

This week in history: September 21-27

This column profiles important historical events which took place this week 25 years ago, 50 years ago, 75 years ago and 100 years ago.

20 September 2026

25 years ago: Mine blast in Alabama kills 13 workers

On September 23, 2001, two gas explosions at the Jim Walter Resources No. 5 mine in Brookwood, Alabama killed 13 miners. The dead were all members of United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) Local 2368.

The incident started with a cave-in that released methane gas throughout the mine. A battery charger then struck a rock, creating the spark that ignited the highly explosive gas and trapping 56-year-old miner Gaston Adams Jr. His coworkers heroically entered the mine to rescue him, but a far larger second explosion 45 minutes later tore through the mine killing everyone present. The second explosion hit equipment up to 6,000 feet away and sent temperatures soaring to 2,500 degrees, traveling through mine tunnels at about 900 feet per second. Rescue workers had to flood sections of the mine to extinguish fires, making it impossible to retrieve bodies trapped a half-mile underground.

It was the worst US mining disaster since December 1984, when 27 workers died in the Wilberg mine in Utah.

The catastrophe at the mine, owned by Jim Walter Resources, Inc. (JWR), had all the signs of management neglect. Despite making a net profit north of \$20 million in the first half of 2001, management refused to implement comprehensive safety installations, plans and checks to protect workers.

Investigators noted that management failed to conduct comprehensive preshift and on-shift examination with methane detectors and strict ventilation monitoring. Proper rock-dusting plans never existed nor were firefighting or evacuation plans in place. The mine's roof had no structural support, maintenance or safety examinations to prevent the initial cave-in. Mine equipment lacked explosion proof de-energizing safety mechanisms.

Mine workers were quoted in the local paper saying company officials had ignored rising methane levels. Shirley Hyche, a 20-year veteran of No. 5, said there had been three recent ignitions where methane flared and went out "like a little bomb," but "they wouldn't listen. They didn't do anything."

The safety record of the mine was pockmarked with violations, fines, injuries and deaths. It had prior fatalities at both No. 5 (1995) and No. 4 (1995, 1996, 1999, 2001). The previous year, the company had double the industry average of serious injuries, according to the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA), and had paid nearly \$600,000 in fines for safety violations since 1995. MSHA had recorded 32 US coal mining fatalities in 2001 to date.

Over the previous two decades, the UMWA bureaucracy's policies had led to the loss of tens of thousands of miners' jobs and the surrender of gains won through a century of struggle. The union had collaborated fully

with mine management to speed up production and had recently enthusiastically endorsed George W. Bush's energy policy, leaving miners defenseless against unsafe conditions.

50 years ago: Orlando Letelier assassinated in Washington D.C.

On September 21, 1976, former Chilean diplomat Orlando Letelier and his 25-year-old American colleague Ronni Moffitt were assassinated in Washington D.C. A bomb was placed beneath their vehicle and detonated at Sheridan Circle, barely a mile from the White House. It remains the most brutal act of foreign state-sponsored terrorism ever carried out in the US capital.

Letelier had been a top ally of Chilean President Salvador Allende, having served as foreign minister and defense minister in his government. After Augusto Pinochet came to power in a US-backed coup, Letelier was among those imprisoned in a remote concentration camp on Dawson Island before being forced into exile.

In Washington, Letelier was working to expose the crimes of Pinochet and popularize opposition to the US-backed regime. Most recently he had organized an international campaign against foreign loans to the junta.

His assassination was executed under Operation Condor, a joint effort by US-backed South American military regimes working in coordination with the CIA to track and liquidate political dissidents abroad. The bomb was built and planted by Michael Townley, an American operative working for the Chilean secret police (DINA), with assistance from anti-Castro Cuban terrorists.

The CIA, directed by George H.W. Bush, and the Gerald Ford administration maintained close ties with the killers. DINA chief Manuel Contreras, who ordered the strike, was a paid CIA asset who had visited agency headquarters in Langley the previous year. In June 1976, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger met privately with Pinochet in Santiago, dismissed Letelier's lobbying, and reassured the dictator: "We wish your government well."

In late August 1976, the State Department drafted a diplomatic cable instructing US ambassadors to warn the US-backed South American military regimes against carrying out overseas murders. However, on September 16, five days before the explosion, Kissinger personally ordered that the cable be rescinded and that "no further action be taken" to block assassinations. Despite receiving advance intelligence that DINA agents were traveling to Washington on false passports, Bush's CIA took no action to prevent the attack.

