This week in history: May 4-10

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: South African gold mine explosion kills 12 miners

On May 7, 2001, an explosion in a South African gold mine incinerated 12 miners: Deon Roux, Petrus Sekhonyana, Tello Chipu, Motsamai Mokhele, Daniel Kubu, Andries Schoeman, Johannes van der Berg, Piet Terblanche, Paulus Mofokeng, Lekhotla Nthebe, Matthews Shumane, and Thebe Motaung.

The blast started 850 meters below ground at the Gold Fields-owned Beatrix gold mine in the Free State province. Twelve experienced miners and an electrician entered Shaft Number 2 to investigate a malfunctioning ventilation fan. Without air circulation flushing the tunnels, methane gas—a highly flammable substance—collected in dangerous quantities. The men diagnosed the problem and began to repair the electrical system to cleanse the shaft. But a spark ignited the methane, forming a fireball and concussive wave that instantly killed the workers. Six miners in the proximity of the blast escaped.

Management's response was as predictable as it was cynical. Gold Fields spokesperson Dana Roets suggested the miners were responsible for their own deaths. He said management provided instruments to measure the amount of methane gas, implying that possession of such tools is the beginning and end of safety. The fact that 4,000 miners continued to labor during repairs revealed the company's indifference to health and safety.

During the press conference, Roets claimed the mining giant had learned the lessons from a deadly methane-gas explosion that killed seven workers at the same Beatrix mine the year before, and from a similar blast that killed 19 workers near Johannesburg in 1999. Investigations into the 2001 Beatrix explosion, however, uncovered significant corporate negligence. Management had swapped a specialized spark-prevention fan used in high-methane mines for a substandard industrial fan, which had been reported malfunctioning three separate times before the explosion. A report from the Inspector of Mines found that inspection orders issued in the months between the two disasters showed safety maintenance at the mine could "at best be described as inconsistent."

A court eventually fined Gold Fields for safety violations.

The 2001 disaster was not an aberration. Methane gas had killed forty workers at Beatrix alone between 1983 and 2001. The insatiable drive for profits made South Africa's deep-level gold mines the most dangerous in the world. Market competitors accelerated operations to cut corners, override safety concerns, and establish production targets and speedups.

50 years ago: Ulrike Meinhof found dead in prison cell

On May 9, 1976, Ulrike Meinhof, a founding member of the Red Army Faction (RAF), was found dead in her cell at the Stammheim high-security prison in Stuttgart. The West German government quickly issued an official statement declaring that the 41-year-old had committed suicide, hanging herself from the bars of her window with a strip of toweling.

After learning of her death, Meinhof's co-defendants at Stammheim—including Andreas Baader and Gudrun Ensslin—issued a written statement and rejected the suicide verdict, declaring Meinhof's death to be an extrajudicial execution by the state.

The trials against Meinhof and the other RAF leaders began about one year prior after they were arrested and accused of carrying out political bombings and assassinations. Meinhof, once a prominent journalist, had joined the group as a founding member in 1970.

In order to convict Meinhof the state had to deny her and the other defendants regular due process rights. The West German Government had constructed Stammheim as a custom-built courthouse and prison annex specifically for the RAF.

For the first time since Nazi rule, German courts operated under a "state of exception." The defendants were held in conditions of extreme sensory deprivation and prolonged isolation, measures designed to torture them psychologically. Furthermore, the government introduced retroactive "Anti-Terror Laws," which permitted the exclusion of chosen defense attorneys and the monitoring of privileged attorney-client communications.

The RAF emerged from the radical student protest movement of the late 1960s. Influenced by the Latin American guerrilla movements, the RAF sought to use individual violence as an alternative to the mass mobilization of the working class.

This "urban guerrilla" strategy, however, proved to be a political dead end. Rather than weakening the capitalist state, the RAF's campaign of bombings and assassinations provided the ruling class with the necessary pretext to expand its repressive apparatus. The West German government used the threat of RAF terrorism to suppress democratic rights far beyond the ranks of the guerrillas

alone.

In the year following Meinhof's death, the conflict between the state and the RAF escalated into what became known as the "German Autumn." A second generation of the RAF carried out a series of high-profile kidnappings and assassinations, including the murder of Federal Prosecutor Siegfried Buback and the kidnapping of industrialist Hanns Martin Schleyer.

The state responded by plunging the country into a near-total security lockdown, deploying the GSG 9 special forces and passing the "Contact Ban Law," which completely cut off the prisoners from any outside communication, including with their lawyers.

