

This week in history: July 12-18

11 July 2021

25 years ago: Flight 800 crash kills all 230 passengers and crew

On July 17, 1996, Trans World Airlines Flight 800 exploded and crashed into the Atlantic Ocean off the coast of Long Island, killing all 230 passengers and crew on board. It was the third-deadliest airplane accident in the history of the United States.

The Boeing 747 had taken off from New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport and was scheduled to fly to Rome via Paris. The crash claimed victims mostly from the United States, as well as France, the Ivory Coast, Germany, Israel, Italy, Norway, Spain, Sweden and Portugal.

A four-year investigation was conducted by the National Transportation Safety Board, alongside a criminal investigation by the New York Police Department Joint Terrorism Task Force and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The latter was closed after 16 months and found no evidence of criminal activity.

The explosion was initially treated as a possible terrorist attack. Investigative officials conducted interviews with hundreds of witnesses to the crash, many of whom reported similar sightings of flashes of light and flaming streaks before the explosion. This had at first led to suggestions that the plane had been struck by a missile. The theory was soon dismissed from the criminal investigation as further evidence emerged.

The NTSB concluded in August 2000 that the real cause of the explosion was probably due to fuel vapors which caught on fire in the center fuel tank, triggered by a short circuit in the electrical wiring. Two years after the crash, the US Federal Aviation Administration grounded 179 Boeing 737s as a result of wear in electrical wiring leading to their fuel tanks.

The crash was ultimately the product of the US policy of deregulation, adopted two decades before the 1996 crash. It freed airlines of most government controls and left enforcement of safety to the voluntary efforts of the airline corporations. Although the NTSB had frequently recommended improvements in aircraft design and maintenance procedures as a result of its work, many of the proposals were blocked by the FAA under pressure of the airlines and Boeing, the main US aircraft manufacturer.

50 years ago: Nixon signs Emergency Employment Act

On July 12, 1971, US President Richard Nixon signed the Emergency Employment Act of 1971. The act was the first piece of federal jobs legislation since the Works Project Administration

created by the Franklin Roosevelt administration in 1935 during the Great Depression.

The move to stabilize the economy came amid a major strike wave across several heavy industries including West Coast dock workers, copper and aluminum workers, and an upcoming strike by 350,000 steel workers whose contract was to expire at the end of July. In addition, rising inflation was sparking fears of an economic collapse and a long period of recession.

In a statement after signing the bill into law Nixon said, "America needs more jobs, and it needs them now. This Administration is working to meet this need. The Emergency Employment Act of 1971 will mean more than 150,000 additional new jobs for our unemployed and our underemployed."

The act was given a life of two years and could be called into effect when the national unemployment reaches 4.5 percent or higher for more than three months. Individual cities could also gain access to funds if they reach a point of 6 percent unemployment or higher.

Nixon asked Congress to provide an initial \$1 billion to fund the immediate creation of federal jobs. Most of the jobs created by the act were various public services including environment conservation, health, education and transportation. A significant portion of the bill would also provide "crime prevention" funds to police departments and prisons.

Nixon stressed that the jobs created by the program would be temporary and intended to be only "transitional" until more jobs by private owners became available: "It will not be a dead-end entrapment in permanent public subsidy." Nixon said, "Local programs will be designed with a view toward career advancement and toward developing new non-subsidized careers for the worker."

The move was an attempt to stave off a looming economic disaster caused in large part by the massive costs of the Vietnam war and the economic growth of Germany and Japan. In 1971 the rate of inflation had grown to 5.84 percent while wages remained stagnant. Unemployment had risen to over 6 percent for the first time since 1960.

The Act, while providing some funds for jobs programs, did little to change the course of widespread unemployment and rising prices. Faced with major strikes nationwide and the danger of a total economic collapse, Nixon began planning more drastic measures. The most impactful of these would be the "Nixon Shock" of August 1971 when Nixon would end the Bretton Woods system of international financial exchange and dollar-to-gold convertibility.

