

This week in history: September 14-20

14 September 2020

25 years ago: Clinton, Congress “end welfare as we know it”

On September 19, 1995, the United States Senate voted 87-12 to terminate the federal assistance program, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), and to slash \$70 billion from Food Stamps and other welfare programs. For the first time, an entitlement program, one of the handful of key social programs that provided guaranteed benefits for all those eligible, was being abolished. AFDC was eventually replaced in 1997 by the much more restrictive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).

The vote was a watershed moment in American history. For the first time in six decades, the federal government was no longer obligated to provide a minimum of cash and food assistance to impoverished families with nowhere else to turn.

The bill passed with heavy support from both the Democratic and Republican parties. Thirty-five of 46 Democrats and 52 of 54 Republicans voted for it. The White House hailed the bill's passage as the realization of President Bill Clinton's pledge to “end welfare as we know it.” The assault on social programs went beyond budget cuts and signified the destruction of the modest welfare state structure begun in the 1930s and that had expanded during the period of the post-World War II boom.

AFDC itself arose as an offshoot of the Social Security Act, passed in 1935 under Franklin Delano Roosevelt. One of the handful of Democrats who opposed the welfare bill, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, noted the significance of this link. “I fear we are now commencing the end of the Social Security system,” he said, denouncing Clinton as well as the Republican majority. “This administration wants to go down in history as one that abandoned, eagerly abandoned, the national commitment to dependent children.”

Moynihan's comments provided a measure of the drastic swing to the right of big business and both parties. Thirty years prior, Moynihan was on the right wing of the Democratic Party and later served in the Nixon administration. By 1995, he was criticizing the policies of a Democrat as too right-wing.

50 years ago: 344,000 General Motors workers go on strike

On September 15, 1970 about 344,000 General Motors auto workers went on strike after the previous contract expired. The strike was the largest national action by auto workers since the 1945–46 auto strike wave.

The main demand by auto workers was for a significant wage increase. By 1970 inflation had started to deplete the real value of workers' wages. Before the strike, the average pay of a rank and file member of the United Auto Workers was \$3.75 an hour. This fell well below the \$10,800 a year required to keep a family of four above poverty-level conditions. Workers also called for a “30 and out” pension, meaning that workers would become eligible for retirement regardless of their age after 30 years in the factory.

The demand that emerged from the rank-and-file auto workers was for a \$1.25 an hour raise at the start of the contract, bringing the average worker's pay to \$5 an hour. However, the UAW bureaucracy, now led by Leonard Woodcock after former UAW president Walter Reuther died earlier in the year, called for an increase of just 61 cents an hour in the first year of the new contract.

There was major dissatisfaction among the rank and file with the UAW leadership leading up to and during the strike. Workers formed a number of committees to push for the higher \$1.25 demand.

One auto worker in New Jersey interviewed by members of the Workers League, forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party, said, “For the last three years, I've actually been making less and less as far as keeping up with the cost of living ... from 1940 until about five years ago our standard of living held up. Since then we've been going backwards.”

Workers also raised concerns about safety in the plants. When asked if there were any local grievances in his factory one 25-year veteran of the Baltimore Chevrolet plant remarked, “Ventilation. At the end of the line where they drive off the cars, the exhaust gets so thick it makes you dizzy.” He also explained that workers had to work in small confined spaces at a line speed that was impossible to keep up with.

75 years ago: Allied powers hold first trial of Nazi war criminals

On September 17, 1945, the Allied powers, in the wake of their victory over Germany and Japan in World War II, began the first of several trials that would reveal some of the war crimes and atrocities carried out over the preceding years.

The hearings at Belsen, primarily presided over by the British, was known officially as the “Trial of Josef Kramer and 44 others.” Kramer had been commandant at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, where thousands of Jews, members of other ethnic minorities and political opponents had been murdered by the Third Reich.

The majority of the defendants were former staff of the SS, Nazi dictator Adolf Hitler’s paramilitary force. The remainder were state functionaries, in charge of prisoner treatment, who were directly implicated in the killings.

The official charge sheet, covering all of the defendants, began: “At Bergen-Belsen, Germany, between 1st October, 1942, and 30th April, 1945, when members of the staff of Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp responsible for the well-being of the persons interned there, in violation of the law and usages of war, were together concerned as parties to the ill-treatment of certain of such persons...” A number of victims, the majority of whom had been killed, were then named. The horrors at the Auschwitz concentration camp were also referenced in the indictment.

The trial would last some 54 days, during which British prosecutors would show footage, demonstrating many deaths at Belsen, and witnesses would testify to the gross human rights violations that occurred there. In the end, 11 of the main defendants would be sentenced to death, after having been convicted. Others faced prison sentences of up to a decade, while a number of defendants were acquitted, on the grounds that there was not sufficient evidence of their role in the genocide.

The trial received substantial media attention, within occupied Germany and internationally, amid global revulsion at the crimes of the fascist powers. The Allies, however, were not interested in a complete reckoning with the crimes of the Nazis. German officials, implicated in the genocide and political suppression, would remain prominent in government and society for decades to come. Some of them would be consciously promoted by the Allies over the following years, in the context of the Cold War directed against the Soviet Union.

100 years: Bomb kills 36 on Wall Street

On September 16, 1920, a powerful bomb exploded at noon outside the headquarters of the leading American banker, J.P. Morgan.

The bomb, concealed in a horse-drawn wagon, was comprised of 100 pounds of dynamite and 500 pounds of metal shrapnel. The area was active with lunch-time crowds. Thirty people were killed immediately, six more later died of their wounds, and 143 people were seriously injured, with hundreds more with less severe injuries. Most of the casualties were office workers, including stenographers, messengers and clerks, many of them young. The stock market immediately ceased trading in fear of a panic sell-off.

It is believed that the person who drove the cart to its location escaped. No one was ever charged with the crime, although historical research has suggested that the anarchist Mario Buda may have been responsible. The authorities indeed soon alleged, based on a leaflet found in the area, that anarchists were responsible, particularly the same group that had carried out an attack on federal officials in 1919, including on that of Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer. Those earlier bombings had sparked massive police raids on socialist, anarchist and Communist meetings, and resulted in the deportation of hundreds of immigrant workers.

The Wall Street bombing was also used by the authorities for the further persecution of left-wing groups, and particularly the frenzy that led to the execution of Italian anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, already in custody, seven years later.



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