

This week in history: July 8-14

7 July 2024

25 years ago: Clinton ends “anti-poverty” tour

On July 10, 1999, US President Bill Clinton wrapped up his “anti-poverty” four-day tour of some of the poorest areas of the US. He made appeals to thousands of impoverished working people and unemployed to put their faith in the profit system.

The six locations which Clinton visited were among the most devastated in America—Appalachia, the Delta region of the state of Mississippi, East St. Louis, Pine Ridge Indian reservation, south Phoenix and Watts in south-central Los Angeles. Clinton was the first president to visit Appalachia since Lyndon Johnson and the first to pay an official visit to an Indian reservation since Calvin Coolidge. This demonstrated how consistently the American ruling class had for decades shunned any contact with the poorest of the poor.

Clinton was not traveling to these areas to announce any major government initiative. He began his tour in Hazard, Kentucky, where Lyndon Johnson launched his abortive “war on poverty” in 1965. But the tiny scale of the programs which he proposed—\$1.5 million for housing, \$8 million for training, along with tax incentives for corporations—only underscored the vast shift to the right in big business politics over the previous three decades. Clinton made his tour, not to praise the war on poverty, but to bury it.

The poverty tour was a lie on many levels. Most brazen was Clinton’s claim that the rest of America, the entire country outside of these desperate “pockets of poverty,” was enjoying remarkable prosperity. This presentation, uncritically echoed by the media, denied the reality of growing social polarization in America. While Wall Street boomed, the living standards, not only of the poorest Americans, but of broad layers of working people, were declining or stagnant.

A report by the Census Bureau released during Clinton’s tour suggested the dimensions of the deepening social crisis in America. It found that 49 million people had difficulty paying important bills—rent, mortgage, utilities, food or medical care—in 1995. While this included most of those in the bottom 20 percent of income, more than 8 million people with incomes above \$45,000 had difficulty paying for essentials at one time or another.

50 years ago: City workers strike shuts down Baltimore

On July 8, 1974, thousands of workers employed by the city of

Baltimore, Maryland began a strike that completely paralyzed the city. Virtually all city workers walked off the job, from garbage collection and sanitation to zookeepers, dog catchers, and prison guards.

The strike was initially set off on June 30 when about 1,000 sanitation workers walked out in a wildcat strike to protest a new contract that had been negotiated by the city and the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). The agreement gave city workers a wage increase of just 6 percent.

Workers were demanding a raise of at least 50 cents per hour to keep up with historically unprecedented levels of inflation over the preceding few years. They also called for improved healthcare coverage and an end to a hated point system that allowed the city to fire a worker for missing eight days, even if sick or injured.

The wildcat action of rank-and-file workers, initially the garbage collectors, to refuse the contract was met with massive support from all sections of city workers. Immediately following the walkout, the heads of the AFSCME Local 44 attempted to pressure workers back on the job, opposed any strike action, and called for workers to accept the contract.

This was met with outrage from the sanitation workers who responded by expanding the strike and protesting their leadership. Some workers demonstrated their opposition to the AFSCME bureaucracy by hanging an effigy of Local 44 President Raymond Clark.

After a few days, when it became clear that AFSCME faced an all-out rebellion by the rank-and-file, it changed course and officially backed the strike. As punishment for failing to control the workers the city filed injunctions against the union declaring the strike to be illegal.

A circuit court issued a \$15,000 daily fine against Local 44 for each day the strike continued. When informed that the local only had \$6,000 of cash on hand it ordered the union treasury impounded and that all membership dues collected be handed over directly to the city.

Gerald, a sanitation worker who spoke with reporters from the American WSWs predecessor, *The Bulletin*, said, “We should keep on striking. This is the best strike ever put on in this city. We can’t back down. Some guys who have been down there 20 years have been fired because of the point system. At my yard, nothing has gone through the gates since the strike began.”

