

This week in history: September 5-11

4 September 2022

25 years ago: Death of Mother Teresa

On September 5, 1997, Mother Teresa, later known as Saint Teresa of Calcutta, died following a series of heart attacks and illnesses throughout the previous year. Born Anjezë Gonxhe Bojaxhiu in Üsküb, now Skopje, North Macedonia, she moved to Ireland and then to India where she spent the majority of her life as a Roman Catholic nun whose missionary work—the subject of much criticism—eventually expanded into over 130 countries.

The funeral of Mother Teresa was an international media extravaganza, which revealed much about both Indian society and the sociopolitical outlook of the international bourgeoisie. In the days preceding the funeral, television broadcasts around the world were filled with harrowing images of Calcutta's poor. Yet not once did a member of the international press corps ask, let alone elucidate, what caused and perpetuated this suffering and squalor.

Mother Teresa's body lay in repose in an open casket in St. Thomas's church, Calcutta for a week before her state funeral. Fearing that any mass gathering of Calcutta's dispossessed could unleash a social explosion, the Indian army assumed charge of the funeral and deployed thousands of troops along the funeral route. Of the 10,000 invited to attend the funeral ceremony, just four had actually been ministered to by the Missionaries of Charity, the religious order that Teresa founded. The international press had predicted that at least 1 million people would join the funeral procession as it made its way through Calcutta, but the army cordoned off large sections of the city, permitting a crowd of less than 50,000 well-to-do Calcuttans to watch.

The Missionaries of Charity provided solace and a small measure of sustenance to those denied food, shelter, medical care, employment or education; but it opposed any and all efforts to change society.

At a press conference on the eve of Mother Teresa's funeral, her successor as Superior General declared that the Missionaries of Charity would continue to comfort the poor "without wanting to know the causes of poverty." Added Sister Nirmala, "We want the poor to see poverty in the right way—to accept it and believe that the Lord will provide."

The process of beatification began immediately following her death, and Pope Francis officially canonized her at a ceremony in 2016 in Vatican City.

50 years ago: Terror attack at Munich Olympics

On September 5, 1972, at the Munich Olympics, eight members of Black September, a Palestinian militant organization, raided the Olympic village taking hostage nine Israeli citizens and killing two more. The attackers demanded the release of 234 Palestinian prisoners in Israel, as well as two prisoners of Germany's Red Army Faction held in West Germany. The next day, a failed rescue attempt organized by the West German government resulted in the murder of all 11 hostages, as well as

the killing of five assailants and one German police officer.

The Black September group was formed after the expulsion of Palestinians from Jordan following the brief war between Jordan and the Palestinian Liberation Organization in September 1970. Leading up to the Munich attack, the Septemberists were also responsible for the assassination of Jordanian Prime Minister Wafi Tal in 1971.

The hostage situation began in the early morning hours of September 5, when the militants sneaked into the Israeli Olympic compound armed with machine guns, pistols, and grenades. Initially, two of the Israeli athletes attempted to fight their attackers but were shot and killed. Many of the team members were able to escape, but nine athletes were surrounded and held before they could get away.

The West German government immediately began negotiating for the release of the athletes. The Septemberists insisted on their demand for the release of the jailed Palestinians by Israel. However, the Israeli government refused to negotiate or make any concessions.

With the games being the first in Germany since the 1936 Olympics used by Hitler to promote Nazi race propaganda, the West German government was under immense pressure to secure the release of the hostages, especially since they were Jewish. The government attempted to make a deal that would secure the release of the hostages offering "an unlimited amount of money" and offering to trade the Israeli hostages for high-ranking German officials. Both of these proposals were rejected.

With neither the Israeli government willing to negotiate nor the hostage-takers willing to back away from their demands, the West German government planned a raid on the facility to kill the Septemberists. However, with the situation being televised and broadcast live by international news networks, the kidnappers were able to watch the police operations and were aware of their exact locations. The raid failed.

By the evening, after it became clear their demands for the release of prisoners would not be met, the Septemberists issued a new demand for a plane to Egypt. The West German negotiators agreed to grant the transport but began planning a new ambush to kill the attackers.

They planned to bring the militants to the airport where police disguised as flight crew would make an attack while snipers also fired from a distance. However, at the last minute the disguised police team called off their plan, leaving only the snipers.

Once the Septemberists arrived at the empty plane, now aware that they had been set up, they were fired upon by the snipers. A gun battle ensued that killed all nine remaining hostages, one police officer, and five militants. It still remains unclear exactly how many of the hostages were killed by the Septemberists and how many were shot inadvertently by the police snipers.

75 years ago: British miners' wildcat strike against Labour government expands

This week in September 1947, a wildcat strike launched the previous month by 140 miners at Grimethorpe, a colliery in Yorkshire, continued to

expand, with the media nervously reporting sympathy walkouts involving as many as 60,000 workers.

The strike was launched in direct opposition to the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). At the beginning of the year, the Labour government had nationalized the mining sector. The move was aimed at preventing a major upsurge of miners' struggles, and above all strengthening British capitalism, which was in a deep slump following World War II.

