

This week in history: September 30- October 6

30 September 2019

25 years ago: UAW sells out Flint Buick City strike

On October 1, just three days after 11,500 General Motors workers walked off the job at Buick City in Flint, the United Auto Workers (UAW) betrayed the strike and reached an agreement with the company that neither addressed nor resolved either of the main demands of workers over declining full-time jobs and speed-up.

The three-day walkout by members of UAW Local 599 was the fourth strike at General Motors that year. The union abruptly announced a settlement just as the impact of the strike began forcing other GM plants to close across the country. A subcontractor in Tennessee shut down within hours after the strike started, and 6,550 workers in Lansing were told not to report to work the day after the walkout began. A month prior, 3,300 workers at a GM parts plant in Anderson, Indiana, walked out over similar concerns.

In addition to producing full-size Buick and Oldsmobile models, the Flint complex also made a torque converter used on many GM automatic transmissions. Buick City was building around 5,600 cars per week on two daily shifts. GM hired thousands of temporary workers over the summer in order to reduce overtime and cut costs. The temps received no health or pension benefits and were paid less than full-time workers.

The first issue raised by workers in the walkout was the destruction of jobs. Employment at Buick City—a facility which today no longer exists—dropped from 14,000 in 1986 to under 11,500 in 1994. The company had not hired a single production worker in nearly a decade. The second concern was the drive by GM to extort greater and greater production from this shrinking workforce through speed-up and forced overtime, averaged around 17 hours a week at the plant, essentially abolishing the eight-hour work day.

The working conditions in the factories had a devastating impact on the employees' mental and physical health, resulting in a sharp increase in accidents, job-related illnesses and heart attacks.

GM President John F. Smith Jr. had vowed upon his hiring in 1992 that he would ramp up productivity and cut costs. He promised GM “would improve its lagging productivity and profitability by reducing the number of workers it uses to build vehicles. Because of the auto industry’s lavish health and pension benefits, permanent workers create an enormous financial liability. Although GM has reduced its blue-collar headcount by 24 percent since the end of 1990, its productivity still lags behind that of its domestic and Japanese competitors.”

50 years ago: Murder charges dropped against eight Green Berets

On October 1, 1969, charges were dropped against eight American Green Berets involved in the murder and cover-up of Chu Van Thai, a South Vietnamese informant who had been providing the United States with information on North Vietnamese military movements.

The Green Berets were part of an intelligence collecting operation called Project GAMMA. Its mission was to recruit Vietnamese natives as agents to collect information on North Vietnam and turn it over to US forces. Chu Van Thai was one of these agents but was suspected by the US of being a double agent for the North. He was arrested and interrogated 10 ten days then was taken by boat into the South China Sea, shot, then dumped into the water.

Green Beret Sergeant Alvin Smith, who had been Chu Van’s handler, feared for his own safety and reported the murder to General Creighton Abrams, the US commander in South Vietnam, who then had Smith and the seven others arrested. Before the incident was properly investigated, however, all of the charges were dropped.

The Nixon White House became directly involved in the affair and ordered the CIA operatives who had information on the killing not to testify. With no available evidence or testimony, a trial could not be properly conducted, and the soldiers were released.

The White House and CIA claimed that there could be no trial as it could potentially expose information vital to US national security. In reality, the trial would have brought to light that the extrajudicial murder of Chu Van Thai was common practice under the secret government operations like GAMMA and added more fuel to the intense antiwar sentiment in the US population.

On October 2 the eight Green Berets returned to the United States and held a press conference where they took questions from reporters in an attempt to convince the public that they had not participated in the murder. One of the soldiers, Colonel Rheault, told reporters that the group would be, “delighted to go back to serve in Vietnam,” explaining that “the job is unfinished.”

In response to reporters’ questions the group mostly responded saying that they had no information about Chu Van Thai’s death and repeated multiple times that they had been “exonerated,” without elaborating on any details of their involvement in the affair. One reporter asked Rheault “how would you like to see history record this incident?” to which he said, “I’d rather not see it recorded.”

75 years ago: Warsaw uprising violently suppressed by Nazi occupiers

On October 2, officers from the Polish Home Army signed a capitulation order signifying an end to their attempts to retake

Warsaw, the country's capital, from the Nazi occupiers. The effective surrender followed months of bitter fighting, and limited Allied support for the Polish resistance forces.

