

## This week in history: April 27-May 3

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: Capitalist governments repress May Day rallies

On May Day 2001, the annual day of international working class solidarity, governments around the world prepared a massive police presence to counter demonstrations. From industrialized to developing countries, demonstrations took place in London, Berlin, Moscow, Seoul, Jakarta, New Delhi, Sao Paulo, Buenos Aires, Santiago, Mexico City, Chicago, Toronto, and many more cities. Many focused anger against International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organization policies that had stripped working people of jobs, social protections and democratic rights.

Government-sponsored media blitzes vilified demonstrators—workers, young people, and the unemployed—as violent criminals, determined to ransack businesses and undermine prosperous bourgeois society. London's *Evening Standard* published photographs of 25 “wanted suspects” who supposedly engaged in riots on May Day the year before. Branding them the “Rent-a-Mob foreigners,” the British media fomented an atmosphere of xenophobic hate against immigrants. On May Day, police violently “kettled” peaceful demonstrators in London.

Across the Channel, Germany's Christian Democratic Union interior minister banned the anarchist-organized “Revolutionary May Day Demonstration,” a yearly protest against the rise of the far-right. In contrast, the minister greenlighted a permit by the fascist National Party of Germany.

In Karachi, Pakistan, under the military regime of Pervez Musharraf, authorities carried out mass arrests of opposition and labor leaders to preempt May Day demonstrations. In South Korea's capital Seoul, riot police, numbering over 15,000, swung batons and deployed water cannon at 20,000 members of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions. Police wove a surveillance web throughout the city, positioning 56 cameras to capture images of protesters.

May Day protests in the US focused on the plight of immigrant workers. In Long Beach, California, police fired rubber bullets and arrested 100 left-wing protesters blocking traffic. Large rallies were also held in Portland, Oregon, Boston and New York City.

Although masses of working people took part around the world, the rallies' organizers—NGOs, trade union bureaucracies, pseudo-left parties and middle-class radicals—appealed to capitalist politicians with reformist and nationalist slogans. Following the political traditions of May Day—international working class unity and class struggle, proletarian power and capitalist expropriation—the ICFI gave voice to the fight of coal miners in Romania. Read at a meeting in Valea Jiului, the May Day greetings recalled the historic struggles of Romanian miners against Stalinism and capitalism. The public reading recaptured the militant spirit

of working class resistance to oppression and called for international unity against globalized transnational corporations.

### 50 years ago: Italian parliament dissolved after bribery scandal

On May 1, 1976, President Giovanni Leone officially dissolved the Italian Parliament, ending the fifth and final government of Prime Minister Aldo Moro and signaling the conclusion of 30 years of uninterrupted control over the Italian state by the Christian Democratic Party (DC). The decision came as Italy was facing a major political crisis involving economic bankruptcy, the exposure of major state corruption and a powerful upsurge of the Italian working class.

By late April, the DC government led by Moro was essentially on its deathbed. The Italian Socialist Party (PSI), which had previously provided the necessary parliamentary support for Christian Democratic rule, now refused to continue negotiations, forcing new elections.

The immediate trigger for the collapse of the DC government was the Lockheed bribery scandal. Recently leaked documents from the US Senate revealed that the military aircraft manufacturer, Lockheed Corporation, had bribed leading members of the DC to facilitate the purchase of C-130 planes by the Italian government. This revelation made millions of Italians draw the connection that the DC leadership was bought and paid for by US imperialism.

The more fundamental cause of the collapse however was the immense economic crisis. Italy was reeling from 20 percent inflation and a collapsing lira, fueling a period of unprecedented labor militancy. In the years preceding the dissolution, Italy was rocked by some of the largest strikes in its history, including a general strike in 1974 that brought into the streets of Rome and Milan 1.5 million workers refusing to accept austerity.

The growth of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) in this period served as a direct barometer of this radicalization. Following the 1975 regional elections, where the PCI captured a massive 33 percent of the vote, it became clear that the working class was looking for a fundamental break with the corrupt capitalist order. This shift indicated that millions of workers and youth were moving toward a revolutionary solution to the social and economic misery imposed by the DC.

However, as working class opposition surged, the Stalinist PCI emerged as the primary defender of the capitalist state. Rather than leading the masses toward the seizure of power, PCI Secretary Enrico Berlinguer announced a program of seeking a “Historic Compromise,” begging for a coalition government with the Christian Democrats to stabilize the

economy and restore the confidence of big business.

