

# This week in history: June 26-July 2

25 June 2023

## 25 years ago: Northern Ireland Assembly meets

On July 1, 1998, the new Northern Ireland Assembly met at Belfast's Stormont Castle and appointed David Trimble of the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) as First Minister. Seamus Mallon of the Irish nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) became his deputy. These appointments followed elections held on June 25.

Provisions for the Assembly were established by the Northern Ireland agreement, which was ratified in referendums held simultaneously in the north and south of Ireland in May. The agreement was drawn up by Britain, the US, the Irish Republic (southern Ireland), the Sinn Féin, the SDLP and the biggest unionist party, and promoted through a massive public relations campaign that portrayed it as the basis for "peace and coexistence," as well as jobs and economic prosperity.

In the Northern Ireland Assembly vote, six representatives were elected for each of the province's 18 Westminster parliamentary constituencies, making a total of 108 members. The elections were contested by a record number of parties, with more than ten challenging for seats in some constituencies. Voting was by a form of proportional representation, where "surplus" votes from successful candidates or those with too small a number to be elected were redistributed according to preferences indicated by the voters.

Reflecting the pattern in the May referendums, parties supporting the Agreement received 75 percent of the 822,000 votes cast. The SDLP took the most first preference votes, with just under 23 percent. The UUP gained a 21.16 percent share but secured the highest number of seats (28 compared with the SDLP's 24) due to second-preference voting. Sinn Féin secured 18 seats. The Progressive Unionist Party (PUP), allied to the loyalist paramilitaries, would send two representatives to the Assembly, making a total of 30 pro-agreement unionists.

Neither the Northern Ireland Agreement nor the Assembly were the product of a mass popular, democratic movement. Both were drawn up behind closed doors between British and American imperialism and the Irish bourgeoisie and reflected their interests. Its central purpose was to eliminate all barriers to the exploitation of the whole of Ireland by international capital.

The Irish Republic was becoming a prime investment location for transnational corporations seeking access to the European market. It did so by offering tax breaks to business and striking wage-restraint deals with the unions at the expense of Irish workers. This was the record the Northern Ireland agreement was designed to emulate. The British-ruled province had previously

been hindered in its attempts to do so by the huge cost of policing 30 years of bitter sectarian conflict and maintaining the extensive public sector necessary to compensate for the decline of traditional manufacturing industry.

## First coup attempt in Chile fails

On June 29, 1973, members of the Chilean military from the Second Armored Regiment attempted to oust President Salvador Allende from power and install a military dictatorship. The coup was led by Lieutenant Colonel Roberto Souper, who was connected politically to Fatherland and Liberty, a fascist political party.

The far-right organizations within Chile's military had been in communication with the CIA and making preparations for a coup since Allende was elected in 1970. In particular, the CIA maintained connections with Fatherland and Liberty and had identified Souper as an important asset.

Officers of the Army, who for the time remained loyal to the Constitution, learned about the plot the week before and made Allende aware of the conspiracy. When the government moved forward with arrests of those involved, Souper decided to mobilize his forces.

Tanks rolled down the streets of Santiago unopposed and surrounded the presidential palace and the Ministry of Defense. At 9:00 a.m., Souper ordered that they open fire on the government buildings, shelling them with tank rounds.

The plan was essentially the mass murder of all the government employees who worked in the state offices. Many workers were also gunned down as the tanks rolled through the streets. Twenty-two people were killed in the coup attempt.

At this point the commanders of the Army decided to back Allende and sent troops to suppress the revolt and arrested Souper. Allende also issued a radio address calling on workers to occupy factories if necessary to defend the government.

The Socialist Party president had suppressed many workers' councils and strikes in important sections of Chile's industries in an effort to placate imperialism interests. Popular support for Allende had massively decreased following these actions.

Allende had repeatedly promised workers that they could rely on the government and the military to defend them against dictatorship. In the aftermath of the June 29 revolt, Allende pointed to the fact that it was the Army that stopped the coup. But the reality was that the events showed the immense danger of a

military overthrow.

