

This week in history: July 3-9

2 July 2023

25 years ago: Puerto Rico general strike

On July 7-8, 1998, an estimated half million workers in Puerto Rico participated in a general strike, the largest work stoppage in the island's history. The strike was called by a coalition of 60 unions led by telephone workers.

Strike supporters briefly blocked access to the main airport in San Juan. There were also sporadic shutdowns of water and electric service. On the second day of the strike workers blocked the gates to the plant of Eli Lilly and Co., an Indianapolis-based pharmaceutical company, in the town of Carolina. Strikers also blocked the entrance to San Juan's second largest airport at Isla Grande.

Workers at the state-owned Puerto Rico Telephone Company had been on strike since June 18 over the government's privatization plans. Puerto Rico Governor Pedro Rossello wanted to sell the telephone company to a group of investors led by GTE and the Banco Popular de Puerto Rico. In the lead-up to the strike, police beatings of strikers generated an outpouring of popular support.

While opinion polls showed island residents opposed privatization by a margin of two to one, an ad placed in the July 12, 1998 edition of the *New York Times* read: "The recent 48-hour strike in Puerto Rico instigated by some labor groups who oppose the Government's decision to modernize the telephone company through privatization, despite widespread media coverage, had very little island-wide support and did not materially affect the island's robust economy."

The eruption of class struggle in Puerto Rico was a manifestation of a historic crisis of the island's economic development and its political subordination to US colonialism. In the beginning of the postwar period, the US sought to industrialize the island, inaugurating the so-called Operation Bootstrap as a means of exploiting relatively cheap Puerto Rican labor. This strategy was followed by the imposition of the Section 936 tax codes, an attempt to encourage investment by allowing corporations what amounted to a tax holiday on the island.

While US-based capital profited from each of those initiatives, none of them brought about a significant change in Puerto Rico's structural unemployment, nor did they change conditions that left more than 60 percent of the population below the official poverty line.

50 years ago: Military coup in Rwanda brings Juvénal

Habyarimana to power

On July 5, 1973, the president of Rwanda, Grégoire Kayibanda, was overthrown in a military coup by then Minister of Defense Juvénal Habyarimana. Kayibanda had been the first president of Rwanda as leader of the Parmehutu political party, which conducted a struggle for Rwandan independence on a program calling for the abolition of the monarchy, the right of the Hutu majority to rule the country, and anti-communism.

Under colonial rule first by Germany and then Belgium following World War I, the two main ethnic groups, the majority Hutus and minority Tutsis, were deliberately divided and set against one another in a strict caste system. Tutsis were given privileges that included better access to education, jobs, and administrative positions in the colonial government, and continuation of the Tutsi-dominated Rwandan monarchy.

The monarchy was abolished in 1962 when Kayibanda and the Parmehutu party came to power after winning over 77 percent of the vote in the country's first elections. As president, Kayibanda transformed Rwanda into a one-party state with himself at the head. He pursued policies that replaced Tutsi domination of political life with that of Hutu domination. In particular, Kayibanda granted favor to his closest allies from his own region of the country, in the south.

Under Kayibanda a number of Hutus became wealthy and made their way into elite society, but the vast majority remained in conditions of impoverishment. In 1973, the GDP per capita of Rwanda was just \$63 USD, making it the 15th poorest country in the world. Kayibanda's regional favoritism angered members of the Hutu elite from other regions. This included Habyarimana who was from northern Rwanda.

Habyarimana had ascended the ranks of the military having initially been educated and trained by the Belgian colonial regime, graduating as an officer just as the Parmehutu party was coming into power. As a Hutu under the new regime, he quickly climbed the ranks and by 1973 had been appointed to be the Chief of Staff of the Army and the Minister of Defense.

When Habyarimana launched his coup on July 5 he enjoyed support from the army and encountered little resistance. He was able to take control of the government without any deaths and making only 56 arrests, which included Kayibanda and other leaders of Parmehutu, which was subsequently disbanded. However, all 56 of those arrested would later be killed in prison years later, some reportedly from starvation.

