

This week in history: November 14-20

13 November 2022

25 years ago: Massacre at Egyptian Temple of Luxor

On November 17, 1997, six gunmen belonging to an Islamic fundamentalist group staged a horrifying massacre outside the ancient Temple of Luxor in upper Egypt, killing 62 people, most of whom were foreign tourists and others Egyptian tour guides and police, before all six attackers were themselves shot to death.

Hundreds of tourists were trapped in the crossfire after the gunmen pulled out automatic weapons and shot the policemen on guard at the 3,500-year-old temple of Queen Hatshepsut, one of Egypt's most popular tourist sites. The victims were from all over the world, including Switzerland, Japan, Britain, Germany, Bulgaria, Colombia, and France.

The attackers disguised themselves as security officers. After the gunmen killed two security guards, the tourists were trapped inside the temple for 45 minutes while the massacre occurred. There were 26 survivors. The assailants hijacked a bus after escaping the temple, but were caught at a checkpoint and subsequently fled into a cave in the hills where they committed suicide together.

The attack was part of an increasingly savage conflict between Islamic organizations and the US-backed dictatorship of President Hosni Mubarak, whose predecessor, Anwar Sadat, was assassinated by Islamic fundamentalists in 1981. In the previous four years, in the face of stepped-up police repression, the underground Islamic groups shifted their attacks from government targets, which were heavily guarded, to tourists and Egypt's Coptic Christian minority.

The Luxor attackers were from the same strain of Islamic fundamentalism as the Al Qaeda organization, whose deputy leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, had been the leader of Egyptian Islamic Jihad, and played a major role in the Sadat assassination. He reportedly fled the country before the Luxor attack, and united his forces with those of Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan.

50 years ago: Social Democrats reelected in West Germany

On November 19, 1972 the Social Democratic Party (SPD) won a second term in office in the federal elections for the West German Bundestag. The victory made the SPD the largest party in the German Parliament for the first time since 1930. The election saw the largest turnout of voters since the end of the Second World War, with over 91 percent of eligible West Germans casting a ballot.

The results allowed Willy Brandt to remain as chancellor despite not winning enough votes for the SPD to hold a majority on its own. The SPD had ruled in a coalition government with the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP) since the last election in 1969. Following the results of the 1972 election the shared rule agreement continued.

Both the SPD and Free Democrats increased their number of seats in the Bundestag. The SPD gained six for a total of 230 seats and the FDP won 11 more for a total of 41 seats. With 497 seats in parliament, 249 seats were needed for a majority.

The results of the election were a major rebuke by German workers of the right-wing Christian Democratic Union-Christian Social Union (CDU-CSU) coalition. The CDU-CSU had campaigned on a promise to industrialists to "tame the trade unions," meaning smashing strikes and suppressing workers' demands for improved conditions and pay.

This was the second time in less than one year that the German working class saved the SPD from defeat. In April, hundreds of thousands of trade union workers went on political strike to oppose the attempt by the CDU-CSU to unseat Brandt through a vote of no-confidence.

While workers saw a vote for the SPD as a vote to defend the unions against outright attacks from the capitalists, Brandt and the SPD were moving sharply to the right and preparing their own assault on workers' standard of living.

The global inflationary crisis sparked by the end of the Bretton Woods system fixed currency parities continued to worsen, sparking demands from the ruling class to suppress any wage demands from workers. Under this pressure Brandt had distanced himself from any socialist policies and campaigned for workers to support the liberal coalition, rather than the SPD alone. As he campaigned he adopted the nationalist slogan, "Germans, we should be proud of our country."

While the election was a clear indication that the working class opposed the reactionary policies of the CDU-CSU, the SPD, which had long abandoned any pretenses of fighting for socialism, offered workers no alternative to the dictates of capital.

As the post-World War II order entered into the beginning stages of historical decline, the SPD's role was increasingly to use the bureaucratic apparatus of the unions to suppress workers coming into struggle against the austerity imposed on them by the economic crisis.

