

This week in history: June 21-27

20 June 2021

25 years ago: Union, company, ANC gang up against South African miners

During the last week of June 1996, the Anglo American Platinum Corporation began firing miners at Rustenburg, the world's largest platinum mine. It dismissed 21,000 workers in the first round of firings, and the last 7,000 were sacked the following week by July 4.

The National Union of Mineworkers, South Africa's leading black trade union, opposed the strike and threw its support behind the company's mass firings.

The miners had defied the company's back-to-work ultimatum after the company won a court order, which found the strike illegal and demanded them back on the job. The workers demanded that management repay them money which had been taken out of their paychecks for income tax, unemployment insurance and death benefits.

The miners union joined management in condemning the wildcat strike. NUM General Secretary Kgalema Motlanthe said that the strike was led by non-unionized miners. "They are a self-elected group and are severely intimidating our members who wish to return to work," he charged.

A spokesman for the strikers denounced the union's role. "We are members of NUM, but this union is wasting our time because they aren't solving our problems. We want to deal with our problems ourselves now," said Lbios Modikwe, member of a workers strike committee.

The ruling African National Congress intervened in an unsuccessful attempt to force the workers to end their walkout. Both the government and the union saw the strike as a serious challenge to the imposition of new labor legislation designed to ensure close collaboration in strike suppression.

50 years ago: 17 miners killed in California tunnel explosion

On June 24, 1971, a massive methane explosion inside an unfinished water tunnel in Sylmar, California, north of Los Angeles, killed 17 mineworkers. The explosion was the worst tunnel disaster in California history.

The Sylmar tunnel was being built as part of the California State Water Project, a massive civil engineering project that brings fresh water from Northern California to the heavily populated but water-scarce cities in Southern California.

The explosion was attributed to a buildup of methane gas that had opened into the tunnel area following the February 2, 1971, earthquake in the nearby San Fernando Valley that killed 64 people. But responsibility for the deaths of 17 miners in the water tunnel rested with the negligence of the company contracted to build it: the Lockheed Shipbuilding & Construction Co., a subsidiary of the massive defense contractor, Lockheed Aircraft.

In a clear warning sign that the tunnel was unsafe, two days before the deadly blast a smaller methane explosion had gone off, causing minor injuries to four workers. Concerned that the tunnel remained unsafe, firefighters instructed company supervisors to make continuous tests for methane and to provide workers with better breathing equipment.

These warnings were not heeded. One of the injured workers was even sent back into the mine and then was killed in the second explosion. Later, court testimony revealed that the company took several readings showing unsafe gas levels but ordered workers to stay on the job, even after some workers made safety complaints.

In interviews for the *Los Angeles Times* shortly after the disaster, workers who were outside the mine recounted being off their feet by the shock wave, which was followed by intense heat and smoke pouring out of the tunnel. Workers hearing cries for help attempted to run into the tunnel but were quickly overcome by massive amounts of smoke. Workers were able to save one man, Ralph Brissette.

In a 2019 interview Brissette told local news, "Right before it blew, it seemed as though it was like all the air became dead—and then it blew." The dead were co-workers and friends. "I would hunt with them, fish with them, drink with them, partied with them," Brissette said. "I have some kind of, I guess you would call it a survivor's guilt. ... I'm constantly asking myself; you know ... about my survival."

After a 54-week trial, the longest municipal court trial in US history, Lockheed Shipbuilding & Construction Co. was found guilty of gross negligence and violations of state safety laws. The company was fined \$106,250 by the court and paid out \$9.3 million in later civil suits to miners and their families. No company or state individuals were ever held responsible for the workers' deaths.

75 years ago: Mississippi Democratic senator calls for violence against black voters

On June 22, 1946, Theodore G. Bilbo, senator from the state of

Mississippi, publicly called on his supporters to use violence against black voters to ensure his renomination in the Democratic Party primary. Speaking on radio, Bilbo made an appeal for every “red-blooded Anglo-Saxon man in Mississippi to resort to any means to keep hundreds of Negroes from the polls in the July 2 primary. ... And if you don’t know what that means, you are just not up on your persuasive measures.”

Bilbo initiated the campaign after the Supreme Court ruled in 1944 in *Smith v. Allwright* that the all-white primary system conducted by the Democratic Party in neighboring Texas was unconstitutional. For decades prior to this, the Democratic Party in the South had defied court rulings upholding black voting rights, declaring that it had the right to hold “white primaries” because they were internal party elections, not ballots for public office.

Some contemporaries estimated that Bilbo’s racist campaign prevented half of African Americans, who intended to vote, from casting a ballot. He won the Democratic nomination with a bare 51 percent of the vote. As usual, the Republicans did not run a challenger against him in the general election later in the year, and he was elected unopposed.

Bilbo was a life-long racist demagogue and member of the Ku Klux Klan. During two stints as governor, in the 1920s and early 1930s, he defended lynching and was a determined defender of segregation. He was first elected to the US Senate in 1934. Amid the economic crisis of the Depression, he engaged in fascistic and anti-Semitic demagoguery directed against “international bankers” and communists, and campaigned against any moves towards civil rights for the black population in the South. At the same time, he supported Franklin Roosevelt’s “New Deal.”

His re-election to the Senate in 1946 provoked mass opposition from workers, students, young people and defenders of civil liberties. To head off this movement, liberal Democratic Senator Glen H. Taylor successfully requested that the Republican majority refuse to seat Bilbo, citing his racist speeches, incitement of violence and receipt of bribes.

Bilbo’s supporters among Senate Democrats filibustered and brought all Senate business to a halt, until, in view of his failing health, his seating was tabled while he unsuccessfully sought medical treatment for a terminal cancer.

100 years ago: Third Congress of the Communist International opens in Moscow

On June 22, 1921, the chairman of the Executive Committee of the Communist International, Grigori Zinoviev, opened the first session of the Third Congress of the Communist International in the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow by remembering the communists who had been killed or died in the last year and those who were imprisoned worldwide. Zinoviev made special note of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, murdered by the Social Democratic regime in Germany in 1919 and of John Reed, the American author of *Ten Days that Shook the World*, who had died in Moscow of typhus the previous autumn.

The Congress met at a decisive moment in the world political situation. The Soviet Republic had defeated the counterrevolutionary White armies in the preceding year but suffered from famine and shortage of everything, from fuel to living accommodations, and, as a consequence, the workers state faced peasant uprisings throughout the country. To address food shortages, the Russian Communist Party at its 10th Congress in March allowed the revival of some capitalist enterprise, in what was called the New Economic Policy.

The Congress, which lasted until July 12, dealt with numerous questions of the international workers movement. As the Congress met, a mass coal miners strike was ongoing in Britain, and France had issued war threats to Germany over the question of reparations for the First World War. The Congress debated the lessons of the semi-insurrection led by the German Communist Party that March. It rejected the opportunism of the Italian Socialist Party, represented at the Congress by Giacinto Serrati. And it made an overall assessment of the world economic situation and its impact on the working class. The high theoretical and political tone of the Congress was set by the speeches and many discussions with delegates by Lenin and Trotsky.

Trotsky summarized the experiences of the period since the war in his “Theses of the Third World Congress on the International Situation and the Tasks of the Comintern,” which was adopted unanimously by the Congress. He declared:

The revolution was and remains a struggle of living forces waged upon given historical foundations. The worldwide disruption of capitalist equilibrium by the war creates conditions favorable to the basic force of the revolution, which is the proletariat. All the efforts of the Communist International were and remain directed toward taking full advantage of this situation.



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