

This week in history: August 12-18

12 August 2019

25 years ago: Major League Baseball players strike

On August 12, 1994, the 700 members of the Major League Baseball Players Association walked out over management's demand for a cap on players' salaries. The owners of the 28 teams—26 in the United States and two in Canada—wanted to impose a limit on what each team could spend on total player payroll. Under their proposal, combined player salaries would be held to 50 percent of gross revenues, a sharp drop from the previous setup in which the players received 58 percent.

The owners included some of the wealthiest individual capitalists in the United States, as well as giant corporations like Tribune Co., which owned the Chicago Cubs; Blockbuster Video, which owned the Florida Marlins; and Labatt Breweries, owner of the Toronto Blue Jays. Among the most prominent bosses was Texas Rangers managing partner and future president George W. Bush.

The strike was the eighth work stoppage in official baseball history. It would go on to become the longest, breaking the record set in the 1981 baseball strike, unsurpassed in North American professional sports history until the 2004-2005 National Hockey League lockout. Overall, 948 games—including postseason—were canceled and for the first time since 1904, the World Series was called off.

In March 1995 the players voted to return to work if a US District Court judge supported the National Labor Relations Board's complaint against the owners of unfair labor practices. The owners voted overwhelmingly to hire replacement players and the strike officially ended on April 2, 1995, after 232 days, following a decision by Judge Sonia Sotomayor to issue an injunction against the owners.

Sales and attendance plummeted the following season, in the wake of political confusion and misdirected anger towards the players, in which fans across the country protested against what was viewed as greed, or "Millionaires vs. Billionaires." At one of the first opening games of that season, fans in Detroit threw trash, a hubcap, liquor bottles and baseballs at the players, one of many instances of backlash against the strike.

At the time, baseball players' salaries averaged around \$1.2 million—making them an extremely privileged layer of the population as well as a huge source of income for the owners.

"The determination of the owners to crush the players union is therefore all the more revealing about the current state of class relations in the US," the *International Workers Bulletin* wrote in September 1994. "If this is how the ruling class treats its most pampered performers, what does it have in store for the masses of workers and the poor?"

50 years ago: British Labour government sends troops to Northern Ireland

On August 14, 1969, the Labour government of Prime Minister Harold Wilson decided to send British troops into Northern Ireland. The action came after several days of fighting in the Catholic neighborhood known as the Bogside of Derry, Northern Ireland, between the Catholic residents and the Northern Irish police, including forces from the B-specials, a part-time paramilitary force dominated by right-wing Protestants.

The fighting began after the Apprentice Boys, a reactionary Protestant organization, carried out a parade that marched along the outskirts of the Bogside area. The parade march quickly escalated to fighting between Catholics and Apprentice Boys. The police instantly came to the aid of the Apprentice Boys and took the lead in attacking the Bogside.

Residents of Derry had recently formed the Derry Citizens Defense Association (DCDA) to protect themselves from police violence and used the organization effectively to stop the police from entering the neighborhood for several days until the British military was mobilized.

Riots also broke out in Belfast in response to the news. Houses on Bombay Street were burned down causing almost 2,000 people, mostly Catholics, to lose their homes.

The British military force took control of Northern Ireland following clashes. Both Bernadette Devlin, an elected member of parliament from a Catholic district and a leader of the civil rights movement, and reactionary Protestant leader Reverend Ian Paisley had called for troops.

Rioting broke out against the police-military presence in both Catholic and Protestant working-class neighborhoods. In subsequent weeks British troops stepped up their repression, while working to fuel religious divisions. They erected a mile-long barbed wire "peace line" between Catholic and Protestant areas of Belfast. The military occupation force was increased to over 7,500 men, and the authorities began a roundup of political opponents.

