

This week in history: April 28-May 4

This column profiles important historical events which took place during this week, 25 years ago, 50 years ago, 75 years ago and 100 years ago

28 April 2025

25 years ago: Actors and museum workers in separate strikes

During the week of April 28 through May 4, 2000, actors and museum workers launched separate strikes across the US.

On May 1st, the historic day of international working class solidarity known as May Day, radio and TV actors struck against the profit-hungry advertising industry and its media empire backers. Over 100,000 members of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) and the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA) were demanding pay for each airing of their commercials on network TV and a larger share of the pie from the prosperous advertising market on cable and network TV.

In major cities, strikers displayed signs saying “Advertising Pays, Advertisers Don’t” and railed against corporate greed. It was the first major Hollywood strike since the over five-month long walkout by the Writers Guild of America in 1988. Well-known actors supported the strike such as Elliott Gould, Richard Dreyfuss and Tony Roberts, and so did the American working class.

The advertising companies adamantly fought to erase the 50-year-old pay-per-play structure and substitute in its place a one-time flat fee, giving them the opportunity to run ads an unlimited amount of time over network TV for a 13-week period. The actors would have been paid \$2,575 for their labor. On average, SAG rank-and-file members earned poverty wages between \$5,000 and \$7,000 annually and lived in cities with a high cost of living. Most actors worked multiple jobs to survive.

The strike only happened when SAG members had voted to oust the incumbent president. Mass anger erupted over the union’s collaboration with advertising executives to reduce wages and benefits a year before the strike.

During the same week, 260 museum workers walked off the job against management at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City, in the first major job action since 1973. Pay, healthcare and job security were the central concerns of archivists, curators, administrative assistants, visitor services, librarians, writers and graphic artists.

The union representing museum workers, the Professional and Administrative Staff Association (PASTA) of the United Auto Workers Local 2110, limited demands to a 5 percent wage increase the first year and a 4 percent increase in subsequent years over the five-year contract. Museum officials offered a 3 percent increase for three years by comparison.

While the contract expired last October, union officials refused to call a strike. This counterproductive action gave MoMA management time to prepare for a strike. To further undermine the solidarity of MoMA workers, six different unions had representation, disunifying the workforce.

One striking worker stated: “the other unions have contracts that expire at different times, and so they are working. The guards have a no-strike clause in their contract, the art handlers have a no-strike clause, the operation and housekeeping union has a no-strike clause, and so on. By contract they cannot go on a sympathy strike and join us.”

50 years ago: 100,000 in Lisbon call for socialism after first election in 50 years

On May 1, 1975, hundreds of thousands of workers demonstrated throughout Portugal to celebrate International Workers’ Day and to call for a socialist government. The mass demonstration came just one week after elections were held for the Constituent Assembly, the first elections in Portugal in over 50 years.

The April 25 elections were a total rejection of Portugal’s military government, the Armed Forces Movement (MFA). With a 91 percent voter turnout, the Socialist Party (PS) and the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP) secured a combined 60 percent of the vote. The MFA had urged voters to reject all parties and cast blank ballots as a sign of support for the military regime, a call that was not taken up.

In working-class strongholds like Setubal and Beja, support for the PS and the PCP reached 75-95 percent. The PS, led by Mário Soares, won 38 percent nationally, while the PCP and its allied Portuguese Democratic Movement (MDP) garnered 13 percent and 5 percent, respectively. By contrast, the center-right Popular Democrats (PPD) received 26 percent and the neo-fascist Social Democratic Center (CDS) trailed far behind with less than 8 percent.

The results demonstrated that the working class was determined to continue the revolution begun in 1974 which toppled the regime of Marcello Caetano by now fighting to establish a socialist state. The MFA generals, many with fascist sympathies, rejected the results of the elections, declaring that Portugal was not “ready” for socialism, and that they would not allow any PS representatives into government positions.

The May Day demonstrations were a direct response to the election results and the repudiation of the MFA. Over 100,000 workers flooded Lisbon’s streets, many chanting, “Socialism yes, dictatorship no!” Workers demanded the immediate end of the MFA government and the establishment of the socialist government that they had voted for.

When PS supporters were barred from entering a stadium where MFA’s leaders and PCP-aligned Premier Vasco Gonçalves were speaking, clashes erupted. PS aligned workers forced their way inside, interrupting Gonçalves’ speech with cries of “We won the elections!”

