

This week in history: November 10-16

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

9 November 2025

25 years ago: Deadliest rail disaster in Austrian history kills 158

On November 11, 2000, a fire broke out on a funicular railway train inside the Kaprun tunnel in Austria, killing 155 people and leaving only twelve survivors from those traveling to the Kitzsteinhorn glacier. The disaster claimed lives from Austria (92), Germany (37), Japan (10), the United States (8), Slovenia (4), the Netherlands (2), the United Kingdom (1), and the Czech Republic (1). The tragedy was caused by a defective electric fan heater in the conductor's compartment, which ignited a blaze inside the tunnel just minutes after departure.

Safety failures contributed to the toll: the tunnel did not have a sprinkler system, fireproof emergency zones or evacuation areas. Survivors reported that the train doors jammed, trapping passengers as smoke and flames filled the tunnel. The investigation found that budget cuts and the shift of safety inspections to private operators had left funicular systems under-regulated; the Kaprun railway had not received a government safety inspection for three years.

The disaster exposed the negligence of both the operating company, Kapruner Gletscherbahnen AG, and the government agencies responsible for oversight. A relentless drive for cost-cutting created conditions of extreme danger. The tunnel's design offered no means of escape, and its ventilation system drew fresh air upward, feeding the fire and directing lethal smoke toward those attempting to flee.

Further evidence highlighted the state's poor safety record. Former Transport Minister Caspar Einem (1997-2000) admitted that the department responsible for public transport oversight suffered from severe understaffing, calling it "a failure that we did not do anything about." At the time, only 11 technicians monitored the safety of more than 3,000 funicular railways, cable cars, and ski lifts across Austria. A 1997 report from the Auditor General, ignored by officials, found that railway authorities had "for years not fulfilled their tasks or only partially completed them."

Budget cuts had also shifted inspection and maintenance duties to private operators. Although regulations required a government inspection every five years and annual checks by operators, the Kaprun funicular had not undergone an official inspection since 1997, three years before the fire.

While the Alpine resort of Kaprun remained a renowned destination for winter sports, its transformation into a site of tragedy revealed the consequences of privatization and weakened public oversight. The

catastrophe could have been prevented had safety and public welfare been prioritized over austerity and profit.

50 years ago: "Canberra Coup" ousts Labor from power in Australia

On November 11, Australia's Governor-General, Sir John Kerr, using archaic "reserve powers" derived from the British monarchy, summarily dismissed the twice-elected Labor government of Prime Minister Gough Whitlam. In its place, Kerr installed Liberal Party leader Malcolm Fraser as a "caretaker" prime minister. The anti-democratic removal of the elected prime minister would become known as the "Canberra Coup."

The immediate pretext for Whitlam's removal was a constitutional crisis manufactured by the Liberal opposition, which had used its control of the Senate to block the Labor government's budget bills, threatening to paralyze the state by depriving it of funding. Despite major support in the working class for a general strike against the Liberals, Whitlam worked to block such a movement and instead called on Kerr to act against the opposition.

Instead, Kerr conspired with Fraser, dismissed Whitlam and secured a promise from Fraser that he would pass the budget and then immediately call an election. The coup was successful in part due to a "dirty trick" tactic whereby Labor senators were not informed of Whitlam's dismissal before a critical vote that allowed the budget to pass. They had mistakenly believed the Liberals had capitulated when they returned prepared to approve the bill.

The coup came in response to the ruling class counteroffensive against the global upsurge of the working class during the period. Following the election of the Whitlam government in 1972—after 23 years of conservative Liberal Party rule—the Australian working class, inspired by international movements, launched a massive offensive. A 1973 referendum to grant the government power over wages was resoundingly defeated, unleashing the greatest strike wave since 1919 and securing the largest-ever wage gains for Australian workers.

The Australian ruling class and its international allies, particularly in Washington, were terrified. The Whitlam government, unable to contain the wages movement, was now viewed as a liability. Facing a deep global recession and the consequences of the US defeat in

Vietnam, Washington grew concerned about the reliability of its alliance with the Australian government, a critical foothold for imperialism in Asia.

