

This week in history: October 31-November 6

This column profiles important historical events which took place during this week, 25 years ago, 50 years ago, 75 years ago and 100 years ago.

30 October 2022

25 years ago: Truckers walk out in France

On November 6, 1997, hundreds of thousands of truck drivers in France walked off the job for a week, bringing much of European road transport to a halt and challenging the regime of Socialist Party Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, in power since the previous June.

The strike began on November 2 with the truckers' rejection of a deal reached by the federation of small trucking firms and the leadership of the CFDT, the largest drivers' union. Among the first to react were drivers in Bordeaux, in southwestern France. They burned copies of the accord and, using their own cars, blockaded a major fuel depot.

Union members in Reims, Limoges, Grenoble, Tours, Poitiers and Rouen quickly voted to repudiate the deal and take strike action. Within hours, truckers had blockaded hundreds of highways and border crossings, cutting off access to major industrial and commercial centers, as well as oil refineries and depots.

The strike was the resumption of a two-week conflict that erupted in November 1996, during which truckers' blockades nearly brought the country to a standstill. That dispute ended, following the intervention of the government of Alain Juppe, with an agreement to lower the retirement age of drivers to 55, pay them a one-time bonus of 3,000 francs, and guarantee full payment for time spent waiting for trucks to be loaded and unloaded. Only about 5 percent of France's 38,000 trucking companies, however, had fulfilled the terms of the agreement.

The strike had a powerful impact, causing 40 percent of France's 18,000 gas stations to run out of fuel and shutting down numerous industrial operations. The blockades at borders and ferry terminals closed critical trans-European routes and left thousands of foreign truckers stranded in France. Industries in Spain and Portugal were particularly hard hit, as France was their only land route to the rest of Europe.

After six days of the walkout, union leaders representing a majority of the drivers were able to push through a settlement. It provided an increase in pay to 10,000 francs a month for 200 hours, which did not apply until the year 2000 and provided no reduction in hours, a major demand of the drivers.

The Jospin government intervened heavily in the strike, using physical force against strikers at two roadblocks on the Spanish and German borders, but for the most part, the regime's role was to

operate through the channels of the labor bureaucracies to defuse the strike.

50 years ago: Trudeau scrapes by in Canada elections

On November 2, 1972, Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau announced that his government would continue in office despite the Liberal Party losing its majority in parliament following the general election that had been completed days earlier. Only by gaining support from the New Democratic Party (NDP) was Trudeau able to retain power.

The election was one of the closest in Canadian history. Some districts took days to finalize results. In one Quebec district the parliament seat was decided by just five votes. The Liberals suffered crushing losses in the election, failing to reach the majority threshold of 133 seats. Dropping from 147 seats in parliament to 109, Trudeau and his MPs lost the ability to govern without the consent of other minority parties. The Conservative Party gained 34 seats, to 107.

Trudeau had either to resign, which would have in all likelihood triggered another election, or to reach an agreement with other minority parties. Fearing even greater losses which might have handed power to the Conservatives in a new election, Trudeau opened discussion with David Lewis and the social democratic NDP, which gained six seats in the election bringing their total to 31, enough to block with the Liberals. It did not hesitate. NDP leader Lewis told the press that the duty of his party was to "make parliament work."

The bourgeois press blamed the Liberal loss on efforts of Trudeau to elevate the French language to equal legal status, requiring all federal offices to offer services in both English and French. The Conservatives had jumped on the initiative as an opportunity to drive a wedge between English- and French-speaking Canadians, by pushing the false claim that English speakers would be forced to learn French.

The entire political system was complicit in the declining living standards facing Canadian workers, who were suffering under soaring prices as the post-Bretton-Woods global inflationary crisis continued with no end in sight. Trudeau responded to strikes and protests with police-state measures, including the imposition of military rule and the arbitrary detention of hundreds of workers suspected of being Quebec

nationalists in October of 1970. Resentment among workers against Trudeau's austerity and repression was chiefly responsible for the fall-off in the Liberal vote.

75 years ago: Howard Hughes' "Spruce Goose" aircraft takes only flight

On November 2, 1947, the Hughes H-4 Hercules, dubbed the "Spruce Goose," took its only flight, traveling less than a mile and being airborne for under one minute near Cabrillo Beach in California. Named after multi-millionaire Howard Hughes, who oversaw its construction, the Hercules remains the largest flying airboat ever constructed and until 2019 held the record for the greatest wingspan of any aircraft to have been flown.