As president, Habyarimana replaced Parmehutu with his own one-party regime, the National Revolutionary Movement for

Development (MRND), which had the backing of French imperialism. He pursued a more aggressive Hutu supremacist policy which encouraged anti-Tutsi pogroms. In response, Tutsi rebels who had fled to Uganda formed the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) and began long preparations for military action against MRND.

Habyarimana would rule Rwanda for over 20 years. In 1990 the RPF invaded Rwanda and began the Rwandan civil war. In 1994 Habyarimana was assassinated, triggering an uprising of Hutu extremists both inside and outside of the government who carried out the Rwandan genocide, killing at least 800,000 Tutsi.

75 years ago: British Labor government establishes National Health Service

On July 5, 1948, the British National Health Service (NHS) was created, an entity that remains to this day, though in an ever more weakened form due to gross under-funding and deliberate efforts at privatization. The establishment of the NHS was a high point of the social reforms instituted in the post-World War II period, in Britain and internationally.

Calls for a universal medical service, accessible to all, had been raised within the Labour Party years before. The party's 1934 conference, held amid the social crisis of the depression, had passed a resolution for the establishment of such a state-run health system. That came amid growing anger over the situation where the wealthy elite and sections of the middle class could access medical care, based upon their financial resources, while the healthcare conditions of workers and the poor remained in many respects similar to those of the Victorian period.

The impact of the war had added additional weight to those demands. Britain, though not in the front rank of Allied casualties, had suffered significant injuries and deaths in the conflict with the Nazi regime. The impact of air raids, coming on top of those in World War I, had added to the immediacy of the losses and the dangers.

The key turning point, however, was the post-war electoral rout of the Tories. After a protracted "national unity" coalition, maintained by Labour during the war years, the general election held in July 1945 had delivered a massive defeat for the Tories and an unprecedented swing to Labour. Sir Winston Churchill, hailed in the media as a hero of the war, was unceremoniously repudiated, amid a developing radicalization of the working class in Britain and internationally.

The Labour government of Prime Minister Clement Attlee embarked upon a cautious program of social reform. This included nationalizing certain industries, including sections of the mines and finance, and establishing what would become the welfare state.

In an indication of the broad groundswell of support for universal healthcare, even the Tories were not able to oppose it directly. Instead, they instituted amendments to the Labour government's bill, directed against centralized state control of the

healthcare system, on the pretext of ensuring local autonomy.

A clear indication of the class character and ultimate purpose of the Labour government's policy—to shore up the capitalist profit system—was underscored by the coincidence between the establishment of the NHS and an assault on London dockworkers.

The very week before the NHS measures were instituted into law, Labour had declared a state of emergency over dock strikes directed against the withholding of bonuses for dangerous and dirty work. That declaration, backed by the right-wing trade union bureaucracy, paved the way for the effective deployment of the military against the workers as state-sanctioned strikebreakers.

100 years ago: British force abdication of Indian nationalist prince

On July 7, 1923, The British colonial authorities in India forced the abdication of Maharaja Ripudaman Singh, of the nominally independent Sikh princely state of Nabha in Punjab. Two days later he was arrested and charged with kidnapping officials of a neighboring, pro-British state.

In 1911 on the death of his father, Ripudaman Singh became the maharaja of Nabha, one of the hundreds of princely states in India that were not ruled directly by British imperialism. He refused to be crowned by the British Viceroy of India, as was then the norm for rulers of his status. During World War I, he refused to send troops to fight with the British.

He is said to have supported the Akalis, an anti-colonial movement among Sikhs that sought to free Sikh gurdwaras (places of worship) from rule by conservative, pro-British clergy. Ripudaman Singh also supported progressive legislation for women.

His alienation from the British became even deeper after the 1919 Jallianwala Bagh massacre, in which the British shot down hundreds of Indians at a market near Amritsar, site of the Sikh Golden Temple, one of the religion's most holy sites.

Ripudaman Singh was close to Lala Lajpat Rai, the president of the Indian National Congress after 1920, himself brutally beaten to death by the British superintendent of police in Lahore in 1928.

After his abdication, the British placed Ripudaman Singh's three-year-old son on the throne of Nabha, with a British administrator serving as a regent, and exiled the former maharaja. His removal sparked mass protests in Nabha, which failed to restore him to power.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact