

This week in history: August 19-25

19 August 2019

25 years ago: US Senate approves Clinton crime bill

On August 25, 1994, the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act was given final approval by the US Senate after being agreed to by the House. It was officially signed into law a few weeks later on September 13 by US President Bill Clinton.

The law was one of the most right-wing and repressive pieces of legislation passed in the country in decades and represented a frontal assault on the democratic rights of the population. The law poured \$30 billion into strengthening local police forces and into the state and federal prison system.

The legislation succeeded in eliminating higher education for prison inmates by overturning a section of the Higher Education Act of 1965, which allowed the Pell Grant to fund inmates' education during incarceration. It added 50 new federal offenses and authorized the initiation of military-style boot camps for juvenile delinquents. The Federal Death Penalty Act, a provision of the bill, created 60 new death penalty offenses under 41 federal capital statutes. It also included a three-strikes provision to address repeat offenders, giving a mandatory death sentence to third-time felony convictions.

The one measure which would have placed slight restrictions on the stepped-up pace of executions, a provision to allow prisoners to challenge their sentences on the grounds of discrimination, was deleted from the bill by the House-Senate conference committee. Much of the social spending allotted in the bill proposal was cut in the House of Representatives.

While the bill contained \$4.6 billion in spending towards recreation, child and youth counseling, drug treatment and other social programs, the *International Workers Bulletin* explained that “[s]uch is the state of capitalist politics that even these provisions, a drop in the bucket compared to the crying social needs in devastated urban areas, had to be packaged as ‘crime prevention’ measures in order to gain passage.”

50 years ago: Hurricane Camille devastates US Southeast

On August 19-20, 1969, Hurricane Camille made its way from the Gulf of Mexico through the southeast US to the state

of Virginia, causing an immense loss of life and damage. The storm had ravaged Louisiana and Mississippi the previous days. The total destruction Camille brought was immense. The cost of damage was the equivalent of \$9.9 billion in 2019 dollars. About 9,000 people were injured, a total of 259 killed, and about 6,000 homes destroyed and thousands more severely damaged. The intensity of the storm caused meteorologists to rethink how hurricanes are tracked and rated, leading to the use of the Saffir-Simpson scale.

Virginia was hit particularly hard, with 153 being killed in flash floods and mudslides caused by the heavy rain. Nelson County, Virginia, a heavily working-class area in the Blue Ridge foothills, west of Richmond, was affected most severely, with 123 of the deaths, or about 1 percent of the population. In the state as a whole 313 houses, 70 trailers, and more than 400 farm buildings were destroyed, resulting in more than \$140.8 million in damages, or \$984.3 million in 2019 dollars.

A few days before the storm hit the US, Hurricane Camille had passed over an area of western Cuba where preventive measures were taken to evacuate people and livestock. Once the storm entered the Gulf of Mexico it greatly increased intensity, upgrading to a Category 5 hurricane.

When the storm hit land in Mississippi and Louisiana it is estimated that gusts exceeded 200 miles per hour. The brute force of the storm destroyed large areas of roads, homes, and other buildings. Massive amounts of rain caused US Highway 90 to become submerged under as much as 10 feet of water in some areas.

Despite federal aid being provided in the aftermath of Camille, advance preparations for the storm in the US were insufficient and thousands of people were left with no choice but to barricade themselves and hope to survive the storm. Though it had been tracked long before it made landfall, few measures were taken to evacuate those caught in the storm's path.

75 years ago: Paris liberated from Nazi occupation

On August 25, 1944, the German military, which had occupied Paris since 1940, surrendered the historic city after a successful offensive of Allied troops and a widespread uprising

of the French Resistance. The defeat was a major blow to the Nazi regime. It followed the successful invasion of northern France by British and US troops in June, and the Allied landing in the south of the country just weeks before.

The defeat of the Nazis in Paris took place under conditions of a quasi-insurrectionary struggle by the city's workers. On August 15, workers in a number of critical state industries, including the postal service and the public railways, had launched strike action. The stoppage was in part a response to the dispatch of over 2,000 political prisoners to the concentration camps in Germany. Workers throughout the city rapidly joined the action, which became a general strike on August 18.

Plans for an uprising in the capital coincided with the defeat of the Nazis in the battle of Normandy, and widespread knowledge of the Allied advance on Paris. On August 22, as German troops began to leave the city, barricades were erected in Paris by the French Resistance. Fighting began on August 22.

The first Allied units, of the French 2nd Armored and US 4th Infantry divisions, entered Paris on April 24. They carried out a series of successful raids on the remaining defensive German positions within the city. The following day, German command formally surrendered.

Charles de Gaulle, head of the Provisional Government of the French Republic, which was allied to Britain and the US, rushed to Paris to try to take control of the situation. In a radio address, he declared: "Since the enemy which held Paris has capitulated into our hands, France returns to Paris, to her home. She returns bloody, but quite resolute."

At the same time, de Gaulle stressed the necessity for "national unity" and military discipline. He, along with the Allied powers, were deeply fearful that the uprising in Paris could become the catalyst for a movement of the working class, directed not only against the Nazis, but against the French capitalist class, large sections of which had collaborated with the German occupation. De Gaulle's aim was to establish a bourgeois republic, and to prevent any further independent intervention of the working class.

100 years ago: Friedrich Ebert becomes first president of the Weimar Republic

On August 21, 1919, German Social-Democratic leader Friedrich Ebert became the first president of the newly established Weimar Republic.

During the First World War (1914-18), Ebert had been a stalwart patriot who suppressed any manifestation of anti-war sentiment in the German Social Democratic Party (SPD). He had been thrust into power on November 9, 1918, when he

became the last Chancellor of the German Empire after the abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm II, which had been brought about by the collapse of the army on the Western Front and the armistice with the Allied imperialist powers.

Ebert's immediate task that year was to contain, by any means, the uprising of the German working class. As German workers and soldiers marched on the German Reichstag (parliament) building, Ebert's fellow social democrat Philipp Scheidemann proclaimed a bourgeois republic, against Ebert's explicit wishes. Ebert, who regarded the monarchy with affection, is said to have exclaimed, "You have no right to proclaim the Republic!"

The next day, Ebert received a phone call from the German Army's Quartermaster General Wilhelm Groener, and the two agreed to a pact: in return for the loyalty of the military, Ebert would suppress Bolshevism and keep the military as a largely independent institution, which it remained throughout the years of the Weimar Republic (1919-33).

Ebert formed a new government called the Council of People's Commissars, whose job, as the WSWS has noted, was to take on "the task of containing, suffocating and bloodily crushing the huge revolutionary wave that has in a few days spread like wildfire across the country, threatening not only the monarchy, but also the property of the capitalists and land owners and the power of the military caste."

By December Ebert had established a dictatorship, and, as one historian has observed, "Ebert's men were very active behind the scenes. They mobilized counterrevolutionary forces, secured the support of the reactionary army officers, found allies among the bourgeoisie and the military, and put pressure on the Executive Council [of the government] with unscrupulous cynicism."

The greatest blow to the German working class had come when "Ebert's men," acting through reactionary paramilitary Freikorps, organized the murder of Karl Liebknecht and his fellow revolutionary leader Rosa Luxemburg in January 1919.

In March 1920, the attempted right-wing Kapp Putsch forced Ebert to flee Berlin, but during the massive strike wave that rose in opposition to the coup, Ebert sent troops to suppress the working class in the industrial Ruhr region.

Ebert's tenure in office was extended by the Reichstag in 1922, and he ruled by frequent resort to the anti-democratic Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution until 1925, when he died in office of appendicitis.



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