This week in history: September 14-20

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

13 September 2026

25 years ago: 9/11 terrorist attacks used as pretext to destroy democratic rights

Seizing on fear and confusion, aided by a compliant corporate media, the George W. Bush administration quickly moved to implement unprecedented police-state legislation in the days following the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon.

On September 13, the Senate approved an amendment to the Commerce-Justice-State appropriations bill that expanded federal electronic-surveillance authority in terrorism investigations. Three days later, Attorney General John Ashcroft and FBI Director Robert Mueller met with congressional leaders of both parties to press for a far broader expansion of federal police powers including authority to wiretap suspected terrorists, trace financial transactions and monitor, detain and expel immigrants and foreign visitors. Its proposals also increased penalties for providing assistance to alleged terrorists and eliminated the statute of limitations for terrorism-related offenses.

Some of these measures had been advanced previously by the Clinton administration but blocked on civil-liberties grounds. Now the congressional Democrats offered support for the authoritarian measures. A spokeswoman for Senator Patrick Leahy, the Democrat who chaired the Senate panel, said all other business would be pushed aside to pass the legislation. Before the Justice Department had even finalized the legislation, liberal Democratic congressmen Barney Frank and Martin Meehan enthusiastically supported the restrictions. “I don’t think we’ve done a good enough job in this country utilizing the technology available, like facial recognition technology,” Meehan told the *New York Times*. “Given this unspeakable act, Americans will tolerate some restraint on their liberties for the sake of security.”

The legislation was quickly used to target opposition to US imperialist wars abroad, including the Afghanistan and Iraq wars that would soon be launched. The American government, in collaboration with local police departments, began a campaign of surveillance and espionage aimed at antiwar and protest organizations. Anti-colonial organizations were also newly targeted. Because in the past federal authorities had classified groups like the African National Congress, Irish Republican Army and Palestine Liberation Organization as terrorist, supporters could now face arrest for actions like raising relief funds.

The American ruling class had become fundamentally hostile to the Constitution’s protections of civil liberties, viewing these as obstacles to militarism, war, unrestricted corporate profit-making and the destruction of social welfare programs. September 11 provided the pretext.

50 years ago: 170,000 Ford workers launch national auto strike

At midnight, September 14, 1976, Ford workers walked off the job in the first national auto strike since 1970. Ford had been selected as the United Auto Workers’ target company under the traditional pattern-bargaining strategy, meaning while autoworkers at Ford walked out the other “Big Three” US auto companies; GM and Chrysler, were allowed to continue production.

The 170,000-strong walkout shut down virtually all of Ford’s North American production for 28 days and marked the last nationwide strike the UAW ever waged against a Big Three automaker.

The strike erupted amid the deepest crisis of American capitalism since the Great Depression. The 1973 oil shock and the severe recession of 1974-75 signaled the end of the postwar boom and the onset of a protracted decline in US global economic hegemony. Stagnating corporate profits and accelerating inflation led the American ruling class to pursue the termination of all gains the working class won in previous decades.

Ford’s opening offer demanded cuts to new-hire wages, rising employee healthcare contributions and the erosion of working conditions. In response workers struck, demanding more paid time off, curbs on forced overtime and a 30-and-out pension.

The Workers League, predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party, spoke with workers at picket lines across the country about deteriorating conditions inside the plants. “It’s like a prison in there,” an Edison, New Jersey veteran told the *Bulletin*, the Trotskyist newspaper. “Once you walk through that gate, you’re theirs until they let you out. If you cut your finger and need a few stitches, you can’t leave the line until the foreman comes and gives the OK. You just bleed.”

Terry Dew, a 25-year-old striker from Sterling Heights, Michigan, noted: “In 1973, that’s when we got screwed, sold out. Today, you can’t live on 40 hours a week if you have a family. The whole UAW should have walked out.”

While autoworkers were prepared for a fight, the union bureaucracy under Leonard Woodcock was desperate to contain it. The UAW leadership shut down the strike after four weeks on compromise terms that allowed the assault on living standards to continue.

The three-year pact capped annual general wage increases at just 3 percent, deferred newly granted paid personal days off until late 1977 while conditioning them on strict attendance, and diverted cost-of-living adjustments to subsidize ballooning corporate healthcare expenses. Demonstrating deep rank-and-file hostility to the settlement, skilled trades workers passed the agreement by a razor-thin margin of only 489 votes amid widespread suspicion of ballot stuffing, while 27 assembly and parts plants remained shut down over unresolved local grievances.