The nationalization also served to integrate the NUM bureaucracy more directly into management structures. In August, without prior consultation with miners, it had agreed to an overhaul of workplace practices aimed at boosting productivity.

For the Grimethorpe workers who launched the strike, this would have meant an increase in the daily "stint" that they had to mine, from 21 to 23 feet of coalface. A striking miner explained to the *New York Times* that this measure was the straw that broke the camel's back amid broader difficulties in the conditions workers faced.

The 140 began their strike on August 11. The response from the union bureaucracy was ferocious. NUM President William Lawther went to the capitalist press to declare that the strikers were "acting as criminals at this time of the nation's peril." He called for prosecutions, stating: "Let them issue summonses against these men, no matter how many there may be. I would say that even though there were 100,000 on strike."

The Stalinist Communist Party, which functioned as the most loyal defender of the Labour government and of British capitalism, similarly attacked the stoppage. Its General Secretary Arthur Horner, who was also a trade union bureaucrat, said the workers involved "must be regarded as an alien force and treated as an enemy of the true interests of the majority of the miners of this country."

In response, one worker told the *Star* newspaper: "Mr. Horner seems to have forgotten that he is our servant and is acting as if he were our lord and master. We pay him to fight our battles and not to fight against us." On the entrance to the colliery, the striking miners painted "Burn Will Lawther."

The rank-and-file reaction was very different to that of the union officialdom. By the end of August, 30,000 miners had taken part in sympathy walkouts, by September 6, the number had grown to over 50,000. The NUM called meetings of other Yorkshire miners, at which it sought to line them up against the strikers. These attempts failed, with votes at the meetings overwhelmingly registering support for the walkout.

Under these conditions, the Coal Board and the NUM beat a retreat. On September 15, they made a promise, which ended the strike, for the increased workload to be withdrawn immediately and subjected to an inquiry. That body did not meet for over a year, and left the work requirement as it had been for fear of provoking another eruption.

100 years ago: Unions sell out strikes of 1 million American railroaders and coal miners

This week in 1922, strikes came to an end that had involved, at their peak, over 1 million American railroad workers and coal miners. A grouping of railroad shop unions capitulated before a vicious attack by the American government—with the major national union body, the American Federation of Labor, refusing rank-and-file calls for solidarity. The United Mine Workers sold out anthracite miners in northeastern Pennsylvania, who had been separated from a larger strike of coal miners that ended earlier in the year.

The federal government used its broad array of powers to crush the railway brotherhoods. The repression involved governors, state

legislatures and local police, tasked with harassing and arresting workers; the federal, state, and local courts, which delivered restraining orders and injunctions, and issued arrest warrants; and the administration of Warren G. Harding, which orchestrated the entire anti-labor operation through the Railroad Labor Board. Attorney General Harry M. Daugherty sought, and received, a court injunction that effectively stripped striking workers of the rights of freedom of speech, assembly, and the press, on the specious grounds that the strike was an illegal conspiracy. The courts ruled in favor of the injunction in the first week of September. It was upheld by another ruling on September 11.

Meeting as an executive council in Atlantic City, the unions of the American Federation of Labor refused any concrete assistance to the railway shopmen. On September 7, the union executives threw out demands, coming from the rank-and-file, that a general strike be called against the Harding administration's injunction. Instead, the AFL called on its members to agitate for pro-labor legislation.

Even the railway brotherhoods moved against the strike that they nominally led. B.M. Jewell, president of a committee representing myriad different rail shop unions, announced on September 11 that there would be no attempt to prevent the separate unions from settling with the different rail firms, which were dominated by a handful of powerful corporations and banks. Some 90 craft unions of the shopmen were cooperating behind an executive council of six overarching unions, which included rail shop job classifications such as machinists, blacksmiths, boilermakers, electrical workers, carmen, and sheet metal workers. The shopmen were the last holdouts in a strike that had begun in the summer, involving 400,000 railway workers.

A similar dénouement was being realized in the coal fields. On September 10, John L. Lewis, president of the United Mine Workers, and Phillip Murray, UMW vice president, announced that they were sending 155,000 anthracite "hard coal" miners back to work after a bitter six-month strike, and, more than that, they had agreed to speed up production to make for lost output owing to the strike.

The anthracite strike began earlier in the year in conjunction with a strike of the bituminous "soft coal" miners. With coal miners out from eastern Pennsylvania to Kansas, it was one of the largest strikes in US history, some 650,000 strong at the start. But the UMW accepted the division of the "bargaining units," sending the bituminous miners back with another rotten contract that accepted the principle that miners would pay the price for there being "too many mines." Like the railroaders, the anthracite miners were on strike against interests dominated by banker J.P. Morgan.

The defeats of 1922 dropped the curtain on the largest, and longest, strike wave in US history, up to that time. Part of a broader upsurge of the international working class including the Russian Revolution, the American strike wave began in 1916, with World War I raging in Europe, and continued after American entry in 1917 in spite of the AFL's efforts to stop it, reaching its apogee in 1919, when some 4.5 million workers walked off the job. The remainder of the decade saw the "lean years" for American workers, as one historian called them, while the America's rich celebrated "the roaring 20s."



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