75 years ago: 100,000 workers protest cost of living increases in Detroit

On July 16, 1946, an estimated 100,000 workers, many of them from the auto industry, gathered in downtown Detroit's Cadillac Square to register their opposition to ongoing cost of living increases. The protest, involving more than six percent of the city's total population, was the largest in Detroit to that point in history.

The protest was part of a nationwide series of demonstrations called by the United Auto Workers (UAW) union. Thousands of workers attended protests in Chicago, New York and other major centers. The Socialist Workers Party (SWP), then the Trotskyist organization in the US, published a report in the *Militant* describing the Detroit protest as "unique in that every section of labor was represented."

Defying threats of retaliation from the auto bosses, workers began to leave their plants before shifts. They included 30,000 Chrysler workers and some 9,000 from Briggs, a large auto supplier. Police sought to disrupt the mobilization by barricading parts of the way to Cadillac Square, preventing thousands from getting there.

The *Militant* reported that most of the union officials who spoke called for consumer boycotts, "however, the workers who have very little to spend outside of bare necessities greeted these remarks with scant enthusiasm." Proposals for specific actions, targeting the meat producers and landlords, received greater support.

The *Militant* stated that while most of the union contingents were organized under slogans such as "We are not buying till prices stop flying," the SWP raised political demands, including: "For a Labor Party now!" "For automatic wage increases to meet price increases!" "For a United National Labor Conference to fight the anti-labor drive!"

The protest took part amid an upsurge of the American and international working class. Up to 25 percent of unionized workers in the US were involved in strike action during 1946. Throughout World War II, the unions had enforced an effective wage freeze and a ban on strikes. At the conclusion of the conflict, the disparity between wages and living costs continued to grow, as the major corporations sought to slash labor expenses while hiking prices.

The union leaders, supporters of capitalism and the Democratic Party, tried to keep major strikes by auto workers, rail employees and other sections of the working class separate from one another, and promoted feckless appeals to government and the bosses, along with consumer boycotts. All of this was aimed at preventing the development of a unified movement of the entire working class directed against the profit system.

100 years ago: Sacco and Vanzetti convicted of murder

On July 14, 1921, a jury in Bridgewater, Massachusetts

convicted Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti of first-degree murder. The two Italian immigrant workers had been accused of murdering a paymaster and a guard in a robbery at the Slater & Morrill Shoe Company in South Braintree, Massachusetts on April 15, 1920.

The trial, which began on May 30, was a travesty. The defense accused the presiding magistrate, Judge Webster Thayer, of irregular methods in selecting the jury. Most witnesses to the crime were unable to identify Sacco and Vanzetti as the killers.

One witness who did identify the workers as the culprits denied that in previous testimony she had said she would be unable to identify the suspects, although the testimony is a matter of record. Another, who testified that Sacco was the "dead image" of the driver of the getaway car, admitted in cross-examination that he had told the police that he had not witnessed the robbery.

An expert for the prosecution testified that the shells found at the scene and in the bodies of the deceased "were consistent" with being fired from Sacco's pistol. On cross examination, the defense alleged that the phrase was used to lead the jury to believe that bullets were fired from Sacco's pistol, though the prosecution did not make that claim. An expert for the defense told the court that the bullets did not come from Sacco's gun.

The trial was a political frame-up. It occurred in the aftermath of a September 16, 1920, bombing on Wall Street which killed 30 people and injured 200 and was widely attributed to anarchists. The previous period had seen a major offensive by the international working class, including in the United States, when coal miners and steelworkers conducted mass strikes and coal miners in West Virginia fought a virtual civil war against the coal operators and the state.

Most significantly, the trial of Sacco and Vanzetti occurred at the height of the Red Scare in the aftermath of the 1917 Russian Revolution. Communists, socialists and anarchists were rounded up in the infamous Palmer Raids of 1919-20, and hundreds of immigrant workers were deported.

The conviction, and execution in 1927, of Sacco and Vanzetti was one of the defining episodes of the 1920s. Perhaps the most important feature of the conviction was the mass opposition it sparked around the world by workers. Mass demonstrations in defense of the two workers were held numerous times, including in the United States.



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