

# This week in history: November 22-28

21 November 2021

## 25 years ago: Establishment of European Monetary Union sparks protests

On November 22-23, 1996, workers throughout Europe protested and struck against austerity measures imposed to meet targets under the proposed European Monetary Union.

The most explosive conflict took place in France, where truck drivers marked the eighth day of their nation-wide strike by blockading English Channel ports and German border crossings. The strike was the most powerful since the general strike movement the previous November and December, which challenged the Alain Juppé government's plans to cut pensions and health benefits.

The strikers were seeking higher wages, shorter hours and retirement aged 55 instead of 60, demands which directly contradicted the policies of President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Juppé. Drivers set up nearly 150 blockades on the highway system.

In Germany, tens of thousands of bank workers took to the streets to protest cuts in sick benefits made by the government of Chancellor Helmut Kohl. The largest protest, in Frankfurt, Germany's financial center, came outside a meeting of European bankers at which Kohl reaffirmed his commitment to the EMU.

In Italy, more than 150,000 metal workers staged a one-day strike and thousands marched through Rome, condemning the refusal of industrialists to make a pay offer that kept pace with inflation.

In Spain, nearly 200,000 workers rallied in the center of Madrid to oppose a pay freeze for government workers imposed by the right-wing regime of Prime Minister Jose Aznar. The pay freeze was part of the same measures to bring Spain into line with EMU requirements for cutting the budget deficit. Coal miners struck in León and Asturias over cuts in government subsidies, another requirement of the EMU.

In Britain, the issue of EMU implementation began to split both the major capitalist parties. Up to 150 Conservative MPs threatened to break with Prime Minister John Major, while Labour Party leader Tony Blair was publicly criticized for his pro-EMU stance. Former deputy Labour leader Denis Healy said that there would be "rioting in the streets" if the austerity measures required for EMU membership were carried out.

The austerity measures imposed by Europe's ruling classes, and the spontaneous opposition from Europe's workers, posed the need to unify the working class in struggle across the continent. This unified struggle was bitterly opposed by the existing workers' organizations, all of which were committed to the nation-

state framework. With the trade unions and the social democratic and ex-Stalinist parties all collaborating with the EMU-inspired austerity policies, it was the extreme right-wing parties that stood to profit politically from the popular opposition.

## 50 years ago: Britain grants independence to apartheid Rhodesia

On November 23, 1971, British Foreign Minister Alec Douglas-Home concluded negotiations with the prime minister of Rhodesia's apartheid regime, Ian Smith, for the formal recognition of independence for the southern African country. The agreement was a major concession to the minority white population who remained in control of virtually all political power.

The independence agreement and new constitution granted an immensely unequal distribution of seats in the parliament, with 50 seats reserved for the 250,000 white Rhodesians while the majority black population of 5 million were given just 16 seats. Government resources for education, land development, and other social needs were to be divided in half and split between the white and black population, giving whites a greatly disproportionate share. All government administration and professional jobs were reserved only for whites.

In the 1960s, the previous British government of Harold Wilson had adopted a policy of "no independence before majority rule." The British Labour Party government was a fervent defender of British imperialism. It insisted that political rights must be granted to the majority population of the colonies before independence could be granted, in order to block revolutionary upheavals and preserve capitalism.

Both the white Rhodesians led by Smith and the British Conservatives opposed the majority rule policy. In 1965 Smith and other Rhodesian leaders signed a Unilateral Declaration of Independence stating their intent to gain independence while maintaining the apartheid system. The British responded by imposing some minor trade restrictions on Rhodesia. The largely cosmetic sanctions had no significant impact.

The November 23 agreement between Smith and Edward Heath's Conservative government essentially accepted all the terms of the Unilateral Declaration and abandoned the majority rule policy. As the news hit the London Stock Market share prices of tobacco and other goods imported from Rhodesia soared.

