

This week in history: August 3-9

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: President Bush sabotages stem cell research

In a televised address to the public on August 9, 2001, President George W. Bush announced the restriction of federal funding for most embryonic stem cell research. The decision jeopardized vital exploration into new treatments and cures for individuals suffering from Alzheimer's, Parkinson's and spinal cord injuries.

Bush attempted to portray his decision as a starting point for innovative research leading to unprecedented discoveries and cures for patients. He formed a presidential council to oversee stem cell research and advocate policy. Leon Kass, a conservative bioethicist from the University of Chicago, was named chairman—not for fully supporting this new scientific breakthrough, but for his ideological opposition to scientific research into stem cells and in-vitro fertilization, a source of embryos for stem cell extraction.

Bush claimed that 60 existing lines of stem cells provided a deep reservoir for medical development. He left out the fact that many of these stem cell lines were substandard according to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), too old and unable to reproduce, while others are stored in private hands at biotech companies or developed overseas, making them unavailable for US-based scientists. In other words, Bush limited stem cell research to those lines already in existence, minimizing research potential and blocking new avenues of discovery. Only 21 lines were actually available according to NIH.

This modern-day religion-based sabotage against medical science was a deliberate attack on democratic rights and the separation of church and state. The announcement highlighted the disproportionate power religious doctrines of the Catholic Church and Protestant fundamentalist groups held over society.

Bush and the Republican Party acted as a political vessel for translating religious obscurantism into state policy, provoking opposition among scientists.

Nobel laureate Dr. Harold Varmus called the limits “a very poor investment and a very cruel investment,” noting that without broad research, many patients would reject implanted cells. Bioethicist Arthur Caplan flatly rejected the “compromise” framing, stating that Bush “in effect banned federal funding for human-embryo-stem-cell research” and that embryos are not equal in moral worth to “crippled children and those confined to wheelchairs.”

50 years ago: Striking worker Norman Ray Lewis murdered on California picket line

On August 6, 1976, Norman Ray Lewis, a 33-year-old striking member of the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU) Local 6, was killed on a picket line in Tracy, California. Lewis, a father of five, was participating in a walkout alongside 22 co-workers outside a distribution warehouse operated by Handyman of California, a home-improvement retail chain.

The workers had recently won union recognition through the National Labor Relations Board. However, the company refused to agree to a first contract, prompting the newly organized workers to strike.

Eyewitness Howard Hackney, a fellow striker, reported that a scab driving a 27-foot delivery truck intentionally accelerated into Lewis. “Norman looked up at the guy in the truck and backed up one step,” Hackney told reporters. “Then the truck started up again, came up against him, and that's when he went down and the driver drove right over him.”

Lewis was the first ILWU member killed on a picket line since the 1930s. Workers in the ILWU had once fought some of the most intense class battles of the Great Depression, most notably the 1934 West Coast longshore strike. On “Bloody Thursday” in San Francisco, police shot and killed strikers Howard Sperry and Nick Bordoise, sparking a citywide general strike.

Despite this militant history, by 1976, four decades of class-collaborationist policies had integrated the ILWU apparatus with the corporations and the government. Rather than mobilizing the industrial power of the working class to support the Handyman strike and demand justice for Lewis and his family, union officials subordinated the investigation to the police and called only for a boycott of Handyman stores.

The murder of Lewis was part of a broader corporate offensive unleashed by the global economic crisis and recession of the mid-1970s. Major corporations demanded that the working class pay for the crisis and were prepared to suppress the struggles that developed. Companies regularly deployed professional union-busting agencies, sought court injunctions against strikers and hired scabs to break organized labor and drive down wages.

Following the killing, neither the driver of the truck nor the company faced serious consequences. Local authorities refused to file

murder charges, booking the scab driver on reduced charges of manslaughter, while Handyman of California was shielded from all liability. Major news outlets across California enforced a total blackout on coverage of the murder to suppress public outrage.

