

# This week in history: October 5-11

4 October 2020

## 25 years ago: General strike in France

On October 10, 1995, workers in France went on a national general strike. The walkout brought nearly all the public sector to a standstill, exacerbating the political crisis of the government of President Jacques Chirac less than six months after taking office.

Between 50 and 70 percent of the 5.5 million workers in public services and state-owned companies struck to protest against the government's planned wage freeze for 1996. The figure went to 90 percent in some sectors, including rail transport. The post office, France Telecom, and the railways were completely shut down. Only one out of five high-speed TGV trains were running. Five airports were closed down by striking air traffic controllers. Most public school classes were canceled and only emergency services in the hospitals were running. Large demonstrations took place in most of the larger cities, including Lyon, Marseille, Bordeaux, and Lille, with the largest protests in Paris.

The last time there was similar national actions was in 1986, also in protest against a wage freeze. Chirac was at that time the prime minister. Between 1986 and 1995, wages in the public and private sectors had drastically fallen, while rent, consumer goods and other living costs exploded. Official unemployment at the time of the general strike was 3 million, or 10 percent of the workforce. Over 800,000 were employed in cheap labor schemes in which state subsidies were used to cut wage costs for the employers. Only 8 percent of the workforce was still organized through the trade unions.

The unions sought to divert mass social anger over austerity into a strike that was primarily called to defend the bureaucracy itself. Unlike in many other countries, the French unions were mostly financed directly through tax payments, in combination with sinecures for union bureaucrats in administration, management boards, and work committees. About 35,000 trade union functionaries had paid jobs administering state benefits. The Chirac government intended to get rid of this system and transfer control directly to the state.

Prime Minister Alain Juppé and his cabinet defended the wage freeze in the public sector by saying that since they were faced with the necessity of cutting costs, they had to also cut back on the "privileges of public employees."

The freeze in public spending was dictated by the conditions of the Maastricht Treaty for entry into the European Monetary Union by 1997. Juppé, along with the Chirac administration, was desperate to enter the agreement on time in order to forestall the formation of a smaller currency bloc consisting only of Germany and a few other members. Britain and Italy did not have a prospect

of meeting the deadline to join, so by linking its currency to its stronger German counterpart, the French ruling class was seeking to sustain itself against world competition while using its global position as a counterweight to German dominance.

## Khmer Republic declared in Cambodia

On October 9, 1970, a new government calling itself the Khmer Republic was declared in Cambodia by General Lon Nol, after he staged a coup to overthrow the country's monarch Prince Norodom Sihanouk. The coup was backed by the United States with the intention of establishing a puppet regime in Cambodia that would assist the US military in fighting National Liberation Front (NLF) forces in Vietnam that had built bases within Cambodia.

Under Sihanouk, Cambodia had maintained official neutrality in the Vietnam war and had turned a blind eye to NLF bases and the Ho Chi Minh Trail supply route constructed within Cambodian territory along the border with South Vietnam. Sihanouk also mustered only verbal opposition to the US bombing campaigns and the invasion of Cambodia in April 1970 that had targeted the NLF bases. Despite his attempts to remain neutral, the US pushed forward with removing Sihanouk in the form of Lon Nol's coup.

As Lon Nol placed himself at the head of the Cambodian state, Sihanouk fled to China where he was given refuge and began preparing a government in exile called the Royal Government of the National Union of Kampuchea (GRUNK). Once his position was secured, Lon Nol greatly expanded the Cambodian military and called for the immediate removal of the NLF and North Vietnamese military.

The new regime carried out a brutal anti-communist campaign that particularly targeted ethnic Vietnamese who lived in Cambodia. Mass killings were carried out under the Khmer Republic and thousands of Vietnamese were executed. Hundreds of thousands more were forced to leave Cambodia.

The coup drove the masses of the Cambodian peasantry, whose farms and livelihood had been destroyed by US bombing campaigns, into joining the Khmer Rouge, the military wing of the Cambodian Communist Party headed by Pol Pot. The Khmer Rouge, who had been fighting a protracted civil war against the monarchy since the mid-1960s, joined in an uneasy alliance with Sihanouk and GRUNK and began planning a counter-offensive against the military dictatorship.

Being more or less dependent on aid from the United States and

having little support outside of the major cities, the government in Phnom Penh was unstable. Henry Kissinger's advice to the US forces stationed there who reported that the Khmer Republic was incapable of winning the war against the GRUNK alliance was "Don't think of victory; just keep it alive."

## **75 years ago: Fascist collaborator Pierre Laval convicted in France**

On October 9, 1945, the trial of Pierre Laval concluded, with the decades-long French politician and leading figure in the fascist Vichy regime being found guilty and sentenced to death for sharing intelligence with the enemy and plotting against the state, in league with Nazi Germany.

Upon Vichy's establishment in 1940, Laval had served first as vice president of the council of ministers in the extreme right-wing French government of Marshall Philippe Pétain, and later as its chief of government. Even prior to Hitler's victory in 1940, Laval had oriented to Nazi Germany and had been anxious to establish close ties with the Third Reich.

The *World Socialist Web Site* wrote of Laval that he:

personified the corruption of the French "left," a man whose political career easily transitioned from the Socialist Party to collaboration with the Nazis. Laval joined the 1920s "Cartel of the Left" government, before emerging in conservative governments during the Great Depression of the 1930s. He left parliament and shifted far to the right amidst an upsurge of working-class struggle, eventually positioning himself as a chief fascist collaborator. It was noted at the time that Laval's name was spelled the same backwards and forwards—a suitable expression of his spineless opportunism.

Laval fled France in 1944 upon the defeat of the Vichy regime, being flown in a Nazi Luftwaffe plane to General Franco's Spain. The Allied powers pressured the Spanish regime to return Laval for trial. The hearings would last just four days, with his lawyers refusing to attend the court in protest against the rushed character of the proceedings, which they said had a political character. Laval was shot by firing squad days later on October 15 and was buried in an unmarked grave.

The hasty trial and execution were aimed at preventing any examination of the role of the French ruling elite and political establishment in facilitating France's defeat to Nazi Germany and their creation of an extreme right-wing, collaborationist regime.

## **100 years: British Prime minister calls for pacification of Ireland**

On October 9, 1920, British Prime Minister David Lloyd George gave a speech in Wales in which he called for the pacification of Ireland, which was in the throes of a war of liberation against British imperialism.

George condemned only actions by Irish nationalists against the British military and police, and not the murderous campaign of collective punishment waged by imperial forces. "The police and soldiers do not go burning houses and shooting men wantonly, without provocation," he said. "You cannot permit the country to be debased into a condition of complete anarchy." The Liberal Party prime minister then went on to oppose home rule, that is, any separation of Ireland from the United Kingdom.

The British were indeed wantonly "burning houses and shooting men." To supplement the police, the local authorities had brought in the infamous Black and Tans, paramilitary auxiliaries, many of them ex-soldiers, who had conducted their own reign of terror for over a year throughout Ireland.

In the early morning of October 9, unknown assailants had bombed and fired upon Cork City Hall. Cork had elected a Sinn Fein government in January 1920. In March members of the Royal Irish Constabulary burst into the home of the mayor, Tomás Mac Curtain, and shot him dead.

After Mac Curtain's murder, Terence MacSwiney, a writer and leader of the Irish Republican Army, was elected mayor of Cork. He was arrested, court-marshaled and jailed by the British. He began a hunger-strike immediately on reaching jail and died on October 25. On December 11, 1920, the Black and Tans would burn down Cork City Hall and much of the rest of the city.



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