

# This week in history: April 15-21

14 April 2024

## 25 years ago: Judge levies \$45.5 million fine against American Airlines pilots union

On April 15, 1999, in one of the largest fines ever levied against an American trade union, US District Judge Elton “Joe” Kendall ordered the Allied Pilots Association (APA) to pay \$45.5 million in damages to American Airlines for a sick-out by AA pilots earlier the same year. The massive fine—\$7 million more than the APA’s net worth of \$38 million—was designed to effectively destroy the union representing 9,200 pilots at American Airlines.

The judge’s action stemmed from a 10-day job action by thousands of American pilots against contract violations and the outsourcing of jobs to American’s low-cost affiliate Reno Air. The sick-out, which began on February 6, quickly got out of the control of the APA leadership and crippled the country’s second-largest airline, forcing American to cancel 6,000 flights and disrupt travel for 600,000 passengers. In the course of the job action, rank-and-file pilots defied Kendall’s February 10 back-to-work order. Three days afterwards the judge held the union in contempt of court and ordered APA officials to pay \$10 million as a down payment on a future “eight-figure” fine.

On Thursday Kendall rejected arguments from union attorneys that cancellations following his back-to-work order had only cost the airline between \$1.4 million and \$4.7 million. Dispensing with even the appearance of neutrality, the Texas judge backed American’s claim that it had lost \$50 million, saying, “American Airlines is not going to want to go to the public and the stockholders and talk about taking that kind of hit without it being true.” Kendall said the \$45.5 million damage award was “a conservative” estimate of the harm done to American.

The judge, appointed to the federal bench by President George H.W. Bush in 1992, also disregarded arguments by APA officials that they had done everything to get their members back to work following his temporary restraining order. Kendall said the union had supposedly been taken over by a “radical element” which was “determined to fly American Airlines into the side of a mountain.”

## 50 years ago: Symbionese Liberation Army rob bank with assistance of Patty Hearst

On April 15, 1974, the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA), a petty-bourgeois radical terrorist group, staged an armed robbery of the Hibernia Bank in San Francisco. One of the assailants was Patty Hearst, the granddaughter of the multimillionaire newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst.

The SLA was formed in 1973 by students from the University of

California, Berkeley during visits to Vacaville prison. The students, under the influence of the middle-class “New Left,” and modeling themselves after Che Guevara, believed that they could confront capitalism by recruiting prison inmates into an urban guerrilla movement. The group’s leader, Donald DeFreeze, was the only former prisoner to actually join the SLA, with all other known members having been student radicals.

Patty Hearst had originally been a victim of a kidnapping plot by the SLA in February 1974. The SLA abducted Hearst from her Berkeley, California apartment, originally planning to use her to negotiate the release of two SLA members who had been arrested for assassinating the Superintendent of Oakland Public Schools, Marcus Foster, in November 1973.

However, in the course of her captivity Hearst expressed political agreement with her kidnapers and joined the SLA. She would release audio tapes stating her membership in the group, denouncing the greed and hypocrisy of her family, and demanding that her father organize an effort to provide food to every Californian facing poverty.

In reports on the affair written by the FBI and in the capitalist newspapers, the claim was made that Hearst was “brainwashed” by her SLA captors, or forced into making certain statements. As explained in the US predecessor to the WSWS, the *Bulletin*, “The question they are all seeking to avoid is why a girl like Patricia Hearst, a member of one of the wealthiest families in the United States, decides to take up arms against the capitalist system.”

The robbery of the Hibernia Bank was the first time Hearst was seen in public since her kidnapping. She entered the bank armed alongside other SLA members and shouted commands at the bank employees and patrons. The group escaped with \$10,000 and shot and wounded two people during the robbery. Far from being coerced, it was clear Hearst was playing a leading role in the heist.

The SLA would flee San Francisco, embarking on a desperate spree of armed robberies. In one instance the SLA was surrounded by police at their hideout in Los Angeles. The situation turned into a shootout and several SLA members were killed. DeFreeze reportedly shot himself during the confrontation.

Hearst, who was not at the LA shootout, was eventually arrested in September 1975. During the trial Hearst renounced all of her previous statements of support for the SLA and claimed she was forced into all her actions. She was found guilty of her involvement in the bank robbery and sentenced to seven years in prison.

After Hearst had served 21 months, President Jimmy Carter commuted her sentence, due to her family’s political connections. Bill Clinton would later grant Hearst a full pardon.