In the last days of the strike the Baltimore police, also covered by the contract, joined the strike and refused to go on duty, making it the first major police strike action since the 1919 Boston police strike.

The strike lasted until July 16 when workers ratified a newly

negotiated contract. Workers won significant improvements to the original contract including a 10 percent raise, a fully paid medical plan and a pledge to end the point system.

However, Mayor William Donald Schaefer promised to make up for the wage increases by firing 300 workers from sanitation, a clear act of retribution for their militancy.

75 years ago: “Mixed marriages” banned in South Africa in step towards apartheid

On July 8, 1949, the “Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act” came into effect in South Africa, barring “whites” and “non-whites” from entering into legally-recognised relationships. This was the first major piece of racist legislation implemented by the National Party since its election to government in 1949 under Prime Minister D. F. Malan, marking a step towards open apartheid rule.

Racial discrimination and the oppression of the African population had occurred in different forms for hundreds of years, since the arrival of the Dutch and British colonists. In the first half of the 20th century, South African governments had denied the African population basic civil rights, including full citizenship rights and the vote.

The turn to apartheid nevertheless marked a shift. It occurred under conditions of a growth of the African working class and of its presence in the major urban centres. African political and civil rights groups increasingly demanded equality and an end to discrimination.

Under these conditions, the National Party was brought to power to block any unified movement of black and other workers against capitalist rule. It also made a populist pitch to lower-class “whites,” especially Boers (descendants of the Dutch colonists), playing to fears that their social position would deteriorate further without racial separation.

The National Party convened the Sauer Commission, which had, in 1948, welcomed a “theory” propounded by Hendrik Verwoerd, calling for sweeping legislative and physical separation of the “races.” No longer would separation be confined to racially-based schools and institutions—it would extend to a vast array of legislation, and measures to fully separate the “white” and African population while exploiting black labor.

The July 1949 marriages act was followed by the 1950 Population Registration law. It required everyone to register as “white,” “black” or “mixed,” with a separate category for South Asian residents later added, forming the basis for a raft of discriminatory and racist measures. The Immorality Acts of the same year formally outlawed sexual relations between “white” and “non-white” South Africans.

100 years ago: Tungus Republic declared in Soviet Siberia

On July 14, 1924, anti-Soviet elements declared the independence of a state called the Tungus Republic, formed from parts of the Okhotsk region of the Russian Far East and the Yakut Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic created in 1922 (today the Republic of Sakha, within Russia).

In a statement of independence, a meeting of an “All-Tungus Congress of the Okhotsk coast and surroundings” at the capital of Ayan, a port town on the Sea of Okhotsk, about 2,500 kilometers (about 1,500 miles) north of Vladivostok, appealed to the imperialist-dominated League of Nations “as powerful defenders of small nationalities on a global scale” to save them from the “common enemy of world nationalism—Russian communism.”

In May and June, rebels under the leadership of Mikhail Artemyev had captured the territory, killing Soviet officials in Ayan. A Provisional Central Tungus National Government was established in Nelkan. The region had been the last redoubt of the counterrevolutionary White armies until as late as 1923.

Artemyev had been appointed as a Red Army commissar in the Yakut region in 1920 but had defected to the White detachments of Mikhail Korobeinikov in 1922. Artemyev later served as a White guerilla with Anatoly Pepelyayev who terrorized the Russian Far East and was defeated at Ayan in June 1923 by the Red Army under the leadership of the Latvian Bolshevik Ivan Strod, in what was perhaps the last major engagement of the Russian Civil War.

The Tungus Republic lasted until July 18, 1925, when a peace agreement was brokered between Strod and Artemyev, when rebels laid down their arms. According to the agreement, Artemyev was amnestied but by 1927 he was operating as a White guerilla again. He was captured and sentenced to death by Soviet authorities in 1928. In 1999, the Sakha Republic rehabilitated him. Strod was murdered by Stalin in the “Latvian Operation,” a part of the political genocide of Bolsheviks in 1937.



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