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The 1976 strike demonstrated the immense militancy of the working class and its ability to decisively shutdown and control production in the world's largest industries. But it also serves as an important historical milestone in the transformation of the unions into instruments of corporate control.

75 years ago: Tripartite conference in Washington between US, UK and France approve German rearmament

On September 14, 1951, the Tripartite Foreign Ministers Conference concluded in Washington, where US Secretary of State Dean Acheson, British Foreign Secretary Herbert Morrison and French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman had spent five days negotiating the terms under which West Germany would be rearmed.

Six years after the defeat of Nazi Germany, the three powers agreed to replace the Occupation Statute—the legal framework under which the Western Allies had governed West Germany since 1949—with "contractual arrangements" restoring West German sovereignty. Because reviving a German national army was politically impossible so soon after the war, the ministers instead approved a "European Defense Force": an integrated army under joint command, into which German troops would be recruited. They agreed on prohibitions on heavy-arms production, defined Allied emergency powers and "safeguards against threats to German constitutional democracy"—concessions designed to reassure France, invaded by Germany three times in 70 years.

The decision to rearm Germany reversed the commitment to German demilitarization made at Potsdam, the July 1945 summit where Truman, Stalin and British Prime Minister Clement Attlee had pledged to disarm and de-Nazify Germany after its defeat. Six years after the war concluded, the German military was being resurrected as the spearhead of an anti-Soviet bloc.

The conference also moved to expand the NATO military alliance. The three ministers formally agreed to recommend that Greece and Turkey be invited to join NATO at its upcoming session in Ottawa, and formulated plans for an autonomous, integrated Allied Middle East Command—outside NATO—to coordinate military activity across the region involving Turkey and Egypt.

The conference likewise outlined courses of action for the Korean War, then in its second year, should the stalled armistice talks collapse, including an economic blockade of Communist China. Morrison resisted the blockade—not out of opposition to the war, but because British capitalism depended on its colonial trade through Hong Kong and feared a wider conflict.

German rearmament was thus one component of a general build-up of armed forces across Europe, the Middle East and Asia. Together with the reorganization of Japan as a permanent US military base, formalized days earlier in the San Francisco treaties, it marked a further step towards the encirclement of the Soviet Union and China by the principal imperialist powers.

100 years: Sacco and Vanzetti lawyers petition for new trial

On September 16, 1926, in a Dedham, Massachusetts courtroom, defense attorney William G. Thompson concluded an impassioned argument demanding a new trial for Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti.

Thompson denounced US Attorney General John G. Sargent for refusing defense access to Department of Justice files, records Thompson alleged would reveal that federal agents actively persecuted the two Italian radicals despite harboring private doubts about their guilt. Presenting 63 corroborating affidavits, Thompson asked presiding Judge Webster Thayer for eight specific legal rulings, insisting that newly discovered evidence demanded the guilty verdict of July 14, 1921 be set aside. In response, Assistant District Attorney Dudley P. Ranney defended the integrity of state and federal investigators and began the Commonwealth's push to dismiss the bid, arguing the defense's fresh claims lacked credibility.

The hearing marked the latest chapter in a case that began on April 15, 1920, when paymaster Frederick A. Parmenter and security guard Alessandro Berardelli were shot and killed during a $15,776 payroll robbery outside a South Braintree shoe factory.

Three weeks later, Sacco, a shoemaker, and Vanzetti, a fish peddler. were arrested aboard a Brockton streetcar while armed with handguns and carrying anarchist literature. Amid the state attacks on immigrants and leftists after 1919, the two immigrant anarchists were convicted of first-degree murder, and sentenced to die.

The new motion hinged on a November 1925 jailhouse confession by Celestino F. Madeiros, a convicted bank robber who swore that he and Rhode Island's notorious Joe Morelli gang carried out the South Braintree payroll heist, wholly exonerating Sacco and Vanzetti. Days earlier in the hearing, Thompson had accused former Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer's agents of orchestrating a conspiracy to convict the two men to advance Palmer's presidential ambitions. Sacco and Vanzetti were taken into custody on May 5, 1920—just days after Palmer's predicted May Day uprising and during the lead-up to the July 1920 Democratic National Convention. The prosecution countered with an affidavit from Joseph Morelli flatly denying any involvement in the murders.

Judge Thayer ultimately denied the motion, and despite massive global protests, strikes and appeals from prominent legal scholars, Sacco and Vanzetti were executed in the electric chair on August 23, 1927.

The Sacco and Vanzetti case was a judicial frame-up of two revolutionists by a capitalist state determined to crush working class dissent in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution and a mass upsurge of the working class internationally. The verdict was based on their politics, and their status as immigrant workers, not the evidence.

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