

This week in history: May 11-17

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

10 May 2026

25 years ago: Italian general election brings Silvio Berlusconi back to power

On May 13, 2001, Italy held its general election. Voters were presented primarily with a choice between two coalitions. The House of Freedoms—led by Silvio Berlusconi and composed of Forza Italia, the National Alliance (the rebranded party of Italian fascism), the separatist Northern League and several minor allies—faced the ruling Olive Tree coalition headed by Francesco Rutelli, which included Democrats of the Left (the former Communist Party), Rutelli’s “Daisy” coalition of former Christian Democrats and remnants of the Socialist Party.

Despite the differences between the right-wing and “center-left” coalitions, both defended the framework of private property and capitalist rule. Demands for socialist expropriation, workers’ democracy, and an end to Italian imperialism were absent from the campaigns of the nominally “socialist” and “communist” parties.

Despite only a narrow plurality in the overall vote—45.6 percent to 43.2 percent for Olive Tree, Berlusconi’s House of Freedoms secured commanding majorities in both houses of the Italian parliament—386 seats of the 630 seats in Italy’s lower Chamber of Deputies and 177 seats out of 315 in the Senate. This was in part due to a split in the “left” vote, as Communist Refoundation did not run as part of Olive Tree, unlike the previous election.

Both factions of the former PCI lost ground. The Democrats of the Left (the bulk of the former Stalinists) recorded their worst-ever result, while Communist Refoundation saw its vote fall from 8.6 percent to 5 percent. The Italian Green Party failed to win a single seat. Decades of betrayals by the social-democratic and Stalinist parties contributed to the poor showing, benefiting the right and returning Berlusconi to the second of his three terms as prime minister.

Italy’s wealthiest individual and controller of much of its media, Berlusconi moved quickly to implement his pro-business economic program. He slashed the top income tax rate, abolished the inheritance taxes, and limited state prosecutors’ ability to investigate company books, measures aimed at protecting his own business empire. Plans were also announced to assign police to every housing block, an indicator of the authoritarian character of the incoming government.

The National Alliance, tracing its political ancestry to followers of Benito Mussolini, obtained the post of minister of immigration, a top

government position to implement Berlusconi’s rigorous screening of migrant workers. Gianfranco Fini, a far-right politician who had declared in the early 1990s that “Mussolini was the greatest statesman of the twentieth century” and “Fascism has a tradition of honesty, correctness and good government,” became deputy prime minister.

Appointments to high-level posts in the Italian government underscored the rehabilitation of fascist forces by the ruling class. The nominal “left,” rather than mounting principled opposition to such reactionary politics, normalized far-right participation in government. The left’s bankrupt capitalist program opened a path for Berlusconi’s coalition to exploit social discontent and steer it behind a program of austerity, nationalism, and reaction.

50 years ago: Terry Tyler, brother of Gary Tyler, framed by Louisiana police

On May 17, 1976, Louisiana police intensified their campaign of harassment against the family of Gary Tyler by arresting his 16-year-old brother, Terry, on bogus burglary charges. The arrest was a transparent act of political retaliation, occurring less than 24 hours after Terry and his mother, Juanita Tyler, had returned from Detroit, where they had been honored guests at the National Conference of the Young Socialists (YS).

The timing of the arrest was calculated. Police waited for Juanita Tyler to leave the family home before storming the residence to seize the youth. Terry was then brought before Judge Ruche Marino—the very same judge who, only a year prior, had presided over Gary Tyler’s sham trial and sentenced him to die in the electric chair. Marino, widely reported to be a member of the racist White Citizens Council, had overseen a trial characterized by an all-white, hand-picked jury and a total lack of physical evidence.

While in police custody, Terry was subjected to psychological and physical intimidation. He reported that officers shoved him, pointed a service weapon at his face, and attempted to coerce a confession by linking him to the death of the white youth for which his brother had been framed. One officer explicitly told the 16-year-old, “I wish there’d be no trial because I’d like to hang you right there.”

Gary Tyler had been framed for the October 7, 1974, death of Timothy Weber, a 13-year-old white student. That day, Gary was on a

school bus attempting to leave the newly integrated Destrehan High School when it was besieged by a mob of roughly 200 angry white residents.

This mob had been whipped into a frenzy by local white supremacist organizations, including the White Citizens Council and David Duke, then a rising figure in the Ku Klux Klan. As the bus attempted to pull away, the crowd pelted it with rocks and bottles while police stood by. In the midst of this attack, a shot was fired from the crowd toward the bus. Weber was struck and killed.

