

This week in history: June 17-23

17 June 2019

25 years ago: The frame-up trial of Jerry Dale Lowe

The frame-up trial of West Virginia coal miner Jerry Dale Lowe extended throughout this week in 1994, in the US District Court in Charleston. Lowe, a Logan County miner, went to trial on June 13 on federal charges of conspiracy and illegal use of firearms from the shooting death of a scab contractor in July 1993 outside the Arch Mineral Ruffner mine. The killing took place during the strike against the Bituminous Coal Operators Association.

Lowe was left high and dry by the United Mine Workers Association (UMWA) for his efforts to defend the picket line against the violence of the coal company bosses and their stooges. No eyewitnesses were able to identify Lowe as the shooter. The role of the UMWA in the frame-up was to pressure the other miners into giving damaging statements about Lowe to the police, while refusing to publish anything about the case or to defend Lowe from accusations in the media. No broader struggle was mobilized by the union to defend Lowe.

The trial on federal charges of conspiracy to interfere with interstate commerce meant the Democratic Party administration of President Bill Clinton was responsible for the persecution of Lowe, with Attorney General Janet Reno overseeing the criminal case. Neither the UMWA or any other union raised any objection to the union-supported Democratic administration railroading a miner to a lengthy prison term.

The witnesses began with UMWA Local 5958 President Ernest Lee Woods, strike captain Frederick Dexter Carver and Luther Shell, three of seven miners initially charged with Lowe in the contractor's death. They pleaded guilty to lesser charges and agreed to testify against Lowe after facing pressure from the UMWA and their defense lawyers, and receiving no legal counsel.

The miners admitted to throwing rocks at scabs and security guards, but denied that any shots were fired either by Lowe or themselves, testimony used by the media to imply that violence and commotion on the picket line led to the contractor's death. The admission of throwing rocks was then used as evidence against Lowe.

The prosecuting attorney stressed that Lowe was one of the most outspoken and militant miners, and that he had protested against the UMWA's orders to allow scabs to cross the picket line. "He has no regard for the law; the federal law or his own union's rules," Assistant US Attorney Brandon Johnson declared to the jury, painting Lowe as a "troublemaker." The same argument was used by Richard Trumka in the union's official statement after the end of the frame-up.

On June 24, the jury returned a verdict of guilty, and Lowe was

ultimately sentenced to 11 years in prison with no chance of parole.

50 years ago: Students for a Democratic Society breaks up at final convention

The American radical student group Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) broke up into warring factions at its ninth and final congress, held in Chicago June 18-22, 1969. The conference was filled with conflict over the group's political orientation between rival groupings heavily influenced by the anti-working-class perspective of Maoism.

There were no serious differences of political principle separating the major groupings within SDS, all of which adhered to varieties of middle-class protest politics, with a noxious admixture of Stalinism. While claiming to be "communists," all sections of SDS rejected the revolutionary role of the working class and substituted the actions of students, oppressed minorities, or small groups of individuals engaged in "direct action."

The open hostility to the American working class—identified, by many Maoists as part of the privileged global elite, as opposed to the "peasant" majority of the human race—was combined with an embrace of various forms of identity politics, including black nationalism and women's liberation. Speakers found themselves shouted down by rival factions and discussions turned into yelling matches and fist fights. The only resolution agreed upon at the convention was to ban entry to journalists from the mainstream media.

At the Chicago convention, the National Office group, as the incumbent SDS leaders were known, claimed to follow the line of the North Vietnamese Communist Party, while the largest opposition faction, led by the Progressive Labor Party, claimed to follow the Chinese CP. The result was shouting matches in which one side chanted for Ho Chi Minh while the other side waved Mao's "Little Red Book."

The National Office faction, after losing control to the larger PLP faction, walked out of the convention, announcing the formation of a new organization called the "Revolutionary Youth Movement," which soon gave rise to the group that called themselves the "Weathermen" and went underground, carrying out occasional bombings and other acts of terrorism. PLP-SDS in turn went on to found a Worker-Student Alliance. Neither faction exercised any serious influence in the increasingly massive movement among youth, students and workers, directed against

the Vietnam War.

