

This week in history: August 30-September 5

29 August 2021

25 years ago: Zimbabwe strikers defy mass firings by Mugabe

On September 4, 1996, more than 100,000 public service workers in Zimbabwe returned to work after successfully defying the threat of mass firings by President Robert Mugabe. The strike ended after a lengthy cabinet meeting voted to rescind the threat to fire 7,000 strikers and agreed that all those who participated in the walkout would be reinstated.

It was the second time in as many weeks that the Mugabe government was forced to back down. Initially the regime fired all those who had left their jobs and arrested two union leaders, John Makoni and Charles Chiviru, who were only released on the condition that they not contact any union members. They were arrested for inciting an illegal strike among public sector employees.

Florence Chitauo, the manpower and social welfare minister, refused to talk with striking workers until they returned to work. The strikers, however, demanded an agreement before returning to work that their raise would meet the cost of inflation.

Officials insisted that there would be no change in the offer of a 9 percent raise, presented to unions in July. But as the strike continued into its third week and won widespread support, the government offered an additional 20 percent raise and rescinded the firings for all but 7,000 workers.

The strike first began on August 20, after members of the Public Service Association rejected the initial government offer. The average civil servant made less than \$100 a month at the time, and the real value of even that salary had been largely eroded by inflation, running at 22 percent annually. Joining the walkout were doctors and other health care workers, fire fighters, tax collectors and other clerical workers.

Mugabe outraged strikers by declaring he was unaware of any discontent among civil service workers and by taking a well-publicized honeymoon—following a lavish wedding celebration on which he reportedly spent \$650,000 of taxpayer money—in the midst of the confrontation. The 72-year-old president-for-life had accumulated enormous wealth during his 16 years of rule.

The strike was the biggest social crisis in Zimbabwe since Mugabe took power in 1980, displacing the white-rule Rhodesian regime in a deal brokered by the British government

to maintain capitalist domination of the resource-rich country.

50 years ago: Egypt, Syria and Libya vote on Arab Federation

On September 1, 1971, a referendum was held in Egypt, Syria and Libya on whether the nations should form a Federation of Arab Republics. The proposal won by huge margins, with 96 percent of Syrians, 98 percent of Libyans and 99 percent of Egyptians voting yes.

The conception of uniting the Arab peoples of North Africa and the Middle East and thereby overcoming the arbitrary boundaries imposed by the imperialist powers first arose along with other anti-colonial demands in the early 20th century. The region's anti-imperialist politics gravitated toward socialism, which gained enormous appeal among the Arab masses after the Russian Revolution of 1917. Mass communist parties developed in Egypt, Iraq and Syria, as well as in neighboring Farsi-speaking Iran, and every significant nationalist tendency was compelled to put the word "socialist" in its party name.

Fearing the implications of the unification of the Middle East and North Africa, the old imperialist powers colluded with Washington and the various nationalist tendencies to create and entrench the nation-state framework after World War II. Nationalists such as Nasser in Egypt and the Baathists of Iraq and Syria were not socialists, and could never overcome the interests of the bourgeois interests they represented in order to unify their respective countries. As for the Stalinist parties, they concerned themselves with strengthening the various states' ties to the Soviet Union. This entailed subordinating every initiative of the working classes behind the Nasserites and Baathists and other allegedly "progressive" wings of the various national capitalist classes.

The Federation of Arab Republics (FAR) was even more of a fraud than its short-live predecessor, the United Arab Republic of Egypt and Syria, which had collapsed ignominiously after less than three years of "unity" in 1961. The FAR did nothing to achieve unification. It was meant as a sop to the working masses of the Arab countries, who still overwhelmingly favored unity, as the "yes" votes made clear. One actual aim of the Federation was the closer collaboration of their military forces,

as set out in its charter, in order to put down “disorders or revolts” in any of the member countries. The very same week that the vote for the federation was held, Sadat used the Egyptian military to crush a strike at a key steel mill in Helwan.