Souper was held in custody until Augusto Pinochet led his successful coup in September. He was released and brought into the leadership of the military government.

Even though the initial coup attempt failed, the political response of Allende's social democratic party and the Stalinist aligned Popular Unity Coalition allowed the military to prepare for a more determined and better organized effort. Popular Unity had totally disarmed the workers' councils, which posed the threat of factory occupations and socialist revolution.

## **75 years ago: British Labour government attacks London dock strike**

On June 28, 1948, the British Labour government of Prime Minister Clement Attlee proclaimed a national state of emergency over a strike by London dock workers that had begun almost a fortnight before. The declaration effectively illegalized the stoppage and provided for the potential deployment of the military and other state forces against the strikers. It was aimed at preventing the spread of the movement.

The strike had begun in London, after a number of workers were suspended for claiming a special bonus they were entitled to for handling zinc oxide. Under postwar labor regulations, workers were due various additional payments for the movement of dangerous and dirty goods. These, however, were frequently curtailed or not paid at all.

The punitive victimizations were a trigger for broader discontent. The National Dock Labour Scheme of the Labour government had limited certain excesses, such as the use of casual labour in the ports. But in establishing a fixed wage scheme, it had eroded some workers' buying power. Its purpose was to establish a highly regulated labour system, with workers compelled to do such things as compulsory overtime.

The Transport & General Workers Union enforced the scheme in partnership with the Labour government. Most strikes of the period, including the June 1948 stoppage, were thus effectively wildcats, with shopfloor and other rank-and-file committees taking the lead.

The British ruling elite responded with fear and intense hostility to the emerging movement. The Manchester *Guardian* commented: "It is plain from the way the strike has spread—within a week, in the face of every discouragement from officials of their trade union, the numbers out have grown from 1,500 to 15,000—that there is fairly widespread discontent with the way some parts of the scheme are working."

The *Times* labelled the stoppage "a challenge to be resisted as resolutely as the threat of attack by a foreign power."

In a radio address, Attlee branded the strike as entirely illegitimate, declaring: "This is not a strike against capitalists or employers. It is a strike against your mates; a strike against the housewife; a strike against the common people who have

difficulties enough." His emergency declaration was accompanied by the deployment of troops to work the docks. The stoppage would end in early July, as a result of the perfidy of the union and the aggressive attacks of the Labour government.

Attlee's government had been elected on the basis of a wave of support for Labour, which swept the Tories from office at the end of World War II. While Labour instituted limited reforms, such as the creation of the National Health Service, these were carried out under pressure from the working class. They were aimed, moreover, at suppressing class antagonisms and laying the basis for a revival of capitalist Britain after the war. The class character of the government was exemplified by its repeated, hostile attacks on all of the major struggles of the working class.

## **100 years ago: Bomb kills ten on railway bridge in Ruhr Valley**

On June 30, 1923, a time-bomb killed eight Belgian soldiers and two German civilians on a military train travelling from Duisburg over the Rhine on the Duisburg–Hochfeld railway bridge. Forty-two other soldiers and civilians were injured, some seriously. One car was demolished by the powerful blast, and others were badly damaged, as was the track. The train was transporting soldiers on leave.

The region of the bombing, the Ruhr Valley, Germany's industrial heartland, had been occupied by French and Belgian troops since January 9 to extract war reparations from Germany's industrial products, including steel, coal, and timber.

Germany was experiencing hyperinflation and with a desperate ruling class, an active far-right that had attempted a coup in 1920 and would attempt another in September, and two large workers' parties, the Social Democrats (SPD) and the Communist Party (KPD). A revolutionary situation was emerging.

The German government had called for "passive resistance" by the population against the French-Belgian occupation but there were massive strikes by workers in the area against the occupation and against the owners of huge industrial firms, as well as acts of far-right terrorism. French and Belgian troops had put down demonstrations at the request of the German government and had killed scores of civilians.

In retaliation for the bombing, French and Belgian troops immediately took hostages from Duisburg, closed all restaurants, theaters, and cafes, and forbade all motor traffic. The occupation forces sealed off the entire Ruhr Valley from the rest of Germany until July 15.



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