The Hughes H-4 Hercules had its origins in World War II. Amid the war with Nazi Germany, the US sought to develop an alternative means of transporting troops, war materiel and supplies under conditions of frequent attacks on transport ships. Henry J. Kaiser, an industrialist who also built "Liberty ships" designed to withstand bombing raids, proposed the creation of a large air ship, winning a government contract in 1942.

The airship was initially supposed to become operational within two years. Kaiser pulled out, after repeated delays which he blamed on the difficulty of attaining valuable metals that were under war rations. The project was taken over by Hughes, who received a new government contract.

That contract was for the construction of just one prototype model. Despite this, further delays ensued, meaning that even the initial prototype was not created prior to the end of the war in 1945. Only in 1947 was construction completed. The Hughes H-4 Hercules was over 218 feet long and 79 feet tall with a wingspan of more than 320 feet. It was supposed to have a cruise speed of 250 miles per hour and a range of 3,000 miles. However, the immense weight of the craft, even when empty, meant that it was never going to be capable of such lengthy flights.

The test flight took place in the context of scrutiny of the vast government sums expended on a project that had contributed nothing to the war effort. It coincided with hearings of the Senate war spending investigations, which highlighted the fact that some \$23 million had been expended on the project, the equivalent of more than \$210 million today.

Hughes had angrily denounced the scrutiny, testifying before the committee, "The Hercules was a monumental undertaking. It is the largest aircraft ever built. It is over five stories tall with a wingspan longer than a football field. That's more than a city block."

Hughes piloted the November 2 flight, before an assembled crowd of politicians and reporters. After two uneventful taxis, Hughes embarked on the successful test run. The craft accelerated in the channel facing Cabrillo Beach, before lifting up. It was airborne for about 26 seconds. Throughout the brief flight, the crew experienced the "ground effect," whereby a plane that is flying close to a fixed surface is affected by drag. Hughes nevertheless proclaimed the test a success.

The craft would never fly again. For years, Hughes, a right-wing figure with prominent political connections, would employ a full-time crew of hundreds of workers to keep it operational.

100 years ago: Archaeologists discover tomb of Egyptian Pharaoh Tutankhamun

On November 4, 1922, a team led by British archaeologist Howard Carter discovered what proved to be the entrance to the Tomb of the 18th Dynasty Pharaoh Tutankhamun, who ruled Egypt from approximately 1334 to 1325 BCE, in the country's Valley of the Kings, near the ancient capital of Thebes, modern Luxor. The tomb was one of the greatest archeological discoveries of the 20th century since its contents were largely intact, unlike most ancient Egyptian royal burials.

It took Carter, who had suspected that the tomb of Tutankhamun was in the area, and his team another two weeks to clear debris in front of the tomb and enter it. As he later wrote, "At first I could see nothing, the hot air escaping from the chamber causing the candle flame to flicker, but presently, as my eyes grew accustomed to the light, details of the room within emerged slowly from the mist, strange animals, statues, and gold—everywhere the glint of gold."

Months of careful and intensive excavation followed, and by February 1923, the scientists were able to reach the burial chamber with its splendid sarcophagus. Inside was a coffin of pure gold that held the mummified remains of the Pharaoh. Over 5,390 items were eventually cataloged, including food, clothing, furniture, a dismantled chariot, objects made from gold, including statues, and an iron dagger smelted from a meteorite's ore.

Subsequent examination of Tutankhamun's mummy has revealed that he suffered from malaria and had a fracture in his leg. Either or both conditions may have been the cause of his death.

Tutankhamun ruled during what is known as the Amarna Period, named after the new capital his father founded, in the New Kingdom period of ancient Egyptian history. His father, Akhenaten, was a religious reformer who created a monotheistic religion based on sun-worship that was dismantled after his death, returning power to the traditional priestly cast. The New Kingdom (1540-1070 BCE) is noted for its aggressive and war-like foreign policy and is documented by the Amarna letters, diplomatic correspondence between the Egyptian administration and its representatives in Canaan, Babylon, Assyria and other states in the region. Tutankhamun's tomb gives the modern world a sense of the wealth and power of the New Kingdom.



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