

This week in history: September 16-22

16 September 2019

25 years ago: Clinton orders US invasion of Haiti

On September 19, 1994, the Clinton administration launched “Operation Uphold Democracy” in Haiti, sending troops to occupy the Caribbean island under the guise of fighting against dictatorship in an effort to restore ousted Jean-Bertrand Aristide to the presidency. The intervention marked the fifth time in less than a decade that US troops were ordered to invade another country in its bid to reassert global hegemony.

In spite of denouncing the Bush administration for its interception and forced repatriation of Haitian refugees, Clinton adopted this same policy himself after campaigning against it when running for president. As the tide of refugees continued, the Clinton administration increased its threats of intervention as a means of placating right-wing anti-immigrant pressures in the US.

The White House decision to invade Haiti provoked opposition from both big business parties and especially from the Pentagon. The major concern among the ruling class was that Clinton had blundered into a policy at odds with the best interests of the US banks and corporations.

No sooner had Clinton delivered his invasion ultimatum and foresworn any further negotiations with the Haitian military regime than the extraordinary delegation led by former US President Jimmy Carter, ex-armed forces commander General Colin Powell, and Senator Sam Nunn were dispatched for talks with military leader Raoul Cedras and his cohorts.

The result was the Port-au-Prince Treaty in which the Haitian junta achieved virtually all the demands it had previously placed on Washington, including full amnesty for the military and police killers.

Its main function was to preserve the military and police as a credible repressive force, preserving the existing state apparatus, against the threat of a popular upheaval damaging to US economic interests and imperialist stability throughout the Caribbean.

50 years ago: Strike wave in Western Europe

European strikes continued to build momentum this week in 1969. On September 18, thousands of West German public service workers walked off the job in West Berlin, Munich, and Nuremberg. The unauthorized strikes, carried out before the expiration of contracts, included bus, subway, and sanitation workers.

Earlier in the month, hundreds of thousands of German coal miners, steelworkers, and shipyard workers engaged in wildcat strikes. Coal miners won wage increases of 14 percent, while metal workers and steel workers won 11 percent. The West German strike wave was the most powerful since Hitler’s coming to power in 1933. By mid-September 350,000 working hours had been lost to strikes, compared to 24,000 in all of 1968.

Wildcats also swept Italy. The walkouts involved 300,000 metal workers, 200,000 chemical workers, and 900,000 construction workers. Workers also struck Fiat and Pirelli, Italy’s two largest manufacturing corporations. Pirelli workers struck even though their contract did not expire for two years. They demanded higher bonuses and the right to hold union meetings inside the plant.

In France railroad and metro workers began a five-day nationwide strike on September 10. The walkout challenged austerity measures imposed by President Pompidou, who called for wage limits in the face of inflation sparked by the devaluation of the franc.

The West German strike wave culminated in the fall of the Christian Democratic government of Kurt Kiesinger, which had carried out cuts in government spending in the face of international pressure to devalue the mark. As a further austerity measure, banks had doubled interest rates since the beginning of the year.

In federal elections held September 28, the Christian Democrats failed to obtain a majority. A week later the Social Democrats reached an agreement with the Free Democrats to form a coalition government. As a result, Willy Brandt became the first Social Democratic chancellor in 40 years.

75 years ago: Danish workers strike against Nazi occupation

This week in September 1944, Nazi authorities launched a wave of repression in Denmark in a bid to quell a strike that had erupted against the German occupation of the country.

Thousands of workers, especially in the strategically critical transport sector, had launched a stoppage on September 16. The walk-out was in response to a call by the Danish National Council, a *de facto* government in exile aligned with the Allied powers, for mass action to halt the impending transfer of 190 political prisoners from Denmark to Germany. Over the following days, the strike expanded and paralyzed Copenhagen and other Danish cities.

The strike coincided with an upsurge of resistance activity, including a transport strike in the Netherlands against the Nazi occupation, and military operations targeting German collaborators in Greece and throughout Eastern Europe. It followed a general strike in Denmark in July.

On September 19, SS official Günther Pancke, who functioned as the effective dictator of Denmark, announced a state of emergency. He demanded that Danish police violently repress the strike and prevent it from becoming general. The order led to a series of clashes, including a shoot-out between members of the Danish Royal Guard and German troops, which left eight dead.

The Nazis responded to indications that the Danish police could not be relied upon by launching a mass round-up. Beginning on September 19, almost 2,000 police officers were arrested, out of a force that numbered about 10,000. They were transferred, in two groups, on September 29 and October 5, to the Neuengamme concentration camp in northern Germany. The repression had the immediate effect of ending the strike. However, opposition to the occupation continued to grow.

Denmark had been invaded by the Germans in 1940. The country's government collaborated with the Nazis for several years. In August 1943, amid a growing resistance movement, the government balked at imposing the death penalty for acts of sabotage, as demanded by Nazi authorities. The Germans responded by declaring a state of emergency and effectively dissolving the government. Over the ensuing year, a series of actions would be called, involving broad sections of the Danish population, against the occupation.

In the last election held prior to the imposition of direct Nazi rule, in March 1943, the fascist National Socialist Workers' Party of Denmark had received just 2.1 percent of the vote.

100 years ago: Boston Police Commissioner refuses to rehire striking cops

On September 17, 1919, Boston Police Commissioner Edward Curtis announced that striking policemen would not be rehired and that he intended to establish an entirely new police force in the city, amid fears that the week-old walkout could lead to a citywide general strike.

Boston police were poorly paid and reported to vermin-infested precincts and stations. Policemen had organized in an association called the Boston Social Club and had asked for a raise in December 1918, but had been rebuffed by the city. By the summer, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) announced that it would charter police unions, and in August police met at a mass meeting to form one. Some 300 delegates to the Boston Central Labor Union voted to support the police. Attempts at compromise failed, Curtis fired union leaders, and the police walked out on September 9.

Using the pretext of looting and allegations that volunteer replacements failed to keep order, on September 10 Mayor Andrew Peters appealed to Republican Governor Calvin Coolidge to call out the State Guard to patrol the streets. Over the next week the Guard shot 10 civilians and bayoneted one. Coolidge refused to compromise with the AFL, and by September 25, Samul Gompers, head of the AFL, acknowledged that police did not have the right to strike and abandoned the Boston strikers. The entire force was replaced with new cops at significantly higher pay by December.

Coolidge used the claim that he had restored peace to the city to bolster his political reputation, helping to catapult him to the US vice-presidency in 1920 and the presidency in 1923 after President Warren Harding died in office.



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