

This week in history: August 1–7

31 July 2022

25 years ago: Nearly 200,000 Teamsters strike UPS

On August 4, 1997, 185,000 UPS employees, members of the Teamsters union, went on strike for two weeks. It was the largest strike in the US in 14 years. The tens of thousands of workers on the picket lines spoke for an entire generation which grew up without the opportunity for secure employment.

UPS was at the forefront of the drive of corporate America to boost profits by reducing workers to the status of industrial peons. The company based its growth on a vast expansion of part-time jobs at the expense of full-time employment. Paying its part-time workers less than half of full-timers, it became a model for all big business in the exploitation of cheap and “flexible” labor.

The strike ended 15 days after it began. In all fundamentals, the final agreement upheld the interests of the company. It maintained the two-tier wage structure and barely put a dent in the exploitation of part-time labor. In a concession crucial to the company’s plans, it gave UPS five years to revamp its operations before the next contract. The pay increase for full-time workers, an average of 3 percent a year, was below the national average for 1997 and resulted in a decline in real wages.

The real character of the agreement was revealed when thousands of UPS workers across the country were handed pink slips as they reported back to work. In addition to the layoffs, 45 to 50 workers were fired outright in reprisal for strike-related actions. The company was able to carry out this vindictive act of retaliation with impunity because it had the tacit sanction of the Teamsters President Ron Carey, whose election had been supported by the “reform” group Teamsters for a Democratic Union.

The union took no action whatsoever to force the rehiring of the victimized workers. In this way, the UPS settlement provided a shameful display of subservience to the bosses and a further debasement of an elementary principle of working class solidarity—the precept that workers who walk out together, go back together.

The union bureaucracy went along with these reprisals because it, no less than management, wanted to reassert the company’s authority and intimidate the rank-and-file. This was a prerequisite for carrying out the essential quid pro quo contained in the new contract: in return for continued UPS participation in the Teamsters’ pension funds and a token increase in full-time positions, the union would continue to collaborate in an intensified corporate drive to boost productivity and profits. The mass layoffs were the first step in the restructuring of operations to cut costs even more ruthlessly than in the past.

50 years ago: British government imposes state of emergency against dock strike

British Prime Minister Edward Heath declared a state of emergency on August 4, 1972, in an attempt to break a strike by 40,000 dock workers. The strike had frozen the British economy, which was heavily dependent on overseas trade. The emergency powers would allow the British government to deploy the military to break up worker’s picket lines and to use soldiers to scab on the dockers.

In the last week of July 1972, a series of wildcat strikes had broken out in the ports, as workers fought back against job cuts and layoffs. Only after the walkouts had already begun did the dockers union, the Transport and General Workers Union, call a national strike.

The emergency decree was Heath’s fourth since taking office in June 1970. All four had been called to break strikes, and it was the second time Heath used an emergency order against the dock workers. Heath and other Tory officials claimed that the emergency powers were necessary, as the dock strike was preventing food and other critical imports from being unloaded from ships. In reality, the Tories were both preparing for an all-out battle against workers, who had been militantly defying the anti-union National Industrial Relations Act (NIRA), and laying the groundwork for dictatorship in the United Kingdom.

At the end of July, the government arrested five striking workers for defying the NIRA. The arrests unleashed a wave of fury in the working class. Workers demanded a response from the Trade Union Congress (TUC). Under enormous pressure from rebellious rank-and-file workers, the TUC called a one-day general strike.

Workers internationally supported the UK dockers, with longshoremen in Holland, Belgium, France and Italy all refusing to handle any British cargo. The picket lines at the major British ports saw thousands of workers come out to support the strikers, who bravely stood their ground against police charges, beatings and arrests.

With workers holding their own against the police, the Heath government threatened to deploy troops in the same manner they were then being used against Catholics in Northern Ireland. Indeed, the day before the emergency declaration and just one week after British soldiers shot and killed two unarmed teenagers in Ulster, Heath told a group of graduating cadets that the Northern Ireland operations “provide the best illustration of the tasks of an Army officer.” Many press reports of police and military strikebreaking raids against dockers were described as “Ulster-like.”

