

# This week in history: August 29-September 4

28 August 2022

## 25 years ago: Death of Princess Diana

On August 31, 1997, Diana Spencer, princess of Wales, died in a car accident in Paris along with her companion Dodi Fayed and driver Henri Paul. The funeral, televised on September 6, had one of the United Kingdom's highest viewing numbers ever, at 32.1 million. The worldwide television audience was estimated at 1 billion. One million people turned out in London to watch the state funeral.

The fanfare over Diana's funeral brought to the surface the constitutional crisis that had been raging around the royal family for almost two decades. Far from being an irrelevant medieval relic, the monarchy served as one of the key bastions of class rule in Britain. The ruling class had relied on the House of Windsor for two essential functions: ideologically, as a symbol of national unity and focus of patriotism; politically, as the last line of defense and font of authority for the capitalist state itself, especially in time of crisis.

Under conditions of mounting social polarization and class tensions in Britain—the most economically unequal of the major capitalist countries after only the United States—there was concern in sections of the ruling class that the monarchy, and indeed the entire centuries-old state structure, was becoming incapable of fulfilling its responsibilities.

They sought the transformation of the monarchy along the lines indicated by Diana's own career—a Hollywood-ization of the royal family, in which the popular masses were bombarded with images of the glamorous comings and goings of celebrities as an antidote to the increasing difficulty of their own lives.

The death of Diana brought this process to a head. Unprecedented public pressure was placed on the royal family. The press whipped up open hostility to Prince Charles, the heir to the throne whom Diana had divorced in 1996, and even Queen Elizabeth II over their supposed insensitivity to the public grieving for Diana.

Labour Party Prime Minister Tony Blair stepped in, both to extricate the royal family and push them in the desired direction. The capitalist press was explicit in recognizing the entire episode as a victory for those seeking to reshape the monarchy along right-wing populist lines, which would be cover for New Labour's policy of dismantling what remained of the postwar welfare state. The restructuring of the monarchy was more and more openly connected with other changes in the state structure aimed at making it a more efficient instrument of the ruling class.

Diana was not a great artist or scientist or humanitarian or political leader. She was a multimillionaire aristocrat who, in death

more than in life, was put to the service of British imperialism.

## 50 years ago: Hundreds of workers protest killing of union organizer

On August 30, 1972, over 500 hospital workers marched to Philadelphia's City Hall to protest the killing of Norman Rayford, an organizer for the National Union of Hospital and Health Care Employees Local 1199C. Rayford was shot and killed by a security guard two days earlier at Philadelphia's Metropolitan Hospital, where he had been supporting a strike by laundry workers.

Workers at Delaware Valley Hospital Laundry, a separate entity but owned by Metropolitan and four other major hospitals in Philadelphia, were on strike to win their first contract agreement and demanded \$2.85 an hour. The hospitals had been sending their laundry as far as New York in an attempt to break the strike.

Meanwhile, a separate bargaining unit representing service workers at Metropolitan Hospital had been fighting for union recognition for over a year. Despite having certified Local 1199C as their bargaining agent, the service workers were faced with continued resistance from the hospital, which was contesting the certification and hoping to break the union drive.

As an organizer for 1199C, Rayford was tasked with watching the laundry trucks to learn what service was being used as scab labor. The hospital had been secretly sending the trucks out in the middle of the night to avoid sympathy strikes should other workers become aware that their labor was being used to break a strike. As Rayford and other union organizers were observing the trucks they were confronted by a hospital security guard. An altercation occurred, and Rayford was shot dead. The guard claimed he acted in self-defense. However, he was not injured and Rayford was unarmed. The police investigation consisted of interviewing the guard and accepting his account as fact. The guard was not arrested or charged with the murder.

When news of the murder spread, workers were outraged and called for mass action to protest Rayford's killing. While only 50 workers had been on strike at the laundry facility, and 130 1199C members worked at Metropolitan Hospital, hundreds of hospital workers and supporters from other industries joined the march on City Hall.

The massive outrage forced Metropolitan to make concessions, fearing that the mobilization of workers could rapidly grow beyond their current demand for union recognition. The day after

the march on City Hall the Hospital agreed to recognize the union. In the contract eventually won by the workers, August 28 was stipulated as “Norman Rayford Day,” an additional paid holiday.

