This week in history: May 17-23

16 May 2021

25 years ago: Strike wave in western Europe

On May 20-22, 1996, nearly two weeks of protest strikes against German Chancellor Helmut Kohl's plans for $32 billion in cuts in the welfare state culminated in three days of mass action.

Involving over 100,000 public sector workers in the OTV union and 60,000 members of IG Metall, the strikes hit postal services, refuse collection and public transport in many major cities—Cologne, Bonn, Berlin, Dusseldorf, Leverkusen, Bochum, Hanover, Leipzig, Weimar, Magdeburg and others. Hospital workers cut back services in Thuringia and Saxony. In Brandenburg, traffic on rivers and canals was disrupted by striking lock operators.

The OTV union rejected a government offer of a 1 percent wage increase, demanding more, as well as guarantees that the budget cuts would not eliminate jobs. The Kohl government responded to the strikes with threats and further attacks. On May 28, the German Employers Association vetoed a minimum wage agreement negotiated the previous month in the construction industry.

This action was part of a broader movement of strike actions across Europe in the aftermath of the French general strike the previous fall. The European ruling class relied heavily on the trade unions to suppress workers' struggles and keep them within the narrowest channels.

In France, the public service trade union movement UNSA called a national demonstration in Paris on May 23, after conservative Prime Minister Alain Juppé said he wanted to shed "layers of fat" from the civil service in order to impose cuts of over $13 billion and 25,000 jobs. Protesters stopped trains to Brussels, Belgium, and London, while all services were halted in Toulouse. Thousands marched in Paris, while 3,000 demonstrated in Bordeaux and another 1,000 in Lyon.

In Norway, the country's two most important industries, oil and metal manufacturing, were hit by major strikes at the same time. In Britain, public service workers were on the brink of strike action in many areas, including Liverpool, Derbyshire and Essex.

Moves to eliminate 30,000 government jobs in Germany were matched by plans to destroy 25,000 jobs in France. Similar austerity measures were being imposed in Spain and Italy, as well as all the countries in the former Soviet bloc.

50 years ago: Signalmen's strike halts entire US rail network

On the morning of Monday May 17, 1971, railroad signal workers walked off the job and began a national strike that paralyzed virtually all railroads in the United States. The workers demanded a pay increase of $2.40 per hour over the next three years. The average signalman's wage at the time was around $3.78 per hour.

A worker interviewed in the *Bulletin* newspaper, a forerunner of the *World Socialist Web Site*, spoke out saying, "The cost of living has skyrocketed but signalmen's pay hasn't. In order to pay your bills, you have to have another job besides this one, and we get no sick pay."

While officially only the signalmen were on strike, virtually all other railway workers supported the strike and refused to cross picket lines, stopping nearly all railway activity.

The workers, organized in the Brotherhood of Railway Signalmen, had been in contract negotiations since 1969. The railroad companies, enjoying the support of the federal government, continually refused to meet any of the workers' demands and aimed to use the Railway Labor Act to force workers back on the job without an agreement.

The previous December, railway workers began a strike action after it finally became possible under the onerous legal framework. Congress immediately called an emergency session and passed new legislation ordering the rail workers back on the job.

Since then, many of the railroad worker unions had already accepted the terms set by federal mediators for a wage increase of 42 cents per hour spread over the next three and a half years. However, the Signalmen, often considered the most skilled and critical of railway workers, did not accept the mediated terms ,which would have placed them at the bottom of the pay scale compared to the other sections of workers.

Assured that Nixon and the Democratic-controlled Congress were in their corner, the railroad owners maintained their refusal to meet the workers' demands, even after the Signalmen's Union lowered the wage demand to an increase of just $1.99 per hour. After the strike continued through Tuesday the government intervened to again pass strikebreaking legislation.

A bill similar to the legislation from December was passed

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and signed by Nixon by the early morning of Wednesday, May 19, 1971. The law gave signalmen a 13.5 percent "interim" raise and ordered them back on the job, banning any strike action until October. The president of the Brotherhood of Railroad Signalmen, C.J. Chamberlain, fully accepted the strikebreaking action and ordered all workers to end their pickets saying, "we will abide by the law."

75 years ago: British Labour government nationalizes the coal industry

On May 20, 1946, the British House of Commons passed the Coal Industry Nationalisation Act, placing the key mining sector under state ownership. The bill would be passed by the House of Lords and given Royal Assent on July 12, becoming law.

The legislation was among the first of a series of nationalizations carried out by the Labour government of Prime Minister Clement Attlee at the conclusion of World War II. The bill was drafted in December 1945, barely six months after the conclusion of the conflict in Europe. It followed a government declaration in August 1945 calling for "an extension of public ownership that our industries and services shall make their maximum contribution to the national well-being."

After the coal act was passed, a series of other bills were advanced by the Labour government along similar lines. Among those that placed key sectors of the economy under state control were the Electricity Act 1947, the Transport Act 1947, the Gas Act 1948, and the Iron and Steel Act 1949.

While it was opposed by sections of the Tory Party, the Coal Act provided compensation to the mining barons, in the form of stock issued by a Coal Board. This ensured their continuing influence within the sector, and was directed against any conception that the nationalizations were aimed at placing the industry under the control of the mining workers, a powerful and militant section of the working class.

The Labour government had been swept to power in a general election of July 1945. While Prime Minister Winston Churchill had primarily run on his war record, Attlee had promised various social reforms, including several nationalizations and the establishment of a publicly-funded health care system. Labour secured 393 parliamentary seats, an increase of 239 seats, while the Tories were reduced to 197 seats, down 189.

The result reflected a growing political radicalization of the working class throughout Europe after the defeat of fascism, and a determination to prevent a return to the poverty-level conditions of the 1930s. The nationalizations were aimed at placating this emerging movement, but did not in any way constitute the establishment of socialism in Britain. On the contrary, they received the support of powerful sections of the ruling class, and also served to revive critical sections of national industry, under the direction of the capitalist state.

100 years ago: Mingo County, West Virginia under martial law

On May 20,1921, West Virginia Governor Ephraim Morgan issued a proclamation that put Mingo County, on the southwest border of the state with Kentucky, under martial law to suppress insurgent coal miners.

The governor's proclamation noted, "Large bodies of armed men have assembled in the mountains of Mingo County." According to the *New York Times*, the proclamation forbade the "carrying or keeping of arms, ammunition and explosives" except by the authorities, and banned public gatherings. Publication of material critical of the federal and state government was made an offense. State police armed and deputized vigilantes to carry out this order.

Coal miners had been battling coal company hired thugs and the state police all along the Tug River Valley bordering Kentucky. Since May 12 ,when state police and mine company thugs shot up a tent colony of striking miners, some areas had been under continuous fire. In a letter to President Harding, a leading coal operator noted that on May 17 that striking miners had erected "barricades and breastworks" along the mountain ridges.

May 19, 1921 marked the first anniversary of the bloody Battle of Matewan, in which hired agents from the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency had fired on armed miners after Matewan Police Chief Sid Hatfield attempted to arrest the detectives for evicting mining families from company housing. The battle at the train station resulted in 10 fatalities, including the mayor, two miners and seven Baldwin-Felts thugs. Hatfield and 16 other men, mostly miners, were subsequently acquitted of murder charges by a Mingo County jury. Hatfield was assassinated by Baldwin-Felts men before another hearing on August 1, 1921.

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