Declassified documents have confirmed the deep involvement of the US and its Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in the coup. Ambassador Marshall Green, a “coup master” involved in the 1965 Indonesian bloodbath, held secret discussions with key Labor Party and union figures, including ACTU President Bob Hawke, who provided critical information on internal Labor and trade union discussions. Kerr himself was a long-time intelligence asset, referred to by CIA officials as “our man Kerr.”

When news of the dismissal broke, a massive, spontaneous movement of the working class erupted, with strikes and mass protests across the country demanding a general strike. This movement was actively suppressed, not so much by the state, as by the Labor and trade union bureaucracy.

Whitlam himself called on workers to “maintain your rage.” Above all, his role was to channel the revolutionary anger back into the safe confines of the electoral system. Hawke, another CIA asset, fearing the movement would “snowball into violence,” worked tirelessly to prevent a general strike from developing in response to the coup.

75 years ago: Missouri Supreme Court weakens racial segregation in schools

On November 13, 1950, the Missouri Supreme Court ruled that the St. Louis Board of Education must admit African American students to “white” schools when equivalent courses are not available in black-only institutions.

The case, *State ex rel. Brewton v. Board of Education of the City of St. Louis*, was brought by two African American brothers, Wesley and Wilbert Brewton, who sought to study aircraft mechanics at Hadley Technical High School, a white-only institution. Their own school, Booker T. Washington Technical High School for Negroes, did not offer such a course. The brothers were denied admission solely because of their race, prompting a legal challenge that became a test of the “separate but equal” doctrine in Missouri’s segregated education system.

The Missouri court’s decision relied heavily on two landmark U.S. Supreme Court rulings from June 1950—*Sweatt v. Painter* and *McLaurin v. Oklahoma State Regents*—which had forced white state universities to admit black students to programs unavailable on a substantially equal basis at black colleges. The Missouri court extended this reasoning beyond higher education, concluding that denying black high school students’ access to essential technical courses violated the constitutional requirement of “substantial” equality.

In a cynical response to the ruling however, St. Louis school officials announced just weeks later that the aircraft mechanics program at Hadley would be cancelled altogether—depriving not only the Brewton brothers but also forty-seven white students of the opportunity to study aeromechanics. Rather than integrate a single classroom and allow the entry of two black students, the Board of Education chose to eliminate the course entirely.

Following the two US Supreme Court cases from June, the Missouri high court in *State v. Board of Education*, while ruling in favour of certain restrictions on segregation, never considered striking down the “separate but equal” doctrine itself, which was

established in the notorious 1896 Supreme Court ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. It would not be until the 1954 case *Brown v. Board of Education* that racial segregation in public schools would be deemed entirely unconstitutional, owing to its violation of the equal protection clause contained within the Fourteenth Amendment.

100 years: First exhibition of surrealist painting opens in Paris

On November 13, 1925, the first exhibition of surrealist painting, *La Peinture surréaliste*, opened in Paris at the Galerie Pierre. The group show featured works by Man Ray, Pablo Picasso, Hans Arp, Paul Klee, André Masson, Max Ernst, Joan Miró, Pierre Roy, and Grigorio De Chirico. The preface in the exhibition catalog, in which the paintings’ titles provided the narrative thread, was coauthored by André Breton and Robert Desnos. The artists assembled at the exhibition were some of the most insightful and talented of the 20th century.

The show was enormously popular, with hundreds of visitors attempting to crowd into the small gallery, although the work did not necessarily receive the approval of art critics, one of whom described the paintings as “fashions of a day, already tarnished by an unbearable intellectual and graphic jargon.”

Surrealism began primarily as a literary movement by André Breton, a poet, with his First Manifesto of Surrealism in October 1924. Breton defined surrealism as “pure psychic automatism, by which one proposes to express—verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner—the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by the thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.”

This conception was to play an enormous role in freeing artists from prevailing aesthetic conventions, although these had largely begun to break up at the end of the 19th century in movements such as impressionism, dada, and cubism.

The exhibition was a prelude to the establishment of the Galerie Surréaliste in 1926, a permanent home for surrealist art.



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