

This week in history: June 29-July 5

29 June 2020

25 years ago: British Tory crisis deepens following John Major electoral victory

On July 4, 1995, British Prime Minister John Major was reelected as leader of the Conservative Party against Secretary of State for Wales John Redwood. Major was saved from defeat at the hands of his Thatcherite opponents only through the intervention of his main pro-European opponent, Michael Heseltine. In the cabinet reshuffle that followed the election, Heseltine was named both deputy prime minister and first secretary of state, giving him virtually as much power within the government and the Tory Party as the prime minister himself.

The contest underscored the persistence of deep divisions within the British ruling class over integration into the European Union. While Major defeated his party's anti-European right, the latter gained fully one-third of the votes cast.

Major took over from Margaret Thatcher in 1990 when the majority of the Tory Party and the British ruling class rejected her opposition to closer integration into Europe. They feared as well that her social policies were alienating the Tories' middle class supporters and threatening a social explosion in the working class.

Major, the compromise candidate, had the task of uniting the party. Yet unity on Europe proved elusive. Those opposing entry became more vocal following the crisis of the European Exchange Rate Mechanism on Black Wednesday, in September 1992, when the pound collapsed. After expelling the so-called Euro rebels for nearly toppling his government in July 1993, Major was forced to invite them back because of the government's extreme weakness.

The anti-Europe faction redoubled its challenge, with Employment Minister Michael Portillo preparing his candidacy against Major. The majority of the Tory press came out against the prime minister, reflecting the growing antagonisms over Europe. Throughout the contest, there was talk of a split in the Tory Party and the possible formation of a new semi-fascist "English National Party."

Labour Party leader Tony Blair's candidacy was receiving increasingly favorable responses from the same Tory press that had turned against Major, as Blair set out to prove that his party's allegiance was not to the working class. Sections of the ruling class had concluded that a period of Labour in power would facilitate deeper attacks on the working class and provide the time necessary for forging a new right-wing formation out of the crisis-ridden Tory Party.

50 years ago: NYC hospital union settles for 25 percent wage increase

With a strike deadline of July 1 for tens of thousands of hospital workers in New York City, their union, Local 1199, reached a tentative settlement with the League of Voluntary Hospitals that fell far short of winning the demands of the rank and file and provoked widespread opposition in which the Workers League, forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party, played a major role.

In an indication of the powerful position of the workers and the rising militancy of the working class as a whole, the employers agreed to raise the minimum hospital wage by 25 percent over two years, 15 percent the first year and 10 percent the second year. A cost-of-living escalator clause was to go into effect in the second year of the contract, but only if prices rose by more than 60 percent. There were minor improvements in vacation and benefits, but in return for these concessions, the union gave up its demands for a 35-hour work week, and agreed to send disputes over the job classification system to arbitration.

The *Bulletin*, newspaper of the Workers League, warned that union leader Leon Davis had capitulated at the last minute to Republican Governor Nelson Rockefeller, who intervened through his top state mediator, Vincent McDonald, to demand the scheduled strike should be cancelled. The *Bulletin* explained, "Davis' role was to keep a militant cover until the last minute and then appear as the savior who had averted a terrible 'crisis.' In reality, he was forced into a near strike by the militancy of the ranks. At the same time he was only too happy to end it at the first opportunity."

At an 1199 delegates meeting on the eve of the planned strike, there was tremendous support for a motion by the Rank and File Committee, in which members of the Workers League participated, that the union stand firm on its demand for a 40 percent increase for the mainly low-paid workers. Davis responded by having the floor microphone removed at a follow-up meeting so the ranks could be more easily silenced.

The upsurge among hospital workers in New York City, then newly organized, was part of a broader offensive by the working class that included mass strikes by postal workers, Ohio Teamsters, GE workers, General Motors workers, and longshoremen, leading to many contract settlements in the 25 to 35 percent range. It was this rising militancy that compelled the Nixon administration to adopt the measures of August 15, 1971, ending dollar convertibility into gold, imposing a surcharge on foreign imports, and setting a ceiling on wage increases of 5.5 percent a year.