Despite the bus driver's testimony that the shot came from outside, police used the incident to launch a frame-up of Gary Tyler, claiming to find a "murder weapon" that later turned out to be stolen from a police firing range.

The Workers League and the Young Socialists, the forerunners of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), spearheaded the international defense of Gary Tyler. They recognized that the harassment of the Tyler family was an attempt to break the spirit of a movement that was successfully mobilizing the working class across racial lines.

75 years ago: Battle of Soyang River in Korean War

On May 16, 1951, the Battle of the Soyang River commenced with a large-scale assault by the Chinese People's Volunteer Army (PVA) and North Korean People's Army (KPA). The week-long battle marked the culmination of the 1951 Chinese Spring Offensive during the Korean War.

The objectives for the PVA at the Soyang River, located near the Taebaek Mountains, were to cut off South Korean army divisions from their US reinforcements. When the first attack was launched on May 16, over 130,000 PVA soldiers, accompanied by almost 40,000 KPA troops, struck their targets by surprise.

Within hours, the South Korean forces—consisting primarily of Republic of Korea (ROK) army divisions—were in complete disarray, with communications breaking down and large numbers of ROK troops retreating in disorder, exposing the remaining forces to an attack from their flank. The PVA pressed their advance from the north and east, which threatened to completely encircle US infantry troops.

Despite initial success, the PVA/KPA offensive was limited over the next several days due to reinforcements by American troops and artillery strikes, which resulted in increased casualties and supply disruptions for the Chinese and North Koreans. By May 20, United Nations forces were able to launch a counterattack that forced the PVA to begin their retreat.

By May 22, the battle at Soyang River concluded, with the territory taken by the Chinese over the previous week regained by the US-led forces. The PVA suffered heavy casualties, estimated at more than 40,000, and ultimately failed to achieve its objectives. Nevertheless, the offensive inflicted severe damage on South Korean forces. The ROK III Corps suffered such a heavy defeat that it was disbanded several days after the battle.

Overall, however, the US forces after the Soyang River battle were positioned to launch a more general counteroffensive that lasted until the end of June. The territorial advances made by the US over this period created a military stalemate near the 38th parallel that remained largely unchanged for the remaining two years of war.

100 years ago: British Trade Union Congress betrays general strike

On May 12, 1926, nine days after four million British workers walked out in the most powerful display of working-class solidarity the country had ever seen, the General Council of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) marched to Downing Street and surrendered unconditionally.

The strike had begun on May 3, ignited by the coal owners' lockout of over a million miners, who refused to accept the Samuel Commission's demand for wage cuts. Transport, printing, steel, chemicals and the building trades were paralyzed. Councils of action sprang up across the country, embryonic organs of dual power. The government mobilized 240,000 special constables, recalled battleships to major ports, and deployed armored car convoys to break the London docks.

The TUC General Council had never wanted the strike it had been pushed into calling. The bureaucrats' overriding fear was not defeat—it was victory. A general strike that *succeeded* would confront the question of state power, destroying the role of the union apparatus as capitalism's loyal labor manager.

On May 12, they ended the strike without securing a single concession. The government refused even to guarantee no victimization of strikers. Lord Birkenhead noted their capitulation was "*so humiliating that some instinctive breeding made one unwilling to even look at them.*"

The betrayal was politically prepared by the Anglo-Russian Committee (ARC), established in 1925 as an alliance between the Soviet trade unions and the TUC. Stalin, having abandoned the Bolshevik perspective of international revolution in favor of "socialism in one country," sought the TUC's diplomatic backing against imperialist pressure.

In exchange, the Comintern ordered the Communist Party of Great Britain to subordinate itself to the TUC leadership and cultivate the "left" bureaucrats—Purcell, Swales, Hicks—as progressive allies. These very men then led the betrayal.

As Trotsky noted in his autobiography, *My Life*, years later: "These 'left' friends, in a serious test, shamefully betrayed the proletariat. The revolutionary workers were thrown into confusion, sank into apathy and naturally extended their disappointment to the Communist Party itself, which had only been the passive part of this whole mechanism of betrayal and perfidy."

The CPGB, with 6,000 members and influence over a quarter of all trade unionists through the National Minority Movement, was rendered politically impotent at the decisive hour.



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