets of the super-rich. According to the indictment, brought by then US Attorney Eric Holder, Rostenkowski pocketed \$50,000 in cash from the House Post Office by disguising money transactions as stamp purchases. He was also accused of taking kickbacks from workers and padding his congressional payroll with employees willing to perform personal services for him.

Rostenkowski initially denied any wrongdoing, and he won the Democratic primary while indicted. However, in November he was defeated by a Republican candidate, Michael Patrick Flanagan, who served only a single term before losing to an even more corrupt Democrat, Rod Blagoevich. Eventually, in 1996, Rostenkowski pleaded guilty to reduced charges of mail fraud. He was pardoned in December 2000 by President Clinton, in one of his final acts in office.

Rostenkowski's illegal activity was widely acknowledged as common practice, with even Republican Congressmen Bill Frenzel admitting that he "took a hit" for the whole House. Former President Gerald Ford sent his only letter requesting a pardon on behalf of Rostenkowski. Ford told a biographer, "Danny's problem was he played under the rules of the city of Chicago. Now, those aren't the same rules that any other place in the country lives by, but in Chicago they were totally legal, and Danny got a screwing."

The indictment was part of a process in which big business used well-known corruption of leading Democratic officials to shift

control of the House to the Republicans, in order to be able to carry out further attacks against the working class. The 1994 election had the immediate impact of blocking the Clinton administration's health care legislation, drafted initially for the purpose of cutting medical care costs for large corporate employers, but touted as a nominal "reform."

50 years ago: General strike begins in Cordoba, Argentina

On May 29, 1969, workers and students in the industrial city of Cordoba, Argentina began a general strike that would become known as "El Cordobazo." The immediate response from the military dictatorship led by Juan Carlos Onganía was violent suppression.

In addition to the suppression of democratic rights and political parties by Onganía since he took power by coup earlier in the year, the month of May in particular had seen a series of events that caused outrage with the working class and youth.

Multiple strikes had broken out in Cordoba including at a sugar mill, auto plants, and in universities. During one university protest, a student was killed by the police. Later, on May 17 and May 21, two more students would be killed during protests. One of the slain youths, Luis Blanco, was just 15 years old.

The deaths of the students, combined with deteriorating conditions and wage cuts in the factories which had been imposed in order to market cheap labor to foreign companies, drove workers and youth to the breaking point. Through a united effort between the unions and left-wing student organizations the general strike was organized.

The strike was immediately welcomed by the local population who had prepared for a confrontation with police. Fernando Solís, a worker at the IKA-Renault forge plant, recalled, "the people's reaction was incredible, they came out into the street to hand us things, women, old ladies, gave us matches, and bottles or brooms to protect ourselves with. Everyone was in the street, old men, kids ... there was a certain feel to the moment, joyous I would say, until then the worst hadn't happened."

The workers encountered the police, who opened fire on the crowd killing one worker. Fighting broke out between the two groups until the workers were able to force the police out of the city center.

The strike turned into a massive demonstration against the military regime with entire sections of the city being filled with protesters. Workers burnt down some selectively targeted building

like the offices of foreign companies and the junior officers club. However, there was no looting or ransacking. Rather workers attacked the areas seen as the centers of imperialism and state repression.

On the outskirts of the city the military began preparations to enforce a curfew and retake control during the night. Initially they were held back by small groups of armed militants who fired from rooftops while workers entered the city's power plant and cut off power, creating a blackout, so the military could not easily navigate.

Protests would continue on the day after the general strike, but with the police and military in much closer proximity. During the next few days the heads of all the leading unions along with hundreds of other workers would be arrested. Eventually the uprising ended, but it was clear that the Ongania regime was on its last leg. Ongania would be forced to resign by the military junta a year later and replaced by Marcelo Levingston.

75 years ago: Allied forces approach Rome as Hitler calls for retreat

On June 2, 1944, Allied forces, led by British and US troops, succeeded in breaching the Caesar C line, the last defensive German positions leading to Nazi-occupied Rome. Adolf Hitler, the fascist dictator of the Third Reich, responded by immediately instructing Field Marshal Albert Kesselring to abandon the Italian capital.

The capture of Rome was the outcome of the Battle of Anzio, which began in January 1944, with a massive Allied amphibious landing, known as Operation Shingle. On January 22, a flotilla of allied ships had landed near Anzio, carrying around 36,000 soldiers and 3,200 vehicles. The Germans, taken by surprise, put up little resistance, with only a handful of deaths resulting from limited skirmishes.

US Army Major General John P. Lucas, who was commanding Allied forces, focused on establishing a bridgehead and defensive positions. The failure to take immediate offensive action angered the British military, with Winston Churchill declaring "I had hoped we were hurling a wildcat into the shore, but all we got was a stranded whale."

Lucas was replaced in February, as the Allied operation became bogged down in a series of attacks and counter-attacks with the German Tenth Army.

In a bid to break the stalemate, on May 23, Allied forces launched a new offensive, with an artillery bombardment of 1,500 pieces against heavily fortified defensive German positions. The US Third Infantry Division lost some 955 soldiers on the first day of fighting, the highest losses of any US division on a single day during the war.

Amid ongoing casualties, Allied command shifted the main line of attack to the left. On May 29, Allied forces reached the Caesar C line defending Rome, which collapsed within several days. On June 2, German troops began a fighting retreat. Hitler ordered that

the capital not be defended, for fear of an encirclement leading to a catastrophic defeat similar to the Battle of Stalingrad in the Soviet Union.

100 years ago: American aircraft makes first transatlantic flight

On May 27, 1919, the military plane dubbed Navy-Curtis 4, which had set off with two other American military planes, Navy-Curtis 1 and 3, from Long Island in New York on May 8, landed in Lisbon, Portugal.

The Navy-Curtis flying boats, nicknamed Nancies, held a crew of three in a watertight hull and could land on the water. They were large biplanes with a wingspan of 127 feet, were 29 feet long and weighed 24,000 pounds when fueled and with a full component of equipment and crew. They were powered by three engines. All the parts of a Nancy were manufactured in the United States in cities such as Albany, Boston, Newark, and New York. The engines were manufactured by the Packard Motor Company in Detroit.

The three aircraft made the journey with six stops. Beginning in Rockaway Naval Air Station, they flew 540 nautical miles to Halifax, Nova Scotia, and from Halifax 460 miles to Trepassey Bay, near St. Johns, Newfoundland. From there the planes would fly the longest leg of the journey, 1,200 miles, to Horta in the Azores, the Portuguese island chain in the Atlantic. The three aircraft were then to fly 150 miles to Ponta Delgada, also in the Azores, 800 miles to Lisbon, the capital of Portugal on the mainland, and finally 755 miles to Plymouth in the United Kingdom.

The group was commanded by Commander John H. Towers, but Towers' plane, the NC-3, as well as the NC-1, were forced down by bad weather near the Azores and unable to resume flight.

While the first transatlantic flight was soon overshadowed by other flights, including a non-stop flight from the US to the UK in June 1919, the crossing led by Towers was a major endeavor of the US military, although the US Navy worked closely with British pilots and mechanics in the design of the sea planes. Over 22 US Navy ships were involved in the flight and stationed at various points in the Atlantic to provide support.

The crossing not only demonstrated the role that air flight could play in linking together whole continents more closely than ever before, but also the arrival of the logistical, technological and industrial prowess of American imperialism in the post-World War I period.



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