By October 1977, three other imprisoned leaders of the RAF—Andreas Baader, Gudrun Ensslin, and Jan-Carl Raspe—were found dead in their Stammheim cells. As with Meinhof, the state declared these deaths suicides and moved quickly to wash their hands of any responsibility.

75 years ago: "Greenhouse George" nuclear test brings United States a step closer to creating the first hydrogen bomb

On May 8, 1951, the United States conducted a nuclear weapons test, codenamed "George," on the islands of the Enewetak Atoll, which resulted in the world's first man-made thermonuclear burn. The "George" test was a major step in the process of creating the first full-scale thermonuclear weapon, or hydrogen bomb.

It was part of Operation Greenhouse, the fifth American nuclear test series following Operation Ranger earlier that year. Four tests were conducted during Greenhouse. The significance of the George test is that it was the first experiment to demonstrate that a thermonuclear reaction could take place from a man-made device.

The device used in the experiment, the "Cylinder," was largely enriched uranium for a primary fission reaction, but also contained a small core of deuterium, an isotope of hydrogen. When the George test was conducted, the explosion resulted in a 200 kiloton yield of TNT equivalent from the fission reaction. That yield ignited the deuterium core and produced an additional fusion yield of 25 kilotons. This combined yield made it the largest nuclear explosion to date, until the first hydrogen bomb was detonated the following year.

The demonstration proved that the principles upon which thermonuclear weapon designs were based were scientifically valid. The US nuclear tests as a whole were aimed at the creation of weapons of mass destruction far more devastating than the fission bombs used against Japan at the end of World War II. The George test in particular validated the principles which would be used to build and test the first full-scale thermonuclear bomb in November 1952.

The political decision made by US President Harry Truman in January 1950 to develop a hydrogen bomb occurred in the context of US imperialism seeking to establish its military supremacy in the aftermath of World War II. This was particularly directed against the Soviet Union, identified as the chief obstacle to the ambitions of American imperialism. The USSR had tested its own nuclear weapon for the first time in August 1949.

100 years: The British General Strike begins

On Tuesday, May 4, 1926, British workers conducted the first full day of their general strike, which began at one minute to midnight on May 3. Within hours, four million out of five-and-a-half million organized workers had answered the call of the Trades Union Congress (TUC). Transport workers, printers, iron and steel workers, workers in heavy chemicals, the building trades, electricity and gas—entire industries ground to a halt.

At the heart of the conflict stood more than one million miners, locked out by the coal owners since April 30, who had refused to accept the wage cuts and restructuring demanded by the government-appointed Samuel Commission under the slogan "not a penny off the pay, not a minute on the day."

The roots of the strike ran deep into the post-war crisis of British capitalism. Britain's global industrial supremacy had been shattered, its empire squeezed, and its coal industry—once the engine of imperial wealth—rendered increasingly uncompetitive. As Leon Trotsky had analyzed in his prescient 1925 work *Where Is Britain Going?*, it was not Moscow but New York that was driving Britain toward upheaval: the relentless expansion of American capitalism was making "the predicament of British industry, British trade, British finance and British diplomacy increasingly insoluble and desperate."

The government's response on May 4 was immediate and ferocious—this was no accidental misunderstanding, but a prepared act of class war. On May 6, Conservative Prime Minister Stanely Baldwin declared the strike "a challenge to Parliament" and "the road to anarchy."

The world bourgeoisie also reacted with hysteria. The *New York Times* headlines screamed: "Premier Tells Commons that Civil War Threatens; Army Is Held Ready."

The government's official scabbing operation, the Organization for the Maintenance of Supplies, drove armored car convoys through London's docks. In the East End of London, mass pickets of thousands fought running battles with police. The government understood, correctly, that it faced a potentially revolutionary confrontation.

The TUC leadership understood this too—and it terrified them. They had been dragged into the dispute not by revolutionary intent, but because they could not avoid it after years of workers demanding no repeat of the 1921 "Black Friday" betrayal.

Trotsky saw this with absolute clarity. Writing on May 6, 1926—in the very midst of the strike—in his preface to the second German edition of *Where Is Britain Going?*, he issued a warning that cut to the core of the crisis: "It has never yet been possible to cross a revolutionary stream on the horse of reformism, and a class which enters battle under opportunist leaders is compelled to change them under the enemy's fire."