75 years ago: Landslide Labour victory in British general election

In a general election held on July 5, 1945, the British Labour Party won a landslide victory, sweeping the Conservatives from office and decimating the Liberal Party. The result reflected a growing political radicalization of the working class after six years of war and amid widespread fears of a return to the mass unemployment and poverty of the 1930s.

The results of the ballot did not lead to an immediate transfer of power, enabling Winston Churchill, prime minister of a caretaker cabinet, to lead negotiations with the United States and the Soviet Union at the Potsdam conference, which finalized the Allied carve-up of Europe at the end of World War II. Clement Attlee, the victorious Labour Party leader, replaced Churchill at Potsdam on July 28, five days before it ended.

Through most of the war, Churchill had led a national-unity type government that had Labour's support. In June, after the final defeat of Nazi Germany, Labour had rejected Churchill's offer for a post-war continuation of the de facto national coalition, triggering the dissolution of parliament and the scheduling of elections.

Labour was fearful that it would be bypassed by growing social opposition, particularly from its mass working class base, if it did not establish its nominal independence from the Tories. As a pro-capitalist party, Labour had fully supported Britain's imperialist war effort, along with a ban on strikes and the political repression of the Trotskyist movement.

In the ensuing campaign, Labour leader Attlee advanced a program of social reforms, including the nationalization of some key industries, an expansion of publicly-funded housing, the establishment of a National Health Service and full employment. Churchill primarily ran on his war record, claiming that a Tory government would ensure security and advance Britain's international interests after the war.

Labour won almost 48 percent of the national ballot, compared with 36 percent for the Tories. This secured Labour 393 parliamentary seats, a staggering increase of 239 seats. The Tories were reduced to 197 seats, down 189. The Liberal Party, which had governed with the Tories over the previous years, lost all of its urban seats.

Throughout Europe, broad sections of the population, especially the working class, were shifting to the left as a result of the experiences of fascism, war and the 1930s Great Depression. In countries such as Greece and Italy, anti-fascist partisans who had overthrown dictatorships were seeking to settle scores with capitalism. Mass movements in France and elsewhere in Western Europe also posed the possibility of establishing workers' states.

The Stalinists, in line with the interests of the privileged bureaucracy that controlled the Soviet Union, collaborated with the Allied powers and capitalist parties in a bid to restabilize capitalism and prevent socialist revolution.

100 years: Conflict between German, French and British imperialism at Spa conference

On July 4, 1920, representatives of German imperialism met with the Allied powers for the first time since signing the humiliating Treaty of Versailles in 1919. The gathering took place in the Belgian town of Spa, the site of the German military headquarters on the Western Front during the First World War. The agenda was set at disarmament, reparations, coal exports (a vital issue for the French since the Germans had destroyed many French coal mines during the war), and the trial of German war criminals.

The German Chancellor, Constantin Fehrenbach, a leader of the right-wing of the Catholic Center Party, came prepared to resist British and French demands for the payment of enormous sums of war reparations.

As the conference opened, the French and British delegations sharply rebuked the Germans for refusing to begin discussion on the question of disarmament. There was no leading representative of the German military present, and the Allies demanded that one attend before the conference proceed.

On July 6, the Allies issued an ultimatum to Germany, demanding that it reduce its army to 100,000 men. The German delegation claimed that it was impossible to reduce the army from its current 200,000 soldiers because Germany in the "present state of unrest," its delegation claimed, was "overheated."

This was an accurate portrayal. In 1920, Germany was a boiling cauldron of revolution and counterrevolution. In Chancellor Fehrenbach's words, "strike followed strike." Elements of the German army had already attempted a coup d'état, the infamous Kapp putsch in March, which was repulsed by a general strike of the working class. The French believed that the use of German troops in the Ruhr Valley, Germany's industrial heartland, had violated the Treaty of Versailles and had sent troops to Frankfurt. The Ruhr Valley also saw battles between armed workers and the proto-fascist Freikorps.

The German delegation acceded to Allied demands on disarmament. No final sum was set on the amount of war reparations, although the proportions to go to each Allied country were set at: France 52 percent, Britain 22 percent, Italy 10 percent (though it had agitated for much more), and Belgium 8 percent. Germany was obligated to increase its coal shipments.



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