Berlinguer's strategy was designed to block the independent movement of workers and prevent the crisis from developing into a struggle for state power. The more the working class moved in the direction of revolution, the more the PCI leadership worked to keep them shackled to the parliamentary system and the requirements of the market.

Despite Berlinguer's attempts to avoid an election, the social pressure from below made the status quo untenable. The dissolution of parliament on May 1 revealed the short-term failure of the PCI's efforts to align with the DC behind the backs of the workers, leading to a general election scheduled for June 20, 1976.

#### **75 years ago: Iran nationalizes oil industry, as Mohammed Mossadegh becomes prime minister**

On April 30, 1951, Mohammad Mossadegh, the leader of the National Front, was formally confirmed as Prime Minister of Iran by Shah Reza Pahlavi. The announcement came after the Iranian parliament (Majlis) nominated him in a 79-12 vote.

The confirmation of Mossadegh followed the assassination of Prime Minister Haj Ali Razmara by an Islamic fundamentalist, and the resignation of his successor Hossein Ala. Both of these figures were pro-western rulers, subordinating the country's oil reserves and natural resources to the dictates of British imperialism, particularly the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC).

Mossadegh was a key figure in seeking to nationalize the AIOC, a measure which was approved by the Iranian senate on the same day as his swearing in as Prime Minister. That policy was widely popular with the Iranian masses, and Mossadegh's central role in carrying it out earned him the approval of large sections of the population. Demonstrations of support were held across the country, particular in the capital of Tehran, after Mossadegh was appointed prime minister.

Mossadegh's role in nationalizing the AIOC also earned him the ire of the British ruling class, which warned of "very serious and far-reaching consequences" for Iran. Its monopoly on Iranian oil was originally set to expire only in 1993. The AIOC was considered vital to the military and economic interests of British imperialism.

Britain responded to Mossadegh's appointment as prime minister and the nationalization of the AIOC with a blockade and embargo of Iran, lodging complaints against Iran before the UN Security Council, and threatening legal action against purchasers of Iranian-produced oil. The imperialist aggression came to a head in 1953 when the CIA and MI6 carried out their coup in Iran, overthrowing the democratically elected Mossadegh and reinstating the absolute and dictatorial rule of the Shah.

#### **100 years ago: British Trade Union Congress calls general strike**

On Sunday, May 2, 1926, the Trades Union Congress (TUC), Britain's main confederation of unions, called a general strike of British workers to begin at midnight on Monday, including railway workers, transport workers, printers, dockers, ironworkers and steelworkers.

The Conservative government of Stanley Baldwin had been negotiating with the coal mine owners and the TUC (which had taken over negotiations from the miners' union) to prevent a lockout of the miners. Owners demanded that workers accept an increase in hours

and a cut in wages up to as much as 25 percent.

With no agreement, the coal operators imposed a lockout of over one million coal miners on midnight May 1. The General Council of the TUC then issued a statement that read, in part:

**The General Council has had no alternative but to decide to cease work ... in defence of miners' wages and hours ... The stoppage will take place as from Tuesday next, May 4th, at the earliest possible moment after midnight on Monday [May 3rd].**

**The General Council directs that the utmost care should be taken to see that there is no interference with the distribution of milk and food... The Council expects every member taking part to be exemplary in his conduct and not to give any opportunity for police interference.**

The crisis was set in motion by Winston Churchill's (then Chancellor of the Exchequer) 1925 decision to return the pound to the Gold Standard at its pre-war parity, which overvalued the currency and devastated coal exports. This economic pressure followed years of labor unrest, including the original "Black Friday" of April 15, 1921, when the miners were left abandoned by their transport and rail allies during a previous dispute. To prevent a repeat of such chaos, the government averted a 1925 strike on "Red Friday" of July 31 by granting a nine-month subsidy to prop up miners' wages.

The result would be the eruption of one of the greatest struggles in the history of the international working class, the British General Strike of May 3-12, 1926. It would be betrayed by the TUC leadership with the collaboration of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union, but it remains one of the most significant events in modern history. Trotsky would distill from the experience its main lesson: "the general strike, more than any other form of class struggle, requires clear, distinct, resolute and therefore revolutionary leadership."



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