75 years ago: Strikes and bloody clashes in Italy

On November 15, 1947, Rome, the Italian capital, was paralyzed by a mass transport strike. The stoppage coincided with broader upheavals, including 10 days of walkouts and clashes between workers and right-wing, state-linked forces in the province of Bari.

The actions, pitting large sections of the working class against the police and extreme-right-wing parties, involved significant violence. At least two were killed in the Rome strike and 22 in Bari. The majority of those who died were ordinary people, with numbers of instances of police opening fire on protesters.

The strikes and upheavals reflected broader opposition to the government of Italian Prime Minister Alcide de Gasperi. The right-wing “centrist,” a member of the Christian Democratic Party, presided over a state apparatus that included some of the fascist forces that had ruled before and during World War II. His government was imposing major attacks on the social conditions of workers and the poor, and was consolidating Italy’s relationship with American imperialism.

The clashes also expressed shifts in the policies of the Communist Party. In line with the interests of the counterrevolutionary Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union, the Italian Communist Party had played a key role in preventing revolution after World War II and working toward the restabilization of capitalist rule. This program, dictated by the pact struck between the Soviet bureaucracy and the western imperialist powers, had included the entrance by the Communist Party into the postwar capitalist governments of Italy.

Earlier in 1947, de Gasperi forced the Communist Party out of the government. He was closely associated with the Cold War policies being spearheaded by the American administration of President Harry Truman. This included confrontation with the Soviet Union and the Eastern European states under its control, and attempts to weaken the influence of communist forces internationally, including in Western Europe and the US itself.

The Stalinists responded by cynically exploiting widespread anger among workers, channeling it into futile clashes with the state. These were viewed as a bargaining chip in the attempts of the Communist Party to pressure de Gasperi and the right-wing forces into allowing it back into government. The strikes were accompanied by fawning appeals and begging directed towards the prime minister by the Stalinists.

De Gasperi responded with state repression of the strikes and protests, and venomous denunciations of the Communist Party, which he branded as the agency of a foreign power. Declassified US government documents have shown that the American state was heavily involved in coordinating this response.

100 years ago: Ecuadorian regime slaughters 300 strikers

On November 15, 1922, troops of the Ecuadorian government fired on a crowd of 20,000 striking workers and their families who were celebrating the release of two of their leaders from prison in the coastal city of Guayaquil, Ecuador’s second-largest city, killing over 300. Soldiers pursued workers, shooting randomly and

bayonetting scores. Eyewitnesses also observed wealthy private citizens joining in the slaughter of the workers.

Guayaquil and its surrounding area were a world center of production of cacao beans (the seed used to make chocolate) and the market had been severely impacted by the post-World War I recession. There was massive inflation in Ecuador and imports of basic foodstuffs, on which the city heavily depended, had declined by two-thirds in just a year. Rents had quadrupled.

On October 17, railway workers in the nearby town of Duran struck, winning significant concessions from the American owners, including the right for Ecuadorian and immigrant Jamaican workers to be paid in gold or American dollars, as American employees of the company were, rather than the rapidly depreciating Ecuadorian sucre.

Inspired by the success of the railway workers, utility and trolley workers in Guayaquil began strikes on November 6-7. They demanded wage increases, shorter hours, and job security. In the next few days, factory workers and printers joined the strike. Printers ran off thousands of leaflets that called on union and non-union workers alike to join the strike. Mass assemblies of workers were held, which included delegations of railway workers from Duran. By November 13, a general strike had taken hold in the city. Strikers began to raise political demands, including calling for laws that would support the sucre, since workers understood that any wage increases would be short-lived because of inflation. Workers began to raise democratic demands such as redistribution of land to landless peasants as well as calls for the protection of national industry.

The massacre broke the momentum of the strike and mediocre pay raises were settled by November 21, soon to be eroded by inflation. The government blamed the violence on anarchist and Bolshevik influence and a whitewash of the military’s role in the massacre followed. The labor movement in Ecuador was set back for years.



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