

This week in history: May 9–15

8 May 2022

25 years ago: Inequality sparks upheavals in Argentina

On May 15, 1997, a 24-hour general strike was declared in San Lorenzo, Argentina, to protest conditions in which 40 percent of the town's population were unemployed.

The strike was part of broader upheavals throughout the country to protest inequality. Workers occupied roads and clashed with riot police as protests against mass unemployment and increasing social inequality spread nationwide later in the month.

The protests expanded from Patagonia in the south to the impoverished northern provinces of Jujuy and Salta in a movement of poor and unemployed, which developed outside of the control of the Peronist labor bureaucracy of the General Confederation of Labor (CGT).

The Peronist government of President Carlos Menem responded with violent repression, in which at least one person was killed and hundreds of others were wounded.

The international financial institutions and foreign banks praised the Menem government for the same economic austerity policies which provoked the social unrest.

Since Menem came to power in 1989, official unemployment rose from 7 percent to 17.3 percent. In many areas of the country, however, factory shutdowns and the closing of industries producing for the national market pushed much larger numbers onto the unemployment lines. Meanwhile, a thin layer of the bourgeoisie and privileged upper-middle class enriched themselves through stock market speculation and deals with transnational corporations.

The occupation of roadways began in the southern province of Neuquen in March and April. Security forces there shot one young woman dead and wounded dozens of others. At least 35 percent of the workforce in the area was jobless following the closing of a YPF oil plant. Similar clashes took place in Tartagal, in the northern province of Salta, where the shutdown of another YPF facility left 65 percent of workers unemployed.

Minister of Defense Jorge Dominguez held a secret meeting with key military commanders on May 17 to draft plans and make logistical preparations for the possible imposition of a state of siege and martial law.

50 years ago: Assassination attempt leaves Democratic presidential candidate George Wallace paralyzed

On May 15, 1972, Alabama Governor George Wallace, a candidate for the presidential nomination of the Democratic Party, was shot five times in an assassination attempt after a campaign rally in Maryland. Wallace would survive the shooting but was left paralyzed from the waist down. The shooter, Arthur Bremer, was arrested immediately after he wounded Wallace and three others.

Wallace, a third-party candidate in 1968 on a segregationist platform, when he won five states, all in the Deep South, sought the Democratic nomination four years later, winning three state primaries in the South before he was shot, and later carrying Michigan and Maryland. In 1972 he no longer openly defended racial segregation, but opposed busing and other measures to promote integration, and focused more on a populist appeal over economic issues.

A vicious racist and anti-communist, Wallace had fought as governor against the desegregation of Alabama public schools, ordering state police to block black students from integrating. At one point Wallace physically stood in the doorway of a University of Alabama building to block black students from registering for classes. The struggle concluded with President John F. Kennedy ordering federal troops into Alabama to oversee desegregation.

Wallace's would-be assassin did not have any political motivations behind the shooting. During Bremer's trial the court psychiatrist stated that Bremer had "schizoid personality disorder with some paranoid and psychopathic features" but also declared that his mental condition did not prevent him from understanding the criminality of his actions.

Bremer had long planned a presidential assassination attempt in hopes of becoming historically famous. In a diary found after his arrest Bremer disclosed that he had initially hoped to kill President Nixon but settled on Wallace after he found it too difficult to carry out a presidential killing. In his diary Bremer even mentions that he did not have any particular political disagreements with Wallace but considered him a suitable enough figure to earn fame by killing him.

The Workers League, the American predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party (US), had campaigned hard against Wallace and fought for workers to take control of the unions

and build a labor party to defeat Wallace and the other capitalist politicians. After the assassination attempt the Workers League published a statement condemning the violent attack, writing “such actions only feed Wallaceism and give the capitalist class an excuse to institute further repression against the working class movement and the revolutionary party. We oppose such actions because only the independent political struggle of the working class can defeat Wallace and the two parties of big business.”

75 years ago: General strike, mass protests against food shortages in US-occupied Germany

On May 9, 1947, some 120,000 workers in Hamburg carried out a general strike and marched through the city center to protest food shortages imposed by US and British authorities in the German city. The mobilization was one of a series against starvation rations, in the first mass struggles in Germany since the defeat of the Nazis and the end of World War II in May 1945.

Following their victory in the conflict, the Allied powers had divided Germany into four occupation zones, managed separately by the US, Britain, France and the Soviet Union. As the US initiated the Cold War in 1947 and broke with its previous alignment with the Stalinist bureaucracy, the US and British zones were merged in January to create an entity known as Bizonia, which Hamburg was a part of. This was increasingly ranged against Eastern Germany, under the control of the Soviet Union.

The zones were ruled with an iron fist by the allied militaries and a layer of German functionaries, including former Nazis, who collaborated with them. In April, the daily food ration for residents of Bizonia was cut from 1,500 calories to just 1,200. But workers claimed that in reality, they were frequently only receiving 800 calories, less than they required to live.

The Allied powers were preoccupied with gaining maximum resources and profits from their newly-acquired European possessions. Their aim was also to suppress the working class to prevent a revolutionary movement from emerging out of the horrors of war and the defeat of Nazism.

As the protests and strikes spread, the imperialist powers threatened repression. On May 16, Dr. James R. Newman, the US military governor of Hesse, declared on American radio that those organizing the protests against food shortages could face the death penalty. Martial law could be established, he stated, unless “attitudes improved” among German workers. At the same time, Newman stated “at the moment, and for some weeks to come, it will be impossible to supply sufficient food to meet the rationed allowance.”

Commenting on Newman’s statements, the *Militant*, then the

newspaper of the Trotskyist movement in the United States, declared: “Unconditional submission to orders! Death to all who disobey or try to protest! That was how Hitler ran Germany before and during the war. And that is how American occupation authorities want to run it now.” The *Militant* noted that the imperialist powers were continuing one of Hitler’s key policies, the deliberate lowering of workers’ living standards to intensify exploitation and capitalist profits.

100 years ago: League of Nations establishes protectorate in Albania

On May 14, 1922, the League of Nations agreed to establish a protectorate in the Principality of Albania at the request of the southeastern European nation. Representatives of Italian imperialism, which had considerable interests in Albania, objected to the plan but relented after the League’s governing council suggested that Italy would appoint some of the foreign economic and military specialists that the League would send to Albania.

Albania had been an independent state since it seceded from the Ottoman Empire during the First Balkan War in 1912. During the First World War, it had been occupied by Greek, Serbian, German, and Austro-Hungarian, Bulgarian, French and Italian troops. Incursions by Greek, Yugoslav and Italian forces continued after the war and the country was torn by communal differences between Muslims and Christians.

The League of Nations did not allow Albania to be represented at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 which created the new post-war imperialist order. The conference sought to divide Albania between Yugoslavia and Italy. American imperialism, however, intervened by March 1920 to block the plan, and to guarantee Albania representation in the League as an independent country. In December 1920, the Americans accepted an official representative of Albania in Washington D.C. Albanian forces expelled Italian and Yugoslav troops by 1921.

The imperialist powers, particularly the United States and Britain, saw the need for the protectorate because the Albanian ruling elite, divided between the pro-British People’s Party of Harvard-educated Bishop Fan Noli and the pro-Italian Progressive Party of Ahmet Zogu (later King Zog I), was on the verge of civil war that could have turned into a wider European conflagration.



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