75 years ago: Red Army launches new offensive in Belarussia

On June 23, 1944, the Soviet Army launched a major offensive against Nazi troops in Belarussia, modern-day Belarus. Dubbed Operation Bagration, the forward movement dealt a major blow to German forces, helping pave the way for the repulsion of the Nazis from Eastern Europe and the ultimate capture of Berlin the following year.

German high command anticipated a new Soviet offensive in the summer of 1944, but they expected it on the southern part of the front, directed through the Ukraine into Romania, the location of the principal oil production still under the control of the Third Reich. Soviet military planners settled on Belarussia, in the center of the vast Eastern Front, and achieved both tactical and strategic surprise.

The attack was preceded by a partisan campaign of guerrilla warfare against German defensive positions, involving mobile detachments and the use of bombs. On June 23, the Red Army launched its offensive with a massive campaign of artillery bombardment, followed by rapid breakthroughs.

German troops received permission from Hitler to abandon the city of Vitebsk, in northern Belarus, on June 24. By the time they attempted to escape, however, the city was already encircled. Soviet forces took Vitebsk within five days, and decimated the 28,000-strong LIII Corps. The Red Army similarly captured the northern town of Orsha inside of a week, providing a base for further northward moves. The cities of Mogilev and Bobruysk were also liberated from the Nazis.

The rapid successes enabled the Soviets to focus their resources on the capture of Minsk, the capital of Belarussia. In a crushing defeat for the Third Reich, the Soviets liberated the city within two weeks, decimating 25 divisions of the German Army Group Centre in the process. The German army lost an estimated 300,000 troops in the course of two weeks.

Operation Bagration is viewed as one of the Nazi regime's worst military defeats in the concluding phases of World War II. By focusing their attack on Belarussia, the Red Army forced German military command to divert tanks and divisions from both northern and southern flanks. This facilitated new Soviet offensives on those fronts in July. Over the months following the liberation of Minsk, Soviet troops proceeded further into Eastern Europe, capturing large swathes of Poland, Romania and Lithuania over the following three months.

100 years ago: Orlando government resigns in Italy

On June 19, 1919, the Italian government of Vittorio Emanuele Orlando, in power since October 1917, resigned amid a growing

political and economic crisis. A new cabinet was formed by Francesco Nitti, which lasted until June 1920.

In April the Italian delegation had walked out of the Versailles peace conference after US President Woodrow Wilson made a public appeal against its territorial claims on the Adriatic coast. The delegation returned May 5.

At the outset of World War I, in August 1914, Italy declared its neutrality. The campaign for intervention on the side of the Allied imperialists gained strength and eventually led to Italy's declaration of war against Austria-Hungary in May 1915. Benito Mussolini broke from the Socialist Party and became one of the most strident interventionists.

Italy joined the war in order gain territory and to wrest control of the Adriatic Sea from Austria-Hungary. The secret Treaty of London—signed by the governments of Italy, France, Britain and Russia in 1915—promised Italy considerable territory, including the South Tyrol and Trieste, the most important Dalmatian islands and the southern part of the province of Dalmatia (in present-day Croatia). Additionally, in the event that England and France enlarged their empires at the expense of Germany, Italy was to receive extensions of her territory in Libya, Eritrea and Somaliland.

The Italian nationalists were extremely disappointed by the results of the war. Wilson adopted a hostile stand toward the provisions of the Treaty of London. In return for 600,000 lives lost, Italy received only 9,000 square miles of territory with a population of 1,600,000. None of the former German colonies were assigned to Italy as mandates.

The war left Italy loaded with debt and suffering from a high cost of living. The successive governments enjoyed no confidence and the influence of Bolshevism spread rapidly throughout the working class.

In January 1919, a right-wing Catholic party was established, and in March, Mussolini founded his fascist movement. In the same month, Italian troops landed in the Turkish province of Adalia, to make good on Italian claims to a share in the spoils from defeated Turkey, which had been allied with Germany and Austria-Hungary.



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