

This week in history: July 27-August 2

27 July 2020

25 years ago: Congress ends hearings on Waco siege

On August 1, 1995, the United States Congress completed week-long hearings on the Waco siege of 1993, designed to both placate and legitimize extreme right-wing groups—from the Christian Coalition to paramilitary militias and neo-Nazi tendencies—which had made the Waco assault a *cause célèbre*.

The Waco siege, carried out by federal agents in the spring of 1993 against an obscure religious group known as the Branch Davidians, culminated in a murderous raid on April 19 that killed 76 members, including 25 children, two pregnant women, and the group's leader, David Koresh.

The fascist terrorists who carried out the Oklahoma City bombing on April 19, 1995, timed their crime to mark the second anniversary of the assault on the Waco compound. The extreme sensitivity of the big-business parties to the concerns of such forces was a major warning to the working class.

In the hearings, congressional Democrats sought to defend the actions of the Clinton administration, the Justice Department, the FBI and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms in the two-month standoff. They repeated the arguments used at the time to justify the use of tanks and injection of CS gas into the compound, which set off the explosion.

The Republican majority, which convened the hearings, subjected dozens of federal officials to hostile inquiries. But their show of concern for democratic rights and the fate of the Branch Davidians was a thinly disguised cover for a reactionary political agenda.

The hypocrisy of the supposed opponents of government violence on the investigating committee was extraordinary. Henry Hyde, a senior Republican congressman, expressed no misgivings in 1969 when the FBI orchestrated the murder of Chicago Black Panthers leaders Mark Clark and Fred Hampton. No congressional hearings were convened to investigate the shooting of student protesters at Kent State in 1970 or the bombing of the MOVE house in Philadelphia in 1985.

The massacre at Waco was a crime perpetrated by the capitalist state against a small and isolated religious sect. It was an object lesson and a warning of the much wider violence which the ruling class would be willing to employ should its property and power be threatened by a mass movement of the working class. (For more analysis, see the WWSW editorial board statement Ten years since the Waco massacre).

50 years ago: Cesar Chavez ends California strike

On July 29, 1970, the five-year-long Delano grape strike by

agricultural workers came to an end. Cesar Chavez, the head of the United Farm Workers (UFW) declared the strike a victory after having secured a collective bargaining agreement with several large growers.

While certain short-term gains in working conditions were made, they came at the cost of the total subordination of the farm workers' rebellion to the profit interests of the growers, as well as the Democratic Party and the AFL-CIO. Within a little more than a decade the UFW would collapse, incapable of offering a means of organizing recent migrants and defending itself against a counteroffensive launched by the major California growers.

The strike began in 1965, following a wave of unrest among farm workers. Initially, workers in the predominantly Filipino Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee (AWOC) walked off the job after being forced into working for \$1.20 per hour, less than the federal minimum wage at the time. The Delano growers attempted to hire workers from Chavez's predominantly Mexican National Farmworkers Association (NFWA), a deal that Chavez initially accepted.

Only after massive resistance by the rank and file to scabbing on their fellow workers and desire to improve their own conditions did Chavez call for a strike. Eventually, the two unions merged into the UFW. Additionally, Chavez did not call workers out until he entered into a formal agreement with the AFL-CIO and UAW President Walter Reuther, who flew to Delano and worked with Chavez to ensure that the explosive struggle of the farmworkers remained within the acceptable framework of contract negotiation.

The strike saw several significant demonstrations by the farm workers. In April of 1966, over 8,000 farmworkers completed a 340-mile march from Delano to Sacramento. Despite being harassed by police when passing through over 30 cities, the workers gained international attention for their strike. Farm workers displayed remarkable bravery, refusing to be intimidated by police abuse.

In an attempt to undermine the strike, the large agricultural businesses came to an agreement with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters to ship the produce picked by scab laborers. When Teamster truck drivers refused to ship scab products, union officials ordered their members off the job and brought in Teamster bureaucrats and scabs to ship the goods. The development marked the emergence of an important phenomenon that would come to dominate labor struggles in the 1980s: the trade union bureaucracies actively working to break strikes.

As the strike dragged on for several years, Chavez's strategy was to appeal to the Democratic party. In particular, Chavez formed a close relationship with Robert F. Kennedy, whom he endorsed for president before Kennedy's assassination in 1968.

