

# This week in history: September 20-26

19 September 2021

**25 years ago: PASOK wins Greek parliamentary elections**

On September 22, 1996, Prime Minister Costas Simitis and his nationalist Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) party won parliamentary elections in Greece. They easily defeated the conservative opposition party New Democracy and its leader, Miltiades Evert, although the party's majority declined slightly, from 170 out of 300 seats in parliament to 162, but the losses were to its left, as 10 seats were won by the newly formed Left and Progress Coalition, a precursor of SYRIZA.

The victory was the first for Simitis since he succeeded Andreas Papandreou as prime minister and then as PASOK party leader. Papandreou had resigned in January 1996 after a two-month hospitalization. The PASOK parliamentary delegation chose Simitis as the successor in a contest with Akis Tsohatzopoulos. Papandreou died in June 1996.

PASOK leaders emphasized that the party had scrapped the reformist and social democratic rhetoric espoused by Papandreou in the 1970s and 1980s in favor of right-wing austerity politics. "There is no question that European socialism has adopted market economics," National Economy Minister Yannis Papantoniou declared.

Simitis called the snap election to cement his position before the full impact of his policies was felt by the masses of Greek workers and peasants. Under terms dictated by the European Union and the International Monetary Fund, the government had to slash the budget deficit, sell off or close most state-run industries, and eliminate most legal restrictions on foreign and Greek-owned corporations.

Upon election, Simitis immediately began working to convince the United States and European Union that his government would usher in a new era of diplomatic relations. Less than a week after the election, Simitis made moves to reshuffle the cabinet, including in the defense and foreign ministries, in favor of personnel more palatable to the Western governments.

**50 years ago: Mass firings in teachers strike in San Francisco suburb**

The week of August 20, 1971, elementary school teachers in Daly City, California went on strike against the school district. The school district responded with every means at its disposal to break the strike, including the immediate firing of the teachers who had walked out.

The central demand of teachers was for an agreement guaranteeing classroom sizes and other working conditions. Teachers also demanded proper oversight of filed grievances, which had largely gone ignored. In line with other strikebreaking efforts, backed by the Nixon administration nationally, such as the railway strike and the ongoing longshoremen's strike, the Daly City school district refused to hear teachers' demands. When the strike began, the district immediately fired the 227 striking teachers and began advertising for replacements.

The school district took advantage of high unemployment among teachers to hire out-of-work educators, who were paid \$40 per day to keep classrooms open. District Superintendent Frank Greenwood said that firing the teachers had been a "bright spot" in the city's education crisis. He noted that there were over 5,000 unemployed teachers in the Bay Area and callously remarked that the mass firing of the Daly City teachers offered "a tremendous opportunity to handpick the kind of teachers we want."

The teachers' union, the California Teachers Association, set the rank-and-file teachers up for a defeat. A union official who spoke with *The Bulletin*, the Trotskyist newspaper in the United States and a precursor of the WSWWS, said that the union saw this as a battle to be settled by the court. The bureaucrat went as far to say the union had grounds to sue the city because they were paying scab teachers above the normal substitute rate and were thus in violation of Nixon's wage freeze.

The union worked to isolate the striking elementary school teachers by refusing to call out on strike every school in the district. While Daly City at the time was the heart of one of the strongest trade union areas in the country, the union made no effort to gain the support of other organized

workers.

*The Bulletin* wrote at the time, “The labor movement must be brought into this fight with all its strength. It is absolutely criminal that the teachers stand alone. ... The unions must mobilize mass pickets to shut these schools down completely to smash the scab movement. There must be preparation to back this struggle with whatever measures are necessary, including a general strike if the teachers’ demands are not won.”

### **75 years ago: Truman ousts Henry Wallace over Cold War differences**

On September 20, 1946, former Vice President Henry Wallace resigned as Secretary of Commerce after US President Harry Truman demanded his removal from the American government. The dispute hinged on a speech Wallace had delivered calling for peaceful coexistence with the Soviet Union, at the same time as the Truman administration was adopting an increasingly aggressive policy towards the USSR.

Eight days earlier, Wallace warned an audience in Madison Square Garden, “The tougher we get, the tougher the Russians will get.” Wallace stated that it was necessary to pursue a policy of “peace” and “collaboration.” This was only possible “if Russia understands that our primary objective is neither saving the British Empire nor purchasing oil in the Near East with the lives of American soldiers. ... On our part we should recognize that we have no more business in the political affairs of Eastern Europe than Russia has in the political affairs of Latin America, Western Europe and the United States.”

Wallace had been vice president in the Roosevelt administration during the US entry into World War II and its alignment with the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy against Nazi Germany. In the 1944 presidential election, Roosevelt chose Truman rather than Wallace to be his running mate, as a concession to the right wing of the Democratic Party. Wallace remained in the administration and played the role of providing a left-liberal political cover for its policies, which included substantial attacks on the working class and increasingly aggressive militarism.

His speech caused a crisis within the administration because it cut across the promotion of hysterical fear over the Soviet Union to justify its imperialist Cold War policies. This included provoking a conflict with the Soviet Union over control of the Turkish Straits in August and pushing for a rapid German reunification on US terms in September.

Wallace spoke for a layer of the ruling elite that was uneasy about the political consequences of confrontation with the Soviet Union, under conditions of mass opposition to war and a major strike movement of the American working class.

### **100 years ago: Industrial accident in Germany kills hundreds**

On September 21, 1921, storage containers of ammonium nitrate exploded at a BASF plant in Oppau, Germany, a dye works, killing 500-600 workers and injuring over 2,000. The *New York Times* reported, “There was not a door, or a window left intact for a radius of three miles.” Most of Oppau was destroyed, leaving over 6,500 people homeless. The explosion left a crater 90 meters x 125 meters (300 ft x 410 ft) wide and 19 m (62 ft) deep.

Two explosions about a second apart at 7:30 a.m. killed all of the workers at the plant, including those who were arriving by train for work. They were all hurled into the air by the blasts. The explosions’ pressure wave caused considerable damage across the Rhine in Mannheim, 7.5 km (4.5 miles) away, broke stained glass windows at the Worms Cathedral 15 km (9.3 miles) to the north and tore off roofs as far away as 25 km (15.5 miles).

A series of smaller explosions at the plant after the initial ones made immediate assistance impossible. The *New York Times* reported that dark green gas hung over the area and first responders had to wear gas masks. In a bitter irony, the plant had been one of the first to produce poison gas for use by the German military in World War I. Hospitals in the area were filled to capacity.

The accident was caused when small dynamite charges were set under a mixture of ammonium sulfate, also produced at the plant, and ammonium nitrate, to break it up so that it could be removed from a large silo by workers with pick axes.

Research in 1919 had shown that quantities of the highly combustible ammonium nitrate that were mixed with 50 percent ammonium sulfate were stable, and the plant had handled that combination of substances thousands of times. However, the research was apparently flawed and did not consider factors, such as particle size, density or humidity.



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