

This week in history: September 8-14

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

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25 years ago: Mass protests over fuel prices rock Europe

Mass protests against soaring fuel prices shook Europe September 2000, reaching a high point on September 8. What began with fishermen and truckers in France quickly escalated into a continent-wide movement, with actions spreading to Italy, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Germany, Belgium and Spain.

In Britain, farmers, truckers and other workers blockaded oil refineries, distribution depots and filling stations. Protests shut down the UK's largest inland oil terminal at Kingsbury and severely affected Yorkshire, North West England and the Scottish borders on September 8-9. With fuel supplies dwindling, nearly 3,000 petrol stations faced closure, while essential services—including mail deliveries, food distribution, and even the National Health Service—reported serious disruption. Protesters demanded steep cuts in fuel taxes, between 15 and 36 pence per litre.

France saw the most militant actions, backed by nearly 90 percent of the population. Blockades began in late August when fishermen shut down the port of Calais and soon spread to Boulogne, Dunkirk, Le Havre, St. Malo and Cherbourg. Solidarity actions followed: truckers, bus and coach firms, farmers, taxi drivers, and even ambulance workers joined the protest and barricades were erected at 125 oil refineries.

By early September, 80 percent of French petrol stations had run out of fuel, airports were closing, and the national economy was grinding to a halt. Prime Minister Lionel Jospin briefly considered using police and troops to suppress the movement but, fearing a major confrontation, instead moved to appease it. Agricultural workers won £45 million in tax concessions, lorry operators gained subsidies of £1,000 per truck, and taxi drivers secured a 4.5 percent fare increase beginning October 1.

The catalyst for the protests was the massive surge in world oil prices—from \$9.90 per barrel in late 1998 to as high as \$34.50 by September 2000—compounded by punishing levels of fuel taxation across Europe. Britain, with the highest prices on the continent, funneled roughly three-quarters of pump costs into taxes and duties. Germany and other European governments also pushed through repeated fuel tax increases. Officials justified this policy shift under the veneer of environmental concern, but in practice it represented a broader reorientation of social-democratic governments: lowering taxes on corporations and the wealthy while increasing regressive,

consumption-based taxes on workers and small producers.

The 2000 fuel protests were significant not only for their scale but because they punctured the belief that European social-democratic governments, such as those led by Blair in Britain, Jospin in France, and Schröder in Germany, were immune from mass resistance. Their concessions, however limited or targeted, underscored how fragile public support had become and how quickly discontent over a basic necessity like fuel could escalate into nationwide and cross-border upheaval with potential revolutionary implications.

50 years ago: New York City teachers strike

On September 9, 1975, New York City teachers began a citywide strike that brought the public school system to an immediate standstill. The walkout was a direct response to a severe fiscal crisis that had brought the city to the brink of bankruptcy and threatened to lay off tens of thousands of city workers.

In 1975, New York City was facing a budget crisis manufactured by the city's capitalist ruling elite. Over a period of years the city had pursued a policy of funding critical city jobs by taking out loans from large banks. Now, the banks were demanding payment of the loans by taking control of the city budget and slashing jobs and social services.

These budget cuts included a proposed elimination of 14,000 public school jobs. In response the over 60,000 NYC teachers organized in the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), voted overwhelmingly to strike and fight back against the austerity budget.

The strike was highly effective, forcing the closure of at least 260 schools and keeping nearly all of the city's 1.1 million students out of classes. The strike was carried out under conditions of illegality as the city government sought to use the state Taylor law which banned strikes by public employees.

The courts would issue an injunction against the strike imposing heavy fines against the union and other penalties against individual teachers. This however did not deter teachers in the slightest who were prepared to wage a sustained fight against the city austerity budget, years of inflationary wage cuts and for high quality public education for the city's working class families.

A crucial demand for teachers was the preservation of small class

sizes. With the large layoffs teachers reported class sizes jumping to 45 students. One teacher speaking at the mass union strike vote meeting reported that she had been given a class of 60 students for the new year.