At the same time Chavez was cozying up to the Democrats, he initiated a red scare and purged all radical elements within the UFW. Workers who were openly socialist or communist were removed from the union and fired. Even those who raised minor criticisms of the

orientation to the Democratic Party became targeted and were accused of being communists.

The growers decided to sign an agreement with Chavez after he had thoroughly convinced them that he had removed any trace of militancy that existed among the workers. Hollis Roberts, one of California's largest growers, said after signing a UFW contract: "I learned to like Chavez and I found that a lot of things we had been told about these people were not true. I had been told they were Communists, and I had been advised never to talk to them in person. ... Now, I don't think we could have been any more wrong."

75 years ago: Massive US bombardment of Japan

On August 2, 1945, the US Air Force carried out its heaviest raids targeting Japanese cities to that point in World War II, with 800 B-29 bombers dropping an estimated 6,000 tons of incendiary bombs on Japanese cities. Within the space of a few hours, an estimated 80,000 people, the majority of them civilians, were killed.

The night before, on August 1, the US military had leveled Toyama, a small city on the northern coast of Japan's main island Honshu. Some 182 aircraft from the US Twentieth Air Force took part in the raid, deploying almost 1,500 tons of bombs on the city.

Toyama was an industrial hub, known for its production of ball bearings and steel. Amid the disintegration of Japan's armed forces, however, and imminent Allied victory in the conflict, it had limited military significance. Despite this, the raid was among the heaviest of the entire war, relative to the population and infrastructure of the target.

An estimated 99 percent of all buildings in the city, including public buildings and residential dwellings, were destroyed. The city center was reduced to ash after the bombardment was compounded by fires triggered by the incendiary devices. Over 100,000 people were affected by the bombing. At least 2,700 were killed and more than 8,000 injured.

The raid included the use of "pumpkin bombs," developed by the US army-led Manhattan Project. These were massive conventional aerial bombs, designed to mimic the handling and ballistic characteristics of the "Fat Man" plutonium bomb, also developed by the Manhattan Project. Instead of containing plutonium, the "pumpkin bomb" was filled with a massive payload of high explosives.

Four of the devices were dropped on Toyama, even though it was virtually undefended. This is widely viewed as having been a test run for the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki just days later. Those attacks, on August 6 and 9, would mark the first use of nuclear weapons during combat, in a war crime that resulted in hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths.

100 years ago: Communist Party of Great Britain founded

On July 31, 1920, the Communist Unity Convention, held at the Cannon Street Hotel in London, founded the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). The 152 delegates came from several left-wing groups, including the British Socialist Party, the Socialist Labor Party,

the South Wales Socialist Society, shop stewards' committees, and a variety of smaller organizations as well as individuals who supported the principles of Bolshevism. The founding of the CPGB occurred while the Second Congress of the Communist International was in session in Moscow.

A letter by Lenin to the committee that had organized the British congress was read at one of its sessions:

I am in complete sympathy with their plans for the immediate organization of a single Communist Party of Britain. I consider erroneous the tactics pursued by Comrade Sylvia Pankhurst and the Workers' Socialist Federation, who refuse to collaborate in the amalgamation of the British Socialist Party, the Socialist Labour Party and others to form a single Communist party. Personally I am in favor of participation in Parliament and of affiliation to the Labour Party, given wholly free and independent communist activities.

In January 1921, at a second Communist Unity Conference in Leeds, Pankhurst's Communist Party (British Section of the Third International), which had sent delegates to Moscow, unified with the CPGB on the basis of common agreement with the Statutes and Theses of the Second Congress of the Third International.

The period that followed the First World War was one of a militant upsurge of the working class in Britain and internationally, initiated by the Russian Revolution of 1917. Revolutionary movements developed in Germany, Italy and Hungary, and the United States was seized with mass strikes by coal miners and steelworkers. In all of these countries communist parties were formed under the leadership of the Communist International to lead revolutionary struggles, while Soviet Russia waged a bitter civil war to prevent the restoration of capitalism in the former Tsarist Empire.

The period also witnessed the development of anti-imperialist movements in the colonies, including Britain's richest colony, India, as well as opposition to British imperialism in Turkey, the Middle East and East Africa.

In 1919, British coal miners had won the seven-hour day, and that year saw one of the most notable episodes in the history of the British working class, the Glasgow general strike, which was only quelled by the intervention of the British military. One of the leaders of the strike, William Gallacher, joined the CPGB in 1921.



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