The uprising had been launched on August 1. It had been timed to precede an anticipated advance into Poland by the Soviet Union's Red Army. While the partisans of the Home Army established a defensive foothold in a number of Warsaw suburbs, including outlying areas of the city, their initial assaults on the heavily fortified police and army compounds of the Nazis within the city failed. Weeks of intensive guerrilla warfare followed.

The Germans were anxious to put down the revolt, so that they could focus troop numbers on countering Soviet advances throughout the rest of Eastern Europe. At the same time, the leadership of the Home Army increasingly recognized that they would not have a swift victory over the Nazis, especially as the prospects of a rapid Soviet entry into the city diminished.

On September 7, the Polish Home Army agreed to negotiations with the Nazi administration of the city. Some 20,000 civilians were evacuated from the city over the following days amid growing food shortages. The talks, however, rapidly disintegrated and the Home Army began a last-ditch attempt to secure ground from the Germans. The Home Army lost a series of positions that it had held, and areas under its control were reduced to a handful of streets. This prompted the capitulation order of October 2.

The following day, Home Army soldiers were disarmed. Around 15,000 of them were sent to German prisoner of war camps.

The defeat allowed the Nazis to begin the mass expulsion of Warsaw's civilian population. Over the following months, up to half a million civilians were removed from the city and taken to the Durchgangslager 121 transit camp in Pruszków. From there, many were taken to labour and concentration camps throughout the Third Reich. An estimated 60,000 were killed in the Nazi death camps.

Although exact casualty figures are unknown, it is estimated that 15,000 Polish Home Army soldiers were killed during the Warsaw Uprising. Between 150,000 and 200,000 civilians are also thought to have perished. Some 25 percent of the city's buildings were destroyed during the fighting. In the weeks following the capitulation, the Germans would act on longstanding plans for the levelling of the city, demolishing another 35 percent of Warsaw. When the Nazis abandoned the city in early 1945, 85 percent of its pre-war buildings no longer existed.

100 years ago: Massacre of black farmworkers in Elaine, Arkansas

On September 30, 1919, a white police officer and a railroad detective exchanged shots with armed blacks who were attending a meeting of a newly formed sharecroppers' union, the Progressive Farmers and Household Union of America, at a church in Phillips County, Arkansas, near the town of Elaine. It is not clear who fired first or why the policeman and detective had stopped near the church. The detective was killed, and the police officer was wounded.

The next morning, local politicians assembled all-white mobs that undertook a bloodbath of black farmers, killing hundreds. Over the next few days, newspapers whipped up a frenzy of a "black insurrection"—a theme which would be repeated in the national media

over the next week. The local American Legion post recruited posse gunmen and bands of armed whites ranged throughout the county shooting blacks on sight. "Posse members later said they saw black men shot while surrendering with their hands in the air. Others were hanged from a bridge," according to one historian. Black veterans organized resistance but were overwhelmed by white mobs. Prisoners were systematically beaten.

Social tensions had been building for years. Phillips County, in the delta region of southeastern Arkansas, bordered on the Mississippi River to the east and had been one of the few centers of plantation agriculture in the state before the Civil War. By the Jim Crow period it was relatively less brutal for blacks than Mississippi across the river. The county was majority-black and there had been a certain improvement in living standards for black farmers because of the rising price of cotton during the First World War. These farmers were, nevertheless, routinely cheated by white merchants, and anger had been building by 1919. In addition, the county had seen a new militancy in black soldiers returned from Europe.

By October 2, over 400 federal troops were sent to the area from the state capital Little Rock, accompanied by the governor, Democrat Charles Hillman Brough, who had defeated a socialist candidate in the election of 1918. The military declared martial law and skirmished with armed blacks. Eyewitnesses claimed that the military tortured prisoners and continued the massacre of black sharecroppers.

The number of victims of the slaughter in and around Elaine has never been definitively calculated, but estimates range from 200 to over 800 blacks killed, many by federal troops. The incident was the last of the series of major racist attacks—and resistance by blacks—in 1919 known as the Red Summer, which included incidents in Charleston, South Carolina; Longview, Texas; Washington, DC; Omaha, Nebraska; Knoxville, Tennessee and Chicago. The Elaine massacre was the deadliest racist assault on blacks since the Civil War.



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