

This week in history: May 19-May 25

18 May 2025

25 years ago: US Congress prepares way for deepened China trade

On May 24, 2000, the US House of Representatives passed a permanent normal trading relations (NTR) bill aimed at deepening trade with China. The bill passed with bipartisan support, 237 to 197.

NTR was intended to make US corporations dominant in the China market, besting their Japanese and European rivals. The Stalinist Chinese Communist Party (CCP) offered the vast and growing Chinese working class as cheap wage slaves to the imperialist powers and US multinational corporations. The bill would pave the way for Chinese entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO), which sought to facilitate capitalist exploitation throughout the planet by bringing down trade restrictions.

The US industrial, agricultural and big-tech sectors expected to gain immensely. Agricultural companies anticipated increased revenue of \$2 billion a year, while tech companies were given permission to enter the growing \$20 billion wireless phone market. Tariffs on computers and semiconductors, essential in the manufacturing of batteries, electronics and electric vehicles, were eliminated.

The bill received heavy political backing from President Bill Clinton, Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan, former president George H. W. Bush and both major political parties, along with their presidential candidates in the 2000 elections, Republican George W. Bush and Democrat Al Gore. The military and intelligence apparatus also advocated for the bill. The *New York Times* jubilantly called its passage a “stunning victory for the Clinton administration and corporate America.”

Major corporations had spearheaded an aggressive campaign to secure enough votes in Congress. The Business Roundtable, made up of chief executives from Boeing, Citigroup, General Motors and hundreds of other corporate behemoths, spent tens of millions of dollars in mass advertisements and lobbying actions. The corporations wined and dined politicians and handed them gifts and cash to buy their support and vote.

The AFL-CIO union bureaucracy lined up against trade normalization alongside fascistic politicians like Pat Buchanan and a minority section of corporate America whose profits were put at risk by the advance of free trade. The nationalist perspective of the union officials was bankrupt. In the final analysis, it sought to ramp up exploitation of US workers, the better to compete against their class brothers and sisters all over the planet and thereby to “save American jobs.” This had already proved disastrous over the

course of the 1980s and 1990s, when millions of jobs were lost to factory closures across the US—even as the wealth of the bureaucracy grew.

50 years ago: Quebec workers launch general strike to defend arrested strikers

On May 21, 1975, 150,000 workers in Quebec conducted a one-day general strike in defense of 34 workers who had been arrested for occupying a plant during a strike against airplane manufacturer United Aircraft, a struggle that had by then entered its 17th month.

The conflict at United Aircraft began in December 1973 when workers at the Montreal-area plant, members of United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 510, walked off the job to protest layoffs, speedups and stagnant wages. The strike quickly became a flashpoint as the company, a subsidiary of the U.S.-based United Technologies Corporation, refused to negotiate.

For months, workers maintained picket lines despite court injunctions limiting their numbers and barring them from approaching the plant. The battle escalated on May 12, 1975, when police stormed the factory where workers had launched an occupation. The police beat the workers with clubs and arrested 34. A Quebec judge charged four with “threatening private property,” sentencing them to jail while the others faced up to 24-year prison terms.

The arrests ignited outrage across Quebec’s militant working class. So much so that the Quebec Federation of Labor (QFL) was forced to call a 24-hour general strike, mobilizing workers from sectors including postal services, Hydro-Quebec power plants, construction, education and healthcare. Factories, docks and public services ground to a halt. In Montreal, thousands filled the Paul Sauvé Arena, chanting demands for the release of the jailed workers and an end to anti-union repressions.

Gaetan Breault, a United Aircraft striker, explained the stakes to reporters from the *Bulletin*, the US predecessor to the WSWS, “This is a political strike. Big business uses judges, the government, and police to break union militancy. They’ve thrown everything at us—injunctions, fines, jail.” He highlighted the complicity of federal authorities, noting that Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau’s government had denied strikers unemployment benefits, while awarding United Aircraft \$14 million in contracts during the dispute.