The *Bulletin*, the US predecessor to the *World Socialist Web Site*, was among the few newspapers to break the press blackout and report the murder to the working class. The *Bulletin* called on the trade unions to mobilize mass sympathy actions across California, break with both capitalist political parties and construct an independent labor party to defend workers' basic rights against employer terror.

75 years ago: US breaks off Korea ceasefire talks

On August 5, 1951, General Matthew Ridgway, commander of US forces in Korea, broke off ceasefire negotiations at Kaesong, charging that armed Chinese soldiers had entered the demilitarized zone around the conference site. The talks had begun less than a month earlier, on July 10, after Soviet UN representative Jacob Malik proposed negotiations to end a war that had already killed hundreds of thousands of Koreans.

While the US publicly accused Beijing and Pyongyang of violating the neutrality of the conference site, in reality it was Washington who had been maneuvering to sabotage the talks from the start while ensuring the blame fell on its adversaries. The row over the Chinese incursion covered over secret US demands that the Chinese and North Koreans retreat 30 to 40 kilometers north of the existing battle line, roughly along the 38th parallel, surrendering thousands of square kilometers of territory.

The Civil Information and Education Division in Tokyo, an agency under Ridgway's own command, had inadvertently confirmed on August 4—the day before the walkout—that Washington sought a truce line somewhere between the present front and the Yalu River, which forms Korea's northern border with China. The American public was being told the ceasefire would be based on the existing battle line, while the Chinese and North Korean negotiators were being told the opposite.

The administration of U.S. President Harry Truman had no interest in a swift end to the war. Short of outright military conquest, US imperialism had no prospect of installing a puppet regime in Korea, and the conflict served to justify the McCarthyite witch-hunt at home and the US military buildup in Asia.

The talks resumed on August 10 after Beijing and Pyongyang gave additional guarantees, only to be suspended again two weeks later when a US plane bombed the Kaesong neutral zone—a pattern of rupture and resumption that would drag out the armistice talks for two more years while the US continued its aerial destruction of North Korea.

inspired by Lord Byron's 1821 epic poem, starred John Barrymore in the title role. The film, however, had no spoken dialogue, though the musical score was synchronized with the film.

Along with *Don Juan*, several shorts appeared, including one that did have synchronized speech, given by William H. Hays, the chairman of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), introducing the new process, known as Vitaphone.

Vitaphone, which synchronized a phonographic sound recording with film, a technology known as sound-on-disc—later replaced with a process that embedded sound on the film itself—was a major technological breakthrough and one that the film industry had been seeking.

Vitaphone was also a cultural breakthrough, making film more lifelike by adding sound to the images of life and to dialogue, which was previously displayed on the screen.

The choice of Hays to give the world its first commercial "talkie" was ominous. Hays was a film industry hack and former Republican Party operative. He had been Warren Harding's campaign manager in the 1920 election and Postmaster General in the Harding administration. He became involved in the greatest government corruption scandal to date, the Teapot Dome scandal of 1921. In 1922 he resigned from his post in the government to become the first chairman of the MPPDA, which the Hollywood studios founded to police the morals of the film industry.

In 1930, Hays promoted the MPPDA's notorious Production Code, sometimes called the Hays Code, as a guideline for filmmakers to self-censor their work. The code, in effect from 1934 to 1968, prohibited profanity, nudity, reference to sex, the drug trade, interracial marriage, prostitution, venereal disease, any ridicule of the clergy and included a long list of other admonitions, including one, which limited scenes of kissing to three seconds.

In other words, Hays, the man who introduced a major cultural-technological leap to the world in 1926, became the enforcer of prudery, artistic censorship and backwardness in the film industry for decades.



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100 years: First commercial film with sound opens in New York

On August 6, 1926, Warner Brothers released the first commercial film with an accompanying soundtrack in a New York theater, heralding the era of "talkies" which were to transform the film industry. The feature length film, *Don Juan*,