### **75 years ago: Movie theater fire kills 87 in Paris**

On August 30, 1947, a movie theater fire in the Rueil district of Paris claimed 87 lives and injured another 60, some of them seriously. The blaze was the worst movie fire disaster since theaters had fully resumed in the aftermath of the defeat of the Nazis and the liberation of France from fascist rule in 1944-45.

The accident occurred on a Saturday night, as hundreds gathered to watch *Étoile sans lumière*, Édith Piaf’s third film, and her first since 1941. The film, despite having premiered a year earlier, was still enjoying widespread popularity. To capitalize, the unscrupulous owner of the Select theater had used makeshift seating to accommodate 800 customers, despite the venue having a maximum capacity of fewer than 600.

During the film, a fire began, apparently where the projectionist was working. It would later emerge that he was an untrained 18 year-old stand-in for the regular employee. Running out of the projection booth in panic, he did not shut its door, ensuring that the fire rapidly spread.

Newspaper reports and a police investigation would reveal that the calamity had been caused by substantial negligence. The theater was cluttered with dusty furnishings, making escape difficult and fueling the fire. There was also exposed wiring. The sole fire extinguisher on the premises did not work, and the owner had decided against the minimal cost of hiring a fire marshal for the occasion.

It also emerged that the theater had been the subject of a series of safety warnings over previous years, including from municipal authorities. Lengthy criminal and civil proceedings ensued, with victims and their families seeking compensation.

Media coverage described the disaster as the worst movie theater blaze in 50 years, though there had been similar incidents resulting in casualties in the interim. In 1897, an early cinematographic display at the Bazar de la Charité, an annual charity event organized by the Parisian Catholic aristocracy, had caught fire. In the ensuing inferno, 127 died.

### **100 years ago: Turkey defeats Greece in decisive Battle of Dumlupınar**

Between August 26 and August 30, the Turkish army routed Greek forces in the Battle of Dumlupınar. The Turkish victory, which came at the cost of tens of thousands of casualties on both sides, spelled the end of the Greek occupation of Anatolia, which had been a part of the World War I Allies’ imperialist carve-up of the Middle East.

The Turkish army launched the Battle of Dumlupınar on the night of August 25 and the morning of August 26. The fighting that followed, which involved about 100,000 soldiers on each side, actually consisted of a series of engagements along a long line of Greek defensive positions in western Anatolia.

The Greek army, hampered by poor communication and low morale, fought unevenly, but by August 30 gave way, and was sent in flight back to coastal positions. About 25,000 were killed, wounded, missing, or captured on both sides.

On September 12, the Greek forces abandoned the coastal city of Izmir, on the Aegean Sea, and on September 18 they left Anatolia. On September 24, the Greek Revolution, an anti-government officers’ revolt, toppled the Greek monarchy. Fighting in the Greco-Turkish War, which had begun with the Greek invasion of May 1919, ended. The victory of the Turkish National Movement, led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, was finally ratified by the imperialist powers in the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923.

The Greco-Turkish War was, from the beginning, an outcome of imperialist machinations during World War I—as were the other catastrophes that have haunted the Balkans, Anatolia, and the Middle East ever since.

In a series of secret agreements, later published by Trotsky and the Bolsheviks, the major powers had agreed to carve up Anatolia. Greece, which was little more than a British proxy, was lured into the war against the Ottoman Empire on side of the Allies with promises of a new Aegean empire. Armenian nationalists, also proxies of the Allies, were promised a state in eastern Anatolia. Italy was bribed to join the war with promises of southwestern Anatolia. And Tsarist Russia, at the beginning of the war, had been assured the straits of Bosphorus and the Dardanelles and with them Istanbul.

Britain and France divvied up between themselves the Ottoman lands that presently comprise Lebanon, Syria, Israel, Palestine, Iraq, and Kuwait. The rump of the dissolving Ottoman Empire acquiesced to these plots in the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920.

Atatürk’s Turkish nationalist movement, and its victories over the imperialist occupiers and Greece, upset these calculations. But Turkish nationalism provided no solution for the fundamental problem of unifying the oppressed, multi-ethnic and multi-religious masses of the broader region, leading instead to catastrophes and crimes such as the Armenian genocide.



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