The general strike was one expression of the international wave of class battles sparked by the global economic crisis that began

with the end of the Bretton Woods system in 1971. Since then, Canada's dollar had plummeted, inflation soared and unemployment climbed.

Among the other attacks, Quebec premier Robert Bourassa's Liberal government had passed the hated Bill 26, which had forced out the leaders of the construction unions and replaced them with government appointed officials. Federal Finance Minister John Turner threatened "massive unemployment" unless workers accepted austerity.

After many months on strike many rank-and-file workers expressed frustration with the union bureaucracies. One construction worker told the *Bulletin*, "A one-day strike isn't worth a damn. We should stay out until they free our brothers."

The United Aircraft strike would last until August 1975 when a partial agreement was reached that included the dropping of the charges against the 34 arrested strikers. However, it would not be until 1976 that a final contract agreement was ratified—with significant concessions granted to the company.

75 years ago: Atomic scientist Harry Gold arrested for espionage

On May 23, 1950, Swiss-born American chemist Harry Gold was arrested by the FBI on charges of espionage, accused of leaking US nuclear weapon data to the Soviet Union.

The investigation leading to Gold's arrest began with the detention of Klaus Fuchs two months prior. Fuchs was a German-born British physicist who worked on the Manhattan Project during World War II and passed nuclear secrets to the Soviet Union. In March 1950, Fuchs was convicted by the British government of "communicating information to a potential enemy." Under interrogation, Fuchs identified Gold as his courier. When the FBI apprehended Gold, he confessed to his role and was sentenced to 30 years imprisonment, for which he served half that time and was released under parole in 1965.

Gold's case was a significant episode in the postwar anti-communist witch hunt within the US. An atmosphere of hysteria was deliberately whipped up, with claims of potential Soviet spies in virtually all areas of American life. Gold's testimony, in particular, was a key element of the frame-up of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, who were ultimately convicted of espionage and executed in 1953.

In addition to legitimizing the aggressive US confrontation with the Soviet Union, a component of its bid for untrammelled global hegemony, the anti-communist crusade supported a crackdown on socialist opponents in the working class, as well as against opponents of militarism and war, all of who, were presented as threats to "national security."

The Smith Act of 1940, which made it illegal to advocate for the overthrow of the US government, was a key element of such persecutions. It had previously been used to prosecute members of the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party (SWP), and later, leading members of the Stalinist Communist Party USA (CPUSA).

100 years: New York City declares war on smallpox

On May 24, 1925, the *New York Times* published an article headlined, "To Start New War on Smallpox," which indicated the commitment to combating contagious disease in American ruling circles a century ago.

The article reported that Commissioner of New York City Department of Health, Dr. Frank J. Monaghan, had notified the public that an epidemic of smallpox was in danger of spread from communities on Long Island adjacent to the city to the Borough of Queens. Monaghan and other health officials had toured the stricken communities the previous day and announced that vaccination stations were to be opened there and in Queens the next day.

Monaghan reported to the Times:

All the cases thus far reported occurred among persons not previously vaccinated. The great majority of cases are children. Commencing Monday, in view of these reports and the tour of inspection that I made today with Dr. Somerset ... we will start a drive against the disease in this city, particularly in the Borough of Queens...

In view of the fact that smallpox is at our threshold we have already organized an intensive campaign of defense and offense to be waged in the city... I have directed Dr. Lewis I. Harris head of the Bureau of Preventable Diseases to establish vaccination stations. In every one of the localities in the Borough of Queens ...

Special doctors and nurses will be assigned to perform vaccinations to all who present themselves at the stations. Other nurses will make house to house visits to discover unrecognized or unreported cases of chicken pox or diseases resembling chicken pox or smallpox.

We wish to make sure that the cases of smallpox have not been mistaken for chicken pox. All such cases will be visited by our diagnosticians. The nurses will urge vaccination and distribute circulars advising it.

The *Times* noted that the Long Island authority planned to establish isolation points if the disease continued to spread.



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