With the recognition of the independent apartheid Rhodesia, British capitalism was sanctioning the continued colonial

suppression and extreme exploitation of the black working class. “Imperialism is throwing all pretense of democracy to the winds in the face of the necessity of keeping down the working class of the colonial and advanced countries alike,” observed the *Bulletin*, the American Trotskyist newspaper.

### 75 years ago: French forces massacre Vietnamese

On November 23, 1946, French military vessels opened fire on the Vietnamese coastal city of Haiphong, in a brutal massacre that claimed at least 6,000 lives and as many as 20,000. The mass killing was part of a chain of events that led to the First Indochina War and to the southeast Asian nation fighting for independence against the imperialist powers for nearly 30 years.

The attack took place in the fluid situation that followed the end of World War II. During the conflict, Japan had taken control of Indochina from France, ending its longstanding colonial rule. With Tokyo’s defeat, France sought to regain its former possession. The Stalinist Communist Party of Vietnam and its leader Ho Chi Minh maneuvered among the imperialist powers and sought to reach an agreement with them.

In September 1945, Ho proclaimed an independent Democratic Republic of Vietnam, but over the following months, the French, in collaboration with the British, would secure control of much of Indochina, especially the south. Ho would make overtures to the US, and, in 1946, held a series of talks with the French, including in March, when he signed the Ho-Sainteny agreement, allowing for a continued French military presence in Indochina.

On November 20, 1946, with talks for the implementation of the deal postponed, a French patrol ship seized control of a Chinese junk attempting to bring so-called contraband from China into Haiphong. Vietnamese fighters responded angrily, opening fire.

The French seized on the incident as a pretext for launching a major assault. Jean Étienne Valluy, commander of French forces in Indochina, instructed his subordinates that “The moment has come to give a severe lesson to those who have treacherously attacked you. Use all the means at your disposal to make yourself complete master of Haiphong.” This was accompanied with a provocative ultimatum to the Vietnamese independence movement, demanding that it leave the French and Chinese quarters of the city.

On the morning of November 23, the ultimatum having been rejected, three French *avisos*, or dispatch boats, together with the *Suffren* cruiser, approached the port at Haiphong. They began bombarding the largely defenseless city. Thousands would die as a direct result of the shelling, and from stampedes the attack caused. Within a week, the French would take control of Haiphong.

### 100 years ago: Hirohito becomes regent in Japan

On November 25, 1921, the crown prince of Japan, Hirohito, a

major in the army and lieutenant commander in the navy, took over the state functions of his father, the Emperor Yoshihito. Yoshihito had performed no official role in the government since 1919 due to incapacitation from mental illness.

The maneuvering of Japanese imperialism in the years after World War I required a diplomatic face, and since March 1921, Hirohito had already made official visits to the United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, and the Vatican. In May, he had been feted in splendor all over England at the behest of the British monarchy. During the visit, the prince was quoted as saying, “The rise of Bolsheviks won’t happen if you live a simple life like Duke Athol,” one of his hosts.

Under his regency, Japan negotiated the Five-Power Naval Treaty with Italy, France, the United States and Britain for stability in the Pacific, and the withdrawal of troops from Soviet Siberia in 1922. Only a few days before his accession as regent, Japan had recognized Manchuria as a Chinese possession.

Hirohito became emperor in 1926 after his father’s death and ruled Japan during the brutal expansion of the Japanese Empire in 1931-1945. As head of state, he endorsed the invasion of Manchuria in 1931 and after the end of Japanese civilian control of the military in 1932, he authorized war crimes including the use of poison gas in Wuhan in 1938.

Hirohito consented to an alliance with Nazi Germany after the success of the Wehrmacht in Poland in 1939. Hirohito supported war preparations against American, British and French imperialism in 1941. Although there is little doubt that Hirohito was a war criminal, particularly because of his support for the aggressive war against China and the horrors of the Japanese occupation there, after the defeat of Japan in 1945, he was never tried. American imperialism instead chose to maintain him as a figurehead of bourgeois rule.



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