Despite the desire to fight and immense support for the teachers from other sections of city workers also facing cuts, the strike was called off after five days without having secured its key demands. The UFT would agree to a contract that only rehired a small fraction of the laid off educators. Additionally, the raises promised to teachers would be frozen by the recently created Emergency Financial Control Board, an assembly of banking executives appointed to pillage the city budget.

Piling one betrayal on top of the next, one month later on October 20, 1975, the UFT, led by longtime right-winger Albert Shanker, agreed to an unprecedented financial maneuver. The union invested \$150 million from teachers' retirement fund into Municipal Assistance Corporation bonds to help bail out the city budget. This action effectively used teachers' pension savings to provide a profit boost to Wall Street

75 years ago: US warplanes use napalm against Korean civilians

On September 10, 1950, United States warplanes dropped canisters of napalm over civilian-populated areas on Wolmido Island, five days before the US-South Korean landings at Incheon, a key military operation of the Korean War. No warnings were given to the civilians living on the island before 43 warplanes of the United States Air Force began dropping napalm on villages and firing guns indiscriminately.

It was not until 2008 that this crime came to light, during the South Korean Truth and Reconciliation Commission, where previously classified documents confirmed that 93 napalm canisters were deployed to "burn out" the eastern slope of the island and clear the way for US troops. The commission reported that there was a "strong likelihood that U.S. forces were aware of the numerous civilians living in Wolmido."

Interviews were also conducted by the commission with survivors of the attack, including Lee Boem-Ki, who was 18 at the time. "When the napalm hit our village, many people were still sleeping in their homes. Those who survived the flames ran to the tidal flats. We were trying to show the American pilots that we were civilians. But they strafed us, women and children."

There is no reliable count for the total number of fatalities that resulted from the bombing of Wolmido. Ten victims were verified as being killed, but that is almost certainly a vast underestimation given the scale of the bombardment. Those who did survive the napalm attacks were forced to evacuate their homes and were unable to return even after the conclusion of hostilities in 1953, due to the island's strategic importance to the US military.

The bombing of Wolmido Island was not an aberration, but a component part of systematic war crimes conducted by US forces during the Korean War. For decades afterwards the US government, as well as the dictatorial South Korean regime of Syngman Rhee which it backed, covered up evidence of any such war crimes that it committed against the Korean population.

Nor was this incident the last time that the US military used napalm to attack Korean civilians. Over the course of the war, the US dropped

over 30,000 tons of napalm on both North and South Korea during the duration of the war, setting a precedent for the deadly weapon to be used against future enemies of US imperialism, most notably during the Vietnam War.

100 years: British unions make "left" gesture to stave off working-class militancy

On September 10, 1925, the national congress of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) in the British town of Scarborough, North Yorkshire, passed a number of resolutions that expressed the growing militancy of the British working class and deeply disturbed the ruling class.

One such resolution was to authorize the TUC's General Council to secure the world-wide unity of the trade union movement in an all-inclusive federation. This was directed to the Social-Democratic International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU). The Communist-led National Minority Movement proposed an amendment that would have included the Communist-affiliated Red International of Trade Unions (known by its Russian abbreviation, Profintern) in developing a world alliance of unions, but it was defeated.

The congress passed another resolution condemning the American Dawes Plan in Germany, which had renegotiated reparations payments from the German defeat in World War I and infused cash into the German economy to help suppress the development of socialist revolution. The resolution characterized it as the "capitalist scheme for the enslavement of German labour."

The resolutions sparked cries about "Bolshevization" of the trade unions in the British and international press. The *Daily Mail* wrote: "The point clearly emerging from the Trade Union Congress is that red revolutionaries have been neither suppressed nor discouraged."

The strength of the National Minority Movement at the conference was an indication of the growing militancy of the British working class that would break out in a general strike next year.

But the TUC leaders used the resolutions as a left cover. In April they had founded the Anglo-Russian Joint Advisory Council, better known as the Anglo-Russian Committee, with Russian trade unions in the name of world trade union unity. The leaders of the TUC were to use it as a left cover in their betrayal of the general strike.



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