

# This week in history: April 6-12

6 April 2020

## 25 years ago: One-day strike in Russia

On April 12, 1995, more than 1 million Russian workers carried out a one-day strike protesting nonpayment of wages and calling for the resignation of the government of President Boris Yeltsin. It was the most widespread strike action in Russia since the 1989 coal miners' walkouts.

The one-day strike came on the heels of the February 8, 1995 coal miners' strike, in which over 600,000 workers shut down coal mines across Russia over the same concerns. Many had not been paid since the previous October and had been threatening a general strike should the back wages not be paid.

Nine different unions were involved in the strikes, which affected 74 regions of Russia, ranging from St. Petersburg in the west to the Pacific coastal region in the far east. Strikes and demonstrations were reported in St. Petersburg, Moscow, and other cities in European Russia, and in Siberian industrial centers like Omsk, Krasnoyarsk, and Barnaul.

Some 38,000 state-owned factories, starved for funds under the pro-capitalist policies of the Yeltsin regime, owed an estimated 5.6 trillion rubles in back wages to workers. Many workers had continued to labor without pay for three, and in some cases up to six, months, fearing that a stoppage of work would be followed by a closure of their factory.

On the day of the strike, the ruble fell to an all-time low of more than 5,000-to-1 against the US dollar. The further decline in the Russian currency came despite final approval of a \$6.8 billion loan to Moscow by the International Monetary Fund, conditioned on further privatization and cuts in subsidies to state-owned industry.

The strike in Russia coincided with a one-day strike of longshoremen in Brazil and a one-day strike of public transit workers in France.

On April 8, 1970 an Israeli bombing raid struck the Bahr El-Baqar elementary school in Egypt's northeastern Sharqiya province, killing 46 children and maiming scores more. The Israeli Air Force dropped five bombs from US-made F4 Phantom II fighters and fired two air-to-ground missiles at the school building, completely destroying it.

The attack was part of Israel's Operation Priha during the ongoing War of Attrition with Egypt for control of the Sinai Peninsula and the Suez Canal. The objective of the mission was to carry out strikes deep within Egyptian territory, rather than focusing attacks on the heavily fortified defenses along the canal, and to lower Egyptian morale by demonstrating Israeli strikes could hit any target within Egypt with impunity. Israel had a major aerial advantage in the war. Egypt's air force had been mostly destroyed at this point in the conflict, and was dependent on limited assistance from the Soviet Union.

Israel officially said the bombing of the school was due to "human error" and that intelligence had suggested the school was a military installation. Israeli Minister of Defense Moshe Dayan sought to shift the blame for the deaths onto Egypt saying, "Maybe the Egyptians put elementary students in a military base."

Nasser responded by deepening his military dependence on the Soviet Union, which began to play a more direct role in the War of Attrition after the Bahr El-Baqar bombing. The deaths of the children, along with the increase in Soviet military presence, brought an end to Operation Priha strikes deep in Egyptian territory.

Throughout the next several months the Soviet Air Force would shift the balance of forces in Egypt's favor. Looking to avoid a larger conflict with the USSR, Israel was forced to limit their air attacks as Soviet planes filled Egyptian airspace, providing cover for Nasser to rebuild his defenses along the canal.

## 50 years ago: Israeli airstrike kills 46 Egyptian children

## 75 years ago: Nazi regime on brink of defeat as defense of Berlin abandoned

On April 10, 1945, the US air force dealt a decisive blow to the German Luftwaffe, wiping out almost half of its assault force and rendering it incapable of defending Berlin amid rapid Allied ground advances. The defeat was one of a series in the first weeks of April that signaled the approaching fall of the Nazi Third Reich and the end of the Second World War in the European theater.

The air battles took place after days of US air force raids on Luftwaffe bases. Hermann Göring, commander of the Luftwaffe, ordered an offensive response involving 50 Me262 jets. The operation resulted in 16 Allied deaths, but the Luftwaffe's toll was far greater. Nearly 25 of the Me262's were shot down, accounting for half of the Luftwaffe's crack offensive force. Ensuing raids on German airfields, over the course of the day, destroyed another 284 German aircraft, including another 25 fighter jets.

The battle became known as "The day of the great jet massacre." It meant that the Luftwaffe was no longer able to mount any defense of Berlin or central Germany, which had been the political, military and logistical hub of Nazi power. The Luftwaffe had been the only means of counteracting a series of aerial raids targeting Berlin, conducted by the Allies throughout the first months of 1945. The Luftwaffe's fighting division would be transferred to southern Bavaria, where it had only primitive grass airfields and would not play a significant role in subsequent hostilities.

On April 7, three days before the decisive battle, German command sent 120 student pilots to confront 1,000 American bombers. The operation, which testified to the desperation of German command, was destined to result in a massacre. Almost all of the student pilots perished, with only a handful achieving their mission of ramming the Allied bombers and rendering them nonoperational.

The same week, the Allies began a spring offensive in Italy, which would result in the decisive defeat of fascist forces in that country. In Western Europe, French and British troops completed an operation to take control of the strategically critical canals and waterways, along with airfields, of Holland. On the Eastern Front, the Soviet Red Army won the Battle of Königsberg.

By the end of the week, Allied troops had captured Hanover, the capital and largest city in the German state of Lower Saxony, and Essen, the second largest city of the Ruhr.

On April 9, 1920, at least 8,000 railroad workers in the New York City area joined a national wildcat strike that shut down most train traffic into the city. They were joined by transit workers later in that evening. The railway and transit unions opposed the strike, as they had other rail strikes around the United States.

Firemen (workers who regulated the fuel on board trains) struck on the Erie railroad just before midnight, effectively stopping freight and passenger service. Subway workers met in Jersey City late on Friday and voted to cease work on the Hudson and Manhattan lines. (At the time, subway lines were owned and operated by private companies.) Over the next few days, the strike spread to workers on the New York Central and Lackawanna railroads.

The trade union bureaucracy not only refused to sanction the strike, but actively intervened to stop it. Along the Erie line in New York, unions sought to prevent shopmen (workers who built, repaired and maintained rolling stock) from striking. One union president attended an "unsanctioned" strike meeting in Harrison, New Jersey, and told workers to keep working since the contract with the rail company had not expired. As the *New York Times* described it: "Many of the men declared for an immediate walkout. For more than two hours the meeting was in tumult." One railway owners group called the strike "a revolution of the workers, pure and simple."

By April 10, over 40,000 railway workers were on strike across the US, including those in New England, St. Louis, Kansas City, Detroit and California.

Part of the largest strike wave in American history, up until that time, lasting from 1916 to 1922, the strikes that gripped the rail industry after World War I were often defensive in nature, as workers attempted to hold on to wartime gains against a vicious corporate counteroffensive that began with the severe recession in the winter of 1920.



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**100 years ago: New York City railroad and transit workers join national wildcat strike**