Underlying the eruption of sectarian fighting in Northern Ireland were unemployment, poverty and deplorable housing conditions for both Catholic and Protestant workers. Unemployment in Londonderry stood at 20 percent and averaged 10 percent across the six counties. In the midst of these provocations, workers sought to forge unity. Nine thousand shipyard workers and 2,000 factory workers near the docks met and agreed there would be no fighting along religious lines. In Derry, Protestant and Catholic workers formed a joint defense force to guard against attacks by right-wing Paisleyites and provocateurs.

The Stalinist Communist Party and all of the middle-class revisionist groups endorsed the military occupation, promoting the illusion that British troops would defend the rights of the Catholic minority. The Socialist Labour League, then the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, opposed the dispatch of British troops to Northern Ireland and demanded their immediate withdrawal.

75 years ago: Allies launch invasion of southern France

On August 15, 1944, Allied forces, including British and US troops and partisans of the French resistance, launched Operation Dragoon, a massive invasion of southern France aimed at expelling the German occupiers of the country.

The mission had initially been scheduled to coincide with Operation Overlord, the Allied landing in Normandy in June. It had been indefinitely postponed, however, as a result of logistical issues involved in carrying out two mass invasions simultaneously. Plans for a southern incursion were revived amid rapid Allied advances in the north, and substantial gains by the French resistance, whose ranks had swelled to hundreds of thousands.

The initial Allied landing force in the south comprised some 151,000 troops. The number would swell to over half a million by the completion of the operation. They were complemented by an estimated 75,000 resistance partisans.

The invasion was preceded by an extensive bombing campaign, targeting railroads and German military infrastructure. Resistance members carried out acts of sabotage behind the lines, while Allied planes dropped massive payloads. This served to hamper German mobility and preparations to repulse the landing.

The invasion began before dawn on the morning of August 15. Ships from the Western Naval Task Force approached the beaches of the French Mediterranean coast under cover of Allied bombers deployed from Italy. The invasion met limited resistance and incurred fewer than 100 fatalities.

With Nazi communication lines broken, individual German units sought to repulse the invasion through uncoordinated initiatives. They were rapidly overwhelmed, however, and were forced to wage a series of desperate rearguard actions, because they could not retreat fast enough to escape engagement with the Allied troops.

In late August, Allied forces reached the strategic port cities of Marseille and Toulon. Amid fierce fighting, German troops suffered massive casualties. By the end of the month, they had made a formal surrender of the two cities, before they had been able to destroy crucial military infrastructure that would benefit future Allied operations.

100 years ago: Polish uprising against German rule in Upper Silesia

On August 16, 1919, 140,000 Polish-speaking coal miners began a general strike against the German authorities in Upper Silesia after German border guards massacred 10 miners. One of the principal demands of the miners was that police and government offices include Poles as well as Germans.

An influx of 21,000 German troops, including right-wing paramilitary units, suppressed the uprising in the following days with great brutality, sparking a refugee crisis. Troops of the World War I Allied Powers were sent in to restore order.

The region today lies in the southwest of Poland. Before and during the First World War, Upper Silesia belonged to the German Empire, although a part was ruled by Austria-Hungary. Its population was divided between speakers of German and Polish, with a smaller group speaking Czech. The area was rich in minerals, and supplied Germany with a quarter of its coal, 81 percent of its zinc and 34 percent of its lead.

With the formation of an independent Polish state after the German defeat in 1918, the Paris Peace Conference of the victorious Allied imperialist powers decided to sponsor a plebiscite to determine which capitalist state would gain control of the region. The vote was scheduled for 1921.

But by August 1920, ethnic tensions were heightened after a German newspaper in the region falsely reported that the Soviet Red Army had taken the Polish capital of Warsaw, leading to German celebration that an independent Poland had been crushed. Allied troops were unable to contain a second Polish uprising that was only gradually brought under control.

The plebiscite was finally held in March 1921 with the result that the region voted by a narrow margin to stay with Germany. French and British imperialism had both interfered in the election, with the British favoring a vote to remain in Germany, since they believed Germany could only repay its substantial war reparations with control of the region, while the French sought to weaken Germany by depriving it of as much territory as possible.



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