The protests escalated days later, as 30,000 PS supporters marched through Lisbon, defying military orders banning further demonstrations. MFA's troops blocked access to government buildings while workers jeered at them demanding that the MFA respect the electoral mandate.

The events of Portugal in 1975 vindicated the analysis of the Trotskyist movement for the necessity of revolutionary leadership. Without a party independent of the Stalinists and Social Democrats, the working class could not take power into its own hands.

Despite its electoral victory, the PS ultimately refused to break decisively with the MFA or make a call for workers' control of the state. Meanwhile, the Stalinists of the PCP collaborated with the MFA to suppress strikes and land seizures, prioritizing stability of the capitalist system over socialist revolution.

75 years ago: At least 18 striking workers killed by police in South Africa on May Day

On May 1, 1950, a May Day mass strike in South Africa was violently suppressed, with police firing into multiple crowds of demonstrators, killing 18 and injuring another 38. Thousands of South African workers had gone on strike that day both to commemorate May Day (International Workers Day) and also to oppose the Suppression of Communism Act, proposed by the National Party which had come into power in 1948 and already begun implementing its program of apartheid.

The Act was widely opposed by the South African working class. While immediately aimed at dissolving the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), its wording was so broad as to deem any opposition to the apartheid government as "communist." It thereby functioned as a legislative tool for suppressing all forms of political dissent. Its widespread unpopularity was demonstrated earlier that year in March, when 10,000 people attended a "Freedom of Speech Convention" in Johannesburg to oppose it. The delegates of the convention voted in favor of a strike to take place on May 1.

When the day of the strike came, tens of thousands refused to work, with the majority choosing to stay home. Many, however, picketed or held gatherings to protest both the Suppression of Communism Act and poor working conditions more broadly. This was despite a government order that banned all meetings and gatherings on the day. In one instance, police fired on a mass meeting of about five hundred striking workers at Benoni to disperse it, resulting in two deaths. Similarly brutal police crackdowns in other working-class cities such as Newclare and Orlando resulted in an official death toll of 18, though the true figure may have been higher.

The events of May Day 1950 in South Africa, while demonstrating the strength of the South African working class, also highlighted the repressive nature of the capitalist state and the bankruptcy of the Stalinist CPSA leadership, which subordinated the working class to a bourgeois nationalist perspective. The CPSA formally disbanded two months later in compliance with the Suppression of Communism Act, in order to keep their seats in parliament.

100 years: Trade union federation formed in China

On May 1, 1925, International Workers' Day, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) was founded in Canton, (now Guangzhou) during the Second National Labor Congress by 277 delegates representing 540,000 workers from 166 local unions. The central role in the congress

was played by Central Trade Union Secretariat of the Chinese Communist Party. The CCP had been founded only five years before as an internationalist party oriented toward the working class.

The first executive committee of the union, consisting of 25 workers, all Communists, was elected by the Congress, which also appointed a chairman, Lin Weimin, and three vice-chairman, Liu Shaoqi, Deng Pei and Zheng Yimin.

The congress also established a clear organizational structure for the union including an Executive Bureau with four departments: one for organization, responsible for unionizing; a secretariat looked after administrative affairs; a propaganda department for public relations and education; and an economy department for finances. The ACFTU Constitution passed by the congress also allowed the Executive Committee to establish special units to "bypass the formal channels of the ACFTU and to conduct covert actions," according to one historian.

The Chinese working class was then a small portion of the population, which was primarily made up of peasants, but industrial centers in Guangzhou, Hong Kong and Shanghai had grown, increasing the number of and social weight of workers.

The trade unions would play a key role in the workers' uprising in Shanghai of March 1927 under the leadership of the CCP. The trade unions conducted mass strikes in that city particularly to dislodge imperialist forces from the international settlements. Any opposition to imperialism was of great concern to the KMT leader Chiang Kai-Shek, whose troops were on the outskirts of the city as a part of an expedition to unify the country and break the power of various groups of warlords.

Joseph Stalin, whose bureaucratic faction in the Russian Communist Party now dominated the Soviet government and the Communist International, collaborated closely with Chiang and subordinated the workers to the KMT faction of the middle class. He ordered the CCP to direct the workers to surrender their weapons to Chiang.

The trade unions, however, organized a mass protest on April 12 and Chiang's troops opened fire, killing over 100 workers. A period of terror followed with the execution of thousands of Communists and the banning of the ACFTU.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact