

This week in history: September 21-27

21 September 2020

25 years ago: Former Italian Prime Minister Andreotti goes on trial

On September 26, 1995, seven-time Italian Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti went on trial in Palermo, facing charges of serving as a longtime front man for the Sicilian Mafia. More than 500 witnesses were expected to be called on in the nationally televised trial, the culmination of the series of scandal investigations which destroyed the postwar Italian party system.

The charges against the 76-year-old Andreotti were based on the testimony of 24 so-called *pentiti*, former Mafia bosses and underlings who witnessed meetings between Mafia leaders and Andreotti, including the now-notorious kiss of respect, administered by Salvatore “Totò” Riina, head of the Sicilian Cosa Nostra.

There was a great deal of hypocrisy in the legal proceedings, since the ties between Andreotti’s Christian Democratic Party and the Mafia were well known and had been the basis of Italian politics since the end of the Second World War. The right-wing bourgeois party was established after the collapse of Mussolini’s fascist regime to serve as the main bulwark for Italian capitalism against an emerging revolutionary movement of the working class.

The Roman Catholic Church and the Mafia joined forces, under the auspices of the United States Central Intelligence Agency, to build the Christian Democratic Party, with its major electoral base in the most impoverished and backward sections of Sicily and southern Italy. At the same time, the Stalinists of the Communist Party of Italy moved to disarm the resistance fighters and block any direct challenge by the working class to the postwar restabilization of Italian capitalism.

Economically weak, but with a strong working class and the largest Communist Party in Western Europe, Italy occupied a key position throughout the Cold War. Government participation by the Italian Communist Party and the development of any possible close links between Italy and Moscow had to be prevented at any cost, in the view of Washington and the Vatican. This provided the Christian Democrats with an almost automatic claim to power, and between 1946 and 1992, they always maintained the largest single parliamentary grouping.

After what the Italian media called the “trial of the century,” Andreotti was acquitted in October 1999. All in all, he appeared 27 times before a parliamentary immunity committee, and got off scot-free each time.

50 years ago: New Haven teachers strike ends

After more than two weeks on the picket lines, a strike by teachers in New Haven, Connecticut, was ended on September 22, 1970. The strike was defeated by a combined crackdown on workers by the court system and the police, with the complicity of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT).

Teachers had demanded higher wages that would keep up with inflation. Teachers also demanded a maximum classroom size of 20 students per teacher.

Following the announcement that teachers had voted to strike, the New Haven Board of Education filed and was granted a no-strike injunction. The terms of the injunction placed fines of \$100 per day for every day that teachers did not return to work.

The day before the strike ended 14 teachers who sat on the negotiating committee were arrested for refusing to pay the fine that had been placed on them by the courts. An additional 69 teachers were subpoenaed to appear in court to face punishment for violating the injunction by continuing to strike.

The day after the arrests the AFT began the process of ramming through a sell-out agreement that it had reached with the Board of Education. The deal gave teachers a pay raise of only \$100 more than the meager pay bump the board had originally offered.

There was large opposition among the rank-and-file teachers to the agreement. A number of teachers had proposed a motion to reject the sellout agreement in its entirety. However, using bureaucratic methods the union leadership prevented the motion from coming to a vote.

In the end, the contract went through after workers had been thoroughly demoralized and the union convinced workers that the strike could not successfully continue. The Workers League, the predecessor to the Socialist Equality Party, issued a statement in the aftermath of the strike, saying, “The undemocratic way they (the AFT) have maneuvered around the ranks’ attempt to discuss these vital questions only shows the leadership’s fear of the rank and file.” The statement continued, “New Haven teachers must prepare to take up the leadership and prevent a retreat on the central issues of wages, conditions, job security and an end to the no-strike clause.”

75 years ago: Vietnamese Stalinists launch murderous campaign against Trotskyist movement

This week in September, 1945, the Vietnamese Stalinists, led by Ho Chi Minh, escalated a vicious campaign aimed at the liquidation of the Vietnamese Trotskyist movement.

