

This week in history: October 12-18

11 October 2020

25 years ago: Million Man March in Washington, DC

On October 16, 1995, hundreds of thousands of people turned out on the National Mall in Washington, DC for the Million Man March, called by Louis Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam.

Although held in front of the Capitol, the march was not a call to political struggle against the government and its attacks on social programs and democratic rights. There were no banners, no demands put forward, and not once in his speech did Farrakhan denounce the recent dismantling of welfare, or the cuts in food stamps, Medicaid or Medicare.

Leaders of the march promoted the fiction that all black people, from the factory worker to the corporate executive or millionaire preacher, had the same interests. African American workers and youth were and are among the most oppressed sections of the working class, suffering the worst forms of capitalist exploitation—low-wage jobs, poverty, brutal working conditions—exacerbated by racism and police brutality. But the march leaders, especially Farrakhan, claimed that the solution to the social crisis caused by capitalism was more capitalism, with a few privileged blacks in the role of businessmen and factory owners.

Two premises formed the political basis of the march. The first was the black nationalist outlook, lumping together white workers with the capitalist rulers who oppressed workers of all races. The second premise was the notion that the solution to problems like poverty, crime and drug abuse came from the individual.

For these reasons the Million Man March was promoted and embraced by the ruling class. The demonstration was given enormous publicity by the mass media and made the center of commentary for days afterward. It was endorsed by the Congressional Black Caucus and the mayors of Washington DC, Detroit, Baltimore, Philadelphia and other major cities. The television networks and major newspapers helped build for it. In promoting the march, the big business media made a calculated decision to encourage communalist politics and to legitimize right-wing figures such as Farrakhan.

That elements such as Farrakhan were able to tap into the pervasive but politically confused discontent among the most oppressed layers of the working class was above all an indictment of the American trade unions, which were neither willing nor able to offer any leadership in the struggle against

the assault on jobs and living standards.

50 years ago: Angela Davis arrested in New York

On October 13, 1970, Angela Davis was arrested in New York after being a fugitive since August. Davis, the most prominent African American member of the Communist Party USA (CP), was charged with aggravated kidnapping and first-degree murder in the death of California Judge Harold Haley. Davis was not present at the time of the death of Haley but was charged for allegedly purchasing weapons.

Haley was killed during a shootout between 17-year-old Jonathan Jackson and police officers after Jackson attempted to kidnap the judge and free a handful of defendants on trial. Jackson's desperate action was an attempt to free his older brother George Jackson, one of the "Soledad Brothers," a group of three black inmates framed up for killing a prison guard at a California jail. In reality, the three prisoners were targeted for their support of the Black Panther Party.

Davis had been a professor at the University of California Los Angeles but was fired in 1969 for being a member of the CP. She had also been active in the California Black Panther Party. In early 1970 she became a central figure in the campaign to exonerate the Soledad brothers and joined the Soledad Brother Defense Committee.

Just 26 years old at the time of her arrest, Davis had become a target of the FBI, which was carrying out a campaign of spying, provocations, frame-ups and terror against left-wing groups. In December 1969, FBI agents, in conjunction with Chicago Police, murdered Black Panther leader Fred Hampton while he slept. The Bureau also targeted for frame-ups Panther founders Bobby Seale and Huey Newton. A year earlier Seale had been one of the "Chicago Eight" defendants falsely accused of inciting a riot at the 1968 Democratic National Convention.

After the charges were announced, Davis went into hiding and traveled in secret from California to various cities around the US until arriving in New York City, where she was apprehended. FBI director J. Edgar Hoover had listed Angela Davis on the FBI's most wanted list and issued posters with the disclaimer that the former teacher should be considered "possibly armed and dangerous." After the arrest President

Ricard Nixon congratulated Hoover and the FBI for the “capture of the dangerous terrorist.”

Davis was held in jail for two years before finally standing trial. The prosecution was unable to provide any concrete evidence connecting her to Jackson’s desperate attack. Jonathan Jackson had been acting as her bodyguard during this period. Davis would be found not guilty on all of the charges against her.

75 years ago: Norwegian fascist President Vidkun Quisling sentenced to death

On October 12, 1945, the Supreme Court of Norway upheld a death sentence imposed on Vidkun Quisling, the Norwegian front-man for the Nazi occupiers, ending a months-long legal process over his collaboration with the Hitler regime, including in the genocide of European Jewry.

Quisling had a career in official politics that spanned some two decades. He had been defense minister in an Agrarian Party government from 1931 to 1933. In that position he had been involved in the illegalization of socialist and left-wing parties, before falling out with the government.

Quisling formed the Nasjonal Samling, which in the late 1930s, was increasingly open in its fascist orientation. While his party had a small membership and limited popularity, he developed ties with the Nazis and was granted an audience with Adolf Hitler in late 1939, where he pitched a plan for a fascist coup in the event of a German attack on Norway.

In April 1940, Germany launched a sweeping military invasion which rapidly overwhelmed the small Norwegian defense force. The Labor Party-led government had not sought to mobilize the military ahead of time, much less the working class. Its ministers fled the country. Quisling took advantage of the flight to proclaim himself prime minister.

Over the ensuing years his government, propped-up by the Germans, would institute brutal military rule. Quisling would collaborate in the genocide of the Jewish people, and rounded up political activists, including socialists, communists and trade unionists. His government repressed strikes and unsuccessfully sought to stamp out a resistance movement.

With Germany’s defeat to the Allied powers in May 1945, Quisling surrendered himself to the army for arrest. He was charged with numerous offenses, including conspiring with Hitler in the invasion and effective occupation of Norway, murder and embezzlement. Quisling would claim that his brutal rule and fascist collaboration had been an attempt to ensure the independence of Norway. He was sentenced to death and executed by firing squad on October 24, 1945. His name would become synonymous with traitor and collaborator.

100 years: One million British coal miners strike

On October 16, 1920, British coal miners struck over wage demands. Miners demonstrated in some mining districts and simply left the pits in other areas. The government had been stockpiling coal in anticipation of a strike, but most cities had supplies only to last one to three weeks.

The strike threatened to exacerbate an international crisis. Belgian coal miners had also threatened to strike, and the British government had prohibited export of coal, a particular blow to Italy, a coal-importing country, which was already experiencing a semi-insurrectionary movement of the working class.

The British prime minister, David Lloyd George, in a message to the nation, blamed the rank-and-file miners for refusing to negotiate with the government. He noted that many leaders of the Miners Federation had supported the government’s proposals but that rank-and-file miners had rejected them. “They are attempting now to gain their ends by force,” the prime minister said. Military leave was halted as the government prepared for a confrontation with the miners.

One leader of the Miners Federation complained to the press that many miners were young and not used to compromise. The press itself blamed “extremists” for motivating the strike and observed that meetings of transport workers had shown that they were eager “to join the belligerents.”

The strike was a part of the militant offensive of the British and world working class in the aftermath of the First World War, inspired by the seizure of power by the Russian working class under the leadership of the Bolsheviks in 1917. Thirty-five million workdays had been lost to strikes in 1919, and the British government had deployed tanks to Glasgow to suppress a general strike movement in Scotland. The ferment among the miners and the entire British working class continued, culminating in the general strike of 1926.



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