

This week in history: August 2-8

1 August 2021

25 years ago: Nation-wide general strike in Argentina

On August 8, 1996, over a million workers took part in a nation-wide strike in Argentina to protest the austerity policies of the government of President Carlos Menem. The factory belt around Buenos Aires was virtually paralyzed by the strike, which shut down public transportation and reduced hospitals to emergency care. Outlying industrial cities like Córdoba were also affected.

The strike was called by the Peronist CGT confederation, which politically supported Menem, and by the smaller MTA confederation, after the government announced it was scrapping family allowances and ending tax exemption of the meal allowances for low-paid workers, which formed a significant portion of family income.

Menem dismissed Economy Minister Domingo Cavallo in advance of the general strike, but appointed an equally hard-line figure, Central Bank governor Roque Fernández, to replace him. The government banned demonstrations during the strike and mobilized police in Buenos Aires to attack protesters seeking to set up soup kitchens to feed the strikers. Police waded into crowds with truncheons and opened up with water cannon. Among the victims were representatives of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, the human rights group set up to expose the crimes of Argentina's military during the 1976-83 dictatorship.

Four days after the strike, Menem presented a further austerity plan, calling for sharp increases in the cost of fuel and sales tax increases for public transport, medicine and many services, as well as an increase in the retirement age for women from 60 to 65. Meanwhile Fernández, while demanding that retired workers subsist on \$140 a month, declared that he personally needed \$15,000 a month to live on, up \$5,000 from the monthly living expenses reported by Cavallo.

Later the same month, the CGT announced that it would call for a 36-hour general strike in September, following a meeting to define "the future battle route and new route" of the union movement. A Gallup Argentina poll showed Menem's economic policy at a 21 percent approval rate, with 71 percent saying that they disapproved of Menem's performance in office. A further 80 percent said that the Menem administration would not resolve the issues within the presidency which brought workers out on strike.

50 years ago: Industrial Relations Act becomes law in UK

On August 5, 1971, the Industrial Relations Act formally became law in the United Kingdom after it had been approved by the Tory government and given royal assent. The Act was a massive attack on workers' rights to strike and organize themselves independently of the trade union bureaucracies represented in the Trades Union Congress (TUC).

The law established a National Industrial Relations Court somewhat similar to the National Labor Relations Board in the United States. The Court was given immense powers to determine the legality of strike action and to enforce so-called cooling-off periods when striking workers were ordered back on the job under threat of arrest.

Virtually all labor organizations or strikes outside the tight control of the TUC were banned. Only under specific conditions could the official trade unions call strikes. The Industrial Relations Act saw to it that "no-strike" clauses would be implemented into workers' contracts, essentially making all wildcat strikes illegal.

When the bill was initially proposed in early 1970 and began making its way through parliament, the leadership of the TUC did little to oppose it and made efforts to sabotage the "Kill the Bill" protests that had been organized among the rank-and-file workers who massively opposed the legislation. As late as March 1971, even after strikes opposing the law and involving millions of workers paralyzed British industry, the TUC refused to make it official policy that member unions refuse to cooperate with the law.

Instead, the TUC hoped to isolate struggles opposing the Act when they broke out and left the issue to the individual unions to decide how to navigate the situation. It was not until September, after the bill became law and member unions had already begun registering with the Court, that the TUC issued a formal statement instructing them not to register.

Despite the conciliatory attitude of the conservative TUC leaders, workers recognized the anti-democratic nature of the bill. In the course of the next three years workers who organized wildcat strikes were targeted by the state for arrest. In these years workers throughout the UK, in particular miners and dock workers, responded to the threats and intimidation with mass strike action.

The law would eventually be repealed in 1974 when Edward

Heath's Tory government was voted out of power. However, the Trade Union and Labour Relations Act of 1974, passed by Harold Wilson's Labour government, kept the bulk of the anti-worker legislation in place.

75 years ago: Crisis in Turkish Strait as tensions between the US and Soviet Union deepen

This week in August 1946, tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union in the emerging Cold War threatened to boil over amid a clash over access to and control over the Turkish Straits. Composed of the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus, the straits were critical to the Soviet regime, being the only naval means of accessing the Mediterranean and the oceans from its Black Sea ports.

On August 7, Soviet officials dispatched a diplomatic note to Turkish authorities, accusing them of having violated the Montreux Convention. Signed in 1936, it gave countries bordering the Black Sea exclusive rights to travel through the straits and established Turkish responsibility for maintaining the arrangement.

The Turkish government had already violated the agreement in the course of World War II. Through most of the conflict, it maintained a nominal neutrality, and allowed vessels of the German and Italian fascist powers to traverse the straits.

Long a point of contention with the Soviet bureaucracy, the issue reemerged at the end of the war. In April 1946, an American battleship, the USS Missouri, traveled into the straits on the pretext of returning the ashes of a deceased Turkish ambassador. As tensions between the Soviet and US governments intensified, Moscow issued its August note, demanding an international conference to establish a new treaty governing the straits.

This was accompanied by an increase in the Soviet naval presence in the straits and the dispatch of greater numbers of Soviet troops to the Balkans. The US would respond by warning of Soviet designs to take control over Turkey and dispatching its own naval vessels to the region. While this prompted a Soviet backdown, the tensions would persist.

During the course of the Second World War, the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union had signed a series of agreements with the imperialist powers, including Britain and the US. These provided for the establishment of a Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, in tacit exchange for the Stalinist suppression of revolutionary upheavals of the working class throughout Europe and internationally. In 1946, tensions increasingly emerged, as American imperialism sought to establish its global hegemony.

100 years ago: Fascists and Socialist Party declare truce in Italy

On August 3, 1921, Benito Mussolini's fascists, the social-democratic Socialist Party and the General Confederation of Labor, the main Italian trade union body, signed an agreement that attempted to call a halt to violence between Fascists and left-wingers. The fascists, who now numbered over 100,000 members, had engaged in a wave of political provocations, attacks and assassinations.

Particularly active in the countryside, the fascists attacked socialist elected officials, as well as cooperatives of small farmers and suppressed strikes, gaining the support of large landowners. Rank-and-file socialists and Communists fought back. In the first four months of 1921 there had been, by one count, 207 political assassinations, most of them of socialists. Ten socialists were killed on the day of the elections in May.

The fascist offensive had begun as a reaction to the mass occupation of factories by the working class during 1920, under the leadership of factory committees. The mass workers' movement was disarmed when the trade unions and the Socialist Party negotiated a return of factories to the owners.

The prime minister, Giovanni Giolitti, head of the Liberal Union, had tolerated the fascist attacks on workers and, in the elections of May 1921, included the Fascists in his electoral coalition. On July 22, an uncharacteristic attack of police on 500 fascist *squadristi* (armed gang members) near Genoa, which resulted in the death of 18 fascists, sparked a wave of fascist reprisals throughout Italy. Sensing that civil war was imminent, Mussolini sought to tamp down the violence by his followers. The leadership of the Socialist Party also sought peace.

The local fascist leaders rejected the pact, and on August 18, Mussolini even resigned from the fascist national executive commission, although his resignation was rejected. By November Mussolini had denounced the agreement when the National Fascist Party was founded as "a revolutionary militia placed at the service of the nation." Fascist violence against workers' and farmers' organizations continued to mount until Mussolini seized political power in the infamous March on Rome of 1922.



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