On September 23-24, workers, many of them organized in local committees, launched an uprising in the southern capital of Saigon against brutal attempts to restore French colonial rule. Foreign-owned industrial concerns were destroyed or taken over, military outposts attacked, and mass demonstrations held, many of them under red banners.

The uprising involved some local units of the Viet Minh, the Vietnamese Independence League, established by the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) and bourgeois-nationalist groups. However, it was a rebuke to the national leadership of the ICP, which after the defeat of Japanese imperialism in the Second World War had bowed to the plan agreed between Stalin, Truman and Churchill at the Potsdam conference to deploy Chinese Kuomintang troops in northern Vietnam and British troops in southern Vietnam, with French colonial administrators accompanying the British into Saigon.

The ICP sought to bring the Saigon insurrection under control and was in negotiations with the French authorities to prevent it from developing into a nationwide uprising against the Allied imperialist powers. This policy went hand in hand with a murderous assault on the Vietnamese Trotskyists. Some 30 leading members of the Trotskyist group associated with *La Lutte* (The Struggle) were arrested by Viet Minh forces in a Saigon temple, where they had been meeting to discuss the armed struggle against the French, and were shortly after summarily executed.

The *La Lutte* group and another Trotskyist organization, the International Communist League (ICL), had a substantial political presence in Vietnam, especially in urban working-class areas, dating back to the early 1930s. Both had been prominent in the August uprising against Japanese imperialism and had opposed the Viet Minh's collaboration with the British and French Allied powers.

One account noted that the ICL "denounced the Viet Minh as a coalition including bourgeois elements in Vietnamese society; the League called on the masses to complete the revolution that had brought independence by building up People's Committees as organs of state power and by distributing land to the peasants." The organization spearheaded the creation of such committees, which it conceived of as embryonic Soviets, in August and early September.

Throughout September, Viet Minh repression intensified across the country. Hundreds of Trotskyists were rounded up and killed. In some instances, this involved the direct collaboration of the Stalinist leaders with the French authorities.

Those murdered included T? Thu Thâu, the leader of the *La Lutte* group, who was well-known throughout the country and in the international socialist movement. Asked about T? Thu Thâu's death by French socialist Daniel Guerin, Ho Chi Minh would reply that he "was a great patriot and we mourn him," before adding, "All those who do not follow the line which I have laid down will be broken."

100 years ago: Workers battle troops in Turin

On September 23, 1920, workers occupying factories in Italy's industrial center of Turin were confronted by troops of the Royal Guard. Workers responded in force and fought back with rifles and hand grenades. For hours, the two sides battled. Nine people were killed and six were seriously wounded. Shops and businesses were closed and the authorities were only able to restore order the next morning.

The violence came after weeks of factory occupations throughout Italy's industrial north. The occupations, led by factory committees not under the discipline of the trade unions, had peaked, and workers were seeking new avenues for power.

The capitalist government of Giovanni Giolitti sought to disarm the workers' movement by a combination of appeals to the unions and threats of force. He sought to incorporate the unions as partners with employers in the control of the factories.

The Italian Socialist Party collaborated with the bourgeois government in this goal. They sought to disarm the factory councils and replace them with production managed with the assistance of the unions, that would be, in the words of the Socialist Party leader Filippo Turati, a "collaboration of labor with enterprise ... drawing them closely into more intense collaboration and a wider vision of the national interest."

Consequently, an agreement had been brokered between the unions and the government to end the factory occupations and offer it to the workers in a referendum. On September 23, most workers in Turin voted to reject it.

The situation in Italy was not only alarming to the Italian ruling class but to the entire world bourgeoisie, to the extent that the *New York Times* quoted, with great concern, a letter of the Executive Committee of the Communist International to the Italian workers:

"You cannot conquer by the mere seizure of works and factories. The bourgeoisie will leave you without raw materials and without markets. It is essential to develop your movement into a general rising, with the object of overthrowing the bourgeoisie—a movement of the workers seizing the government and of the organization of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Only in this lies salvation. Otherwise, the destruction and ruin of this excellently begun movement is inevitable."



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