## 75 years ago: Clash between Chinese Communist Party forces and

## British navy

On April 20, 1949, a clash between Chinese Communist Party fighters and British Navy ships broke out on the Yangtze River. Dubbed the Yangtze, or Amethyst, incident, after the main British ship involved, the encounter pointed to the ongoing role of the major powers in supporting the forces of reaction in their present and former imperial possessions, and could have resulted in a major war.

The context was the Chinese Civil War, which had been raging since the defeat of Japan and the end of its brutal occupation in 1945. The conflict pitted the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its mass peasant army against the Kuomintang, the reactionary bourgeois party led by the warlord Chiang Kai-shek. Widely despised for corruption and brutality, Chiang had been the butcher of the 1925-27 Chinese Revolution, overseeing the murder of tens of thousands of workers in Shanghai and elsewhere.

In the fourth year of the civil war, the Kuomintang was in disarray, after a series of successful offensives by the CCP's People's Liberation Army (PLA). The US and the British continued to provide aid to the Kuomintang, but sought to conceal their support given its discredited and corrupt character.

In April, the PLA was engaged in a major cross-river offensive, in the immediate vicinity of Nanjing, aimed at taking what had been for decades the Kuomintang capital. Such a victory, it was known, would have been the immediate harbinger of the complete defeat of Chiang's forces and the victory of the PLA.

It was in this charged atmosphere that a flotilla of British naval ships were sent down the Yangtze, purportedly to relieve another warship stationed to protect the British Embassy in Nanjing. The British armada, consisting of four vessels, passed directly through part of the river that was central to the PLA operation, despite previous CCP demands that the old colonial power remain outside of active areas of the civil war.

The PLA responded to this violation with warning shots. When they too were ignored, its troops opened fire on the *HMS Amethyst*. The British ship was eventually grounded and its turrets disabled, with some of the sailors forced to clamber ashore. Other ships in the British flotilla that sought to come to its aid received similar treatment. The *Amethyst* would be detained in place by the PLA for 10 weeks, amid a flurry of diplomatic negotiations. The incident shocked the major powers, above all Britain, which had claimed free passage through Chinese waters for centuries.

In the meantime, the PLA would seize Nanjing, and shortly after it Shanghai, with the Chinese Revolution fast approaching victory. The CCP, based on its Stalinist program of a two-stage revolution and collaboration with the national bourgeoisie, had repeatedly made overtures to Chiang and engaged in peace talks with the Kuomintang. It eventually took power, only under conditions of the intransigence of the imperialist powers and the Kuomintang, and propelled by a developing mass movement.

## 100 years ago: Hundreds of motorists attempt to break quarantine in Arizona

On April 18, 1924, about 700 motorists in 200 cars attempted to race

across the Colorado River Bridge between California and Arizona at Yuma, Arizona, which had been closed because of a quarantine to stop the spread of hoof and mouth disease (HMD) that was then decimating livestock in California.

HMD is highly contagious and deadly to cloven-footed mammals. Humans rarely contract it but can carry the virus and spread it.

Some cars passed quarantine guards but police and firefighters from Yuma County assembled on the Arizona side of the bridge, aimed fire hoses at the cars and stopped the rush. The *New York Times* noted, "there was no shooting." Even so, some motorists refused to return to the California side. Authorities allowed four cars to cross into Arizona after they had fumigated them.

The train of cars, nearly a mile long, which stretched out into the desert on the California side of the bridge, had been waiting to cross for four days, along with thousands of others, although not all attempted to cross.

National Guardsmen arrived the next day (and fired machine guns into the air to announce their presence) and cars were eventually allowed through after they had been dosed with formaldehyde and passengers were forced to walk through sawdust sprinkled with the substance.

The outbreak of HMD in California resulted in the deaths of over 100,000 livestock and 20,000 deer. It was one of the worst outbreaks of the century in the United States. Thirty-six states imposed restrictions on various types of agricultural products from California.

One historian notes,

Arizona's reaction to the epidemic was the most extreme. Democratic Governor George W.P. Hunt adopted a quarantine so severe that even human movement across the border was suspended. ... In April, Governor Hunt received a telegram from President Calvin Coolidge requesting the relaxation of the quarantine. Hunt ... telegraphed in reply that he was obligated to "business, banking, agricultural, stockraising and dairy interests ... [who are] practically unanimous against any modification of [the] quarantine and the pressure on me is to make it even more stringent and apply it to passengers on railroad trains passing through the state."



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