By 1973, the FAR existed in name only, after it became clear that Sadat was moving Egypt into a tacit alliance with American imperialism and its Israeli satellite. By 1977, the FAR was disbanded entirely.

75 years ago: Truman signs off on US program to employ former Nazi scientists

On September 3, 1946, US President Harry Truman gave official assent to Operation Paperclip, a secret US military intelligence program to recruit German scientists, including former Nazis, to bolster America’s war production efforts in the context of the accelerating arms race with the Soviet Union.

Truman’s open endorsement of the program, which had been under way from the concluding stages of World War II in early 1945, allowed for its expansion. He gave permission for the recruitment effort to be extended to 1,000 German nationals under “temporary, limited military custody,” i.e., those who were being detained by the Allied powers in prisoner of war camps over suspected involvement with the Nazi government.

Immediately after the defeat of Hitler’s regime in May 1945, the US and Soviet militaries began competing with one another to gain control of German military technologies and personnel. The US Army gained control of components for the V-2, a liquid-propellant rocket engine developed by the Nazis and able to carry a 1,000-kilogram payload. In early 1946, Wernher von Braun, the leading figure in the development of Nazi rocket technology, and a number of his colleagues were brought to the US, where they were given immunity for past crimes and put to work on V-2 development beginning in September 1945.

In other projects, German synthetic fuel scientists were employed at a Fischer-Tropsch chemical plant in Louisiana, Missouri, while 86 aeronautical engineers were sent to Wright Field, Ohio, where the United States was working on aircraft and equipment from the Luftwaffe, the Nazi air force.

Georg Rickhey, an engineer, employed on the US V-2 program, was returned to Germany in 1947 to be among the defendants in trials over Nazi war crimes at the Dachau concentration camp but was acquitted for lack of evidence. None of the estimated 1,600 other scientists brought to the US under Operation Paperclip was ever charged for their involvement with the fascist regime and its crimes.

100 years ago: Coal miners confront company thugs and

state forces on Blair Mountain, West Virginia

On August 30, 1921, West Virginia Governor Ephraim Morgan activated the West Virginia National Guard to support an anti-union militia of coal company thugs and state police, organized by Logan County Sheriff Don Chafin, entrenched on Blair Mountain on the eastern border of Logan County, adjacent to Boone County.

On the same day President Warren Harding threatened to send in federal troops if miners did not disperse. His emissary, Brigadier General Harry Bandholtz, was sent to Charleston, the West Virginia capital, to prepare an intervention.

The state and coal company forces were in place to stop a mass march of armed coal miners on the move from unionized Boone County southward to non-union Logan and Mingo counties. The miners were well organized and were seeking to free imprisoned miners in Mingo County and to unionize the state’s southern Logan and Williamson coalfields. Many miners joined to seek retribution for the murder of Sid Hatfield by Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency gunmen on August 1 on the steps of the McDowell County courthouse. Hatfield was the pro-union police chief from Matewan in Mingo County who had fought Baldwin-Felts goons with miners in the Battle of Matewan in May 1920.

Union leaders had persuaded miners to disband at a mass meeting in Madison, the seat of Boone County. But rumors that Chafin had shot union sympathizers in the town of Sharples caused miners to resume their march. Miners commandeered trains for transportation.

The Battle of Blair Mountain had begun in earnest on August 29. Chafin’s men had dug trenches, were armed with machine guns from the Kentucky governor and financed by the Logan County Coal Operators Association. Over the next five days skirmishes took place between miners and the anti-union forces. At one point the miners nearly broke through to the town of Logan. Chafin hired private airplanes to bomb the miners with poison gas and explosives. About 30 of Chafin’s thugs were killed, and nearly 100 miners died with hundreds more wounded.

The uprising subsided after the arrival of federal troops on September 2. Many miners were veterans and did not want to fire on the troops. Miners in some cases hid their weapons and returned home and in other cases surrendered to federal troops. Over 985 were subsequently indicted on charges of murder, accessory to murder and conspiracy.



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