

This week in history: November 20-26

19 November 2023

25 years ago: European rail workers strike against deregulation

On November 23, 1998, rail workers in Belgium, France, Spain, Portugal, Italy and Greece took strike action in protest against European Union proposals to deregulate and privatize the European freight rail system.

Virtually all rail traffic ground to a halt in Belgium and only one-third of services ran in France. Trains in and around Paris were most affected by the dispute. Motorways were packed with cars in the Paris region as commuters used other forms of transport to and from work. Routes from the northwest to the southwest, southeast and the east coast were heavily disrupted by the strike.

No trains ran from France to Belgium and the Thalys train service from France to Amsterdam, Holland and Cologne, Germany were cancelled due to the strike action. One in three Channel Tunnel services did not run and London-Brussels service was suspended for 24 hours.

Trains were severely disrupted in Greece, where no services operated in Athens or in Thessaloniki. Services were also hit in Luxembourg and Lisbon.

The 24-hour day of action was called by the Brussels-based European Federation of Transport Unions (FST). The dispute was called following the announcement of proposals by the European Commission intended to open up a quarter of the rail freight market to competition over the following decade, and to end the system of state control over freight. The Commission recommended that 5 percent of the freight network in the 15 European Union (EU) member states be opened up to private companies.

Rail job losses over the previous 15 years had been primarily the result of downsizing in the run-up to the single European Market and European Monetary Union. The falling cost of passenger and freight transportation, not only in Europe but also internationally, intensified competition throughout the transport sector. The EU was seeking to privatize the sector in preparation for an escalation of trade war in the aftermath of the single European Market.

50 years ago: White House forced to admit to erasing

Watergate tapes

On November 21, 1973, attorneys for the Richard Nixon White House admitted into court record that 18 minutes of tape recorded conversations in the Oval Office, involving discussions between Nixon and White House Chief of Staff Harry Robbins Haldeman three days after the Watergate break-in, had been erased. The Watergate tapes had been subpoenaed by District Court Judge John Sirica months earlier, in July of 1973.

The Nixon administration had refused to cooperate with the subpoenas and the broader Senate investigation into Watergate. Claiming an invented principle of “executive privilege,” Nixon affirmed that he had the right to withhold information from the Senate that he had determined might harm so-called “national security” interests if released.

The refusal by Nixon to provide the requested evidence was a clear indication that he was engaged in a cover-up of the break-in at the 1972 Democratic National Convention headquarters at the Watergate Hotel in Washington DC. Despite his efforts, the evidence against Nixon continued to pile up, as, one by one, members of his administration broke ranks and offered up testimony, often as part of a deal to save themselves from prosecution for their own criminal roles in the conspiracy.

A major development in Nixon’s crisis was the October 20 “Saturday Night Massacre,” when both the Attorney General and Deputy Attorney General resigned after refusing to fire Archibald Cox, the special prosecutor charged with leading the investigation. Despite the purge of the Justice Department, the new special prosecutor Leon Jaworski opted not to block the subpoena of the White House tapes. After the Saturday Night Massacre fiasco the White House recognized that eventually it would have to hand over the tapes and admitted to the court that critical discussions had been erased.

The White House claimed that Nixon’s secretary, Rose Mary Woods, deleted the recording by mistake after becoming distracted answering a phone call while in the process of transcribing the tape. The recording has never been recovered and it remains unknown what exactly was said in the conversation. However it is widely speculated that it entailed a discussion of how the Nixon administration planned to suppress the Watergate scandal and cover up the president’s role.

Despite admitting to the erasure, the Nixon administration

still refused to hand over other tapes to the investigation, announcing that they would be locked away in a White House safe. It would not be until August 5, 1974 that the tapes would be turned over, and only after the Supreme Court ruled the claim of executive privilege to be invalid. Even with the deleted portions of the tapes lost, what remained proved that Nixon had planned to use the CIA to block the FBI investigation and stop the truth of Watergate from becoming revealed to the public. Nixon would resign three days after the tapes were released, on August 8, 1974.

75 years ago: East Coast dock workers end strike after revolt against union sell-out

This week in November, 1948, 45,000 longshoremen on the East Coast of the US began returning to work after agreeing to a new contract that included wage increases and some improvements to conditions. The stoppage had begun on November 10, after workers revolted against a sell-out agreement pushed by the International Longshoremen's Association.

The *Militant*, the publication of the then Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party, noted that the stoppage “was not only the first general strike of Atlantic Coast dockworkers, but the first officially sanctioned strike in the history of the AFL International Longshoremen's Association [ILA].” It occurred at the tail end of a wave of post-World War II labor militancy in the US, as workers sought to reverse the impact of union-enforced wartime wage freezes amid substantial inflation.

The *Militant* wrote that the dock workers had forced improvements to the contract, after rejecting the deal first advanced by the ILA and its leader Joseph P. “King” Ryan. While Ryan's sellout had limited pay increases to 10 cents an hour for day work and 15 cents for night work, the final contract locked in increases of 13 and 19.5 cents respectively. Additional gains were won on guaranteed shifts, paid vacations and the establishment of a welfare fund.

But, the *Militant* warned: “The greatest evils still remain under Ryan's notorious gangster rule. These are the vicious shape-up system, which puts the hiring in the hands of crooked pier bosses; the speed-up and dangerous working conditions.”

Ryan, a longtime AFL leader, was an avowed opponent of industrial unionism and a vicious anti-communist. Prior to the dispute, ILA bureaucrats had recently appointed him the union's president for life, in a formalization of his dictatorial rule.

Ryan and the rest of the union bureaucracy were increasingly aligned with the Truman administration's militarist program. The same week it reported on the longshoremen's dispute, the *Militant* covered a November constitutional convention of the

Congress of Industrial Organizations, which backed the aggressive Cold War policies of American imperialism that were already resulting in frame-ups and victimizations of socialist and communist workers within the unions.

100 years ago: Filipino rebel leader flees from meeting with American Governor General

On November 20, 1923, Filipino troops in the American-governed Philippines pursued Sanchez, a leader of the Muslim Moro rebels who fled to the inland of Mindanao, the Philippines' second-largest island and the center of the Muslim Moro rebellion, after the American Governor-General, Leonard Wood, attempted to meet with him. Wood blamed local Filipino officials and claimed the Christian authorities were guilty of a great lack of tact with the Moros.

With the hypocrisy and arrogance of an imperial viceroy, Wood complained, “There has been petty graft in the collection of taxes, licenses, and fees, through which the Moros have been victimized.” In July, Wood had reappointed to office a corrupt American detective in the Manila police department—who had been removed by Filipino authorities—an act which caused his entire Filipino cabinet to resign in protest.

That any Moro leader would seek safety at the appearance of an American official, however, was hardly surprising, especially if that official was Wood. During the occupation of the Philippines in the Spanish-American War and the military attempts at pacification afterwards, the American troops behaved with great brutality toward the Moros.

In 1906, American troops killed hundreds of women and children in the aftermath of a battle that has come to be known as the Moro Crater Massacre. Wood was at the time the governor of Moro Province, an area of Mindanao. The massacre shocked the world and newspapers in the United State vociferously condemned the killing of women and children.

Wood as governor general was known to have a hostile relationship with Filipino leaders who had repeatedly pressed for independence from the United States in the aftermath of World War I. President Woodrow Wilson had pledged independence for the Philippines upon leaving office in 1921, but the subsequent Republican Harding administration reneged on the promise.



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