The strike would continue for over three weeks, with workers eventually winning some job guarantees and the release of the five arrested workers. This limited success came only through a significant rebellion against the union leadership, which worked to block the development of a general strike movement against the Heath government.

75 years ago: Clashes between Britain and Zionists over control of Palestine

On August 5, 1947, 35 prominent Zionist leaders were rounded up by British troops in occupied Palestine. On the same day, three British policemen were killed when the Irgun, an extreme right-wing Zionist organization, bombed the Labor Department in Jerusalem.

The intensifying clashes were part of a protracted battle between the British colonialists and Zionist organizations over control of Palestine. Both sides were hostile to the majority native Arab population and determined to deprive it of any rights, including to an independent Palestinian nation-state.

Through most of World War II, most of the Zionist groups had allied with the British, reflecting their aspirations to strike a deal with the dominant imperialist powers. But in the concluding phases of the war, the Zionists began a guerrilla campaign aimed at pressuring Britain to agree to the establishment of a Jewish state.

Fighting, including Zionist terrorist attacks and harsh British reprisals, intensified in 1946 and continued into 1947. In March, the British imposed martial law in Palestine in response to a series of attacks. Over the following months, Zionist bombings and ambushes continued.

In early March, Irgun bombed the Goldsmith officer's club, a British Army officer's club in the fortified district of Jerusalem. Four soldiers and nine civilian employees were killed. Amid other attacks, Lehi, another Zionist armed group, bombed two of the key oil refineries in Palestine, with a significant impact on the profits extracted by British firms. Over the following months, the Zionist organizations bombed railroads, British government offices and oil pipelines, while killing a number of British police and soldiers. On July 11, Irgun kidnapped two British soldiers and used them as hostages to demand the release of three Irgun leaders who had been sentenced to death. When those executions were carried out in late July, Irgun responded with grisly killings of the two hostages.

In the first days of August, anti-British rioting was coordinated by the Zionist groups in Tel Aviv after a British raid had killed five Jewish activists. The British responded with the roundup of Zionist leaders. Those detained included the mayors of Tel Aviv, Netanya and Ramat Gan, all of whom were detained without trial. Several groups were banned, with their headquarters and alleged members' homes raided.

The British, however, were increasingly looking to extricate themselves from the conflict as part of a broader move towards

nominal "decolonization," which would keep imperialist dominance intact. In September, the British cabinet would decide to evacuate Palestine and in November, the newly-created United Nations would recommend the establishment of a Jewish state.

These developments also reflected the decline of the British Empire and the emerging global hegemony of American imperialism, which looked upon a Zionist state as a potential bulwark of its predatory operations throughout the region.

100 years ago: Typhoon in China kills over 60,000

On August 2, 1922, a typhoon landed on the coastal city of Shantou (also known as Swatow) in south China's Guangdong province, killing 5,000 people in the city (out of a population of 60,000) and tens of thousands more in the surrounding countryside. Some estimates of the death toll are as high as 100,000. The 1922 Swatow Typhoon remains one of the deadliest in history.

The typhoon had formed near the Caroline Islands in the west Pacific and gained strength as it passed over what was then a sparsely populated part of the Philippines and into the South China Sea. When it made landfall in China, its winds were estimated to be over 100 miles per hour (155 km/h). The harbor was destroyed, and ships were hurled as much as two miles (3.2 km) inland.

One American sea captain reported in a letter to the *American Monthly Weather Review*:

"A storm, accompanied by a tidal wave, passed over Swatow and neighborhood on the 2nd of August 1922, devastating a large part of the Han River delta and taking a heavy toll of life and property. Both foreign and native shipping suffered heavily. Houses that escaped being blown down were washed away by the waters which spread over the whole countryside, and the loss of life was enormous. Owing to the general inundation as well as to the extremely heavy rainfall which accompanied the storm, it was several days before the country became drained off, and meanwhile the tides appeared to lose their rise and fall, the surface current flowing to seaward nearly all the time, and the general level remaining above normal."

Guangdong was at the time ruled by the Chinese nationalist movement, the Kuomintang, and its leader Sun Yat-sen. The *New York Times* did not report on the disaster until August 18, when it reproduced a small item from the Associated Press that noted that the typhoon had destroyed over \$100,000 of Standard Oil Company property.



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