Following the bombing, the US intelligence apparatus orchestrated a

media disinformation campaign to divert blame away from the junta. Media outlets including the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and *Newsweek* published planted leaks from intelligence officials claiming that leftist extremists had killed Letelier to create a martyr. This fabricated narrative was pushed aggressively by the CIA to shield its ties to Pinochet's secret police.

The cover-up collapsed in 1978 when federal investigators traced the false passports to Townley, who was extradited to the United States and confessed to carrying out the bombing. It would not be until 1993 that a Chilean court sentenced Contreras and his top deputy to prison for ordering the murders. Between 1999 and 2010, declassified US government documents conclusively proved that Kissinger had personally blocked the warning cable and that the CIA had concealed its advance knowledge of the plot.

Still, Townley was the only American convicted in connection to the killing. No US officials ever faced charges or consequences.

75 years ago: Anti-communist referendum voted down in Australia

On September 22, 1951, Australian voters rejected a referendum that would have written into the Constitution an open-ended power for the government to ban the Communist Party and criminalize anyone the government branded a "communist." The "no" vote won 50.56 percent nationally, carrying the three most industrialized states—New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia—on a turnout of 95.58 percent.

The ballot grew out of the Menzies government's 1950 Communist Party Dissolution Act, which empowered the governor-general to declare any person a "communist" if "satisfied" they were "likely to engage, in activities prejudicial to the security and defence of the Commonwealth or to the execution or maintenance of the Constitution or of the laws of the Commonwealth." Those labelled as Communists could be barred from public employment and from any industry deemed vital to security, barred from standing in union elections, and have their unions dissolved.

In March 1951 the High Court ruled six to one that the Act was unconstitutional, since Australia was not formally at war. The referendum put forward to the Australian public in September proposed to amend the Constitution by adding a new head of Commonwealth power over "communists and communism," validating the Act and authorising "any other laws whatsoever" to "deal with communists and communism."

The Communist Party of Australia (CPA), nominally the target of the ban, had long since been transformed into an appendage of the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy—supporting the Moscow frame-up trials, backing the Hitler-Stalin Pact and, after 1941, acting as an industrial policeman that denounced strikers as "traitors." But the real aim of the Menzies legislation and the referendum was the suppression of the postwar strike wave, which had cost some 2 million working days in 1950. It aimed to create a framework for jailing workers, imposing employment blacklists and crushing trade unions.

The narrow margin did not reflect working class support for the ban. Seven weeks before the ballot, opinion polls showed 73.3 percent in favor, but support collapsed as workers recognised that the "declaration" power, requiring no proof or trial, could be turned against any militant. "Vote no!" committees sprang up in workplaces and unions; one of the most active was at Sydney's Mort's Dock, chaired by the Trotskyist ironworkers' delegate Nick Origlass. Early returns from working class centres showed a decisive "no" lead, while later-counted rural votes trended toward "yes."

100 years: Chinese students protest at League of Nations assembly

On September 26, 1926, 16 Chinese students from Paris distributed handbills in front of the Salle de la Reformation in Geneva where the League of Nations was holding the final session of its assembly.

The group identified themselves as the "Kuomintang [KMT] Delegation." The *New York Times* labeled the group as "Bolshevists," although it also noted that the KMT were "enemies" of the officially recognized Chinese government based in Peking (Beijing) whose delegation was attending the League assembly. It is entirely possible that the students were supporters of the communist movement, which had embedded itself in the KMT. Only a few years earlier, the Chinese revolutionary milieu in Paris had included Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping, both future leaders of the People's Republic of China.

The students' leaflet warned the delegates to the assembly that the League must take action to avoid a war in the Far East, for which it blamed the activities of British imperialism in China.

The leaflet declared, "What a deception for us young Chinese to know that the most important member of the League of Nations, Great Britain, delivered and still is delivering brutal, barbarous assaults on our country without the League showing the least concern."

The leaflet went on to condemn the British for moving artillery into central Canton (Guangzhou), the capital of the KMT's nationalist government, on September 4, a violation of international law. The students called it "material and moral aggression ... to prepare for new English massacres following those of Shanghai and Shameen in 1925," and to hinder the progress of KMT leader Chiang Kai-Shek's Northern Expedition against warlords who were well-known British lackeys.

The leaflet also raised the most recent British piracy in the Wansien Incident of September 5 and proclaimed:

"Is it not a shame that such savagery exists in the Twentieth Century? Shame to those who lent themselves to cowardly butchery! Shame to those who looked on with arms folded!

"Delegates, if the League continues to permit England to do what she wishes—if nobody interferes in such cases—she is responsible for the war which is breeding in the Far East. We and future generations are ready to give our blood to save the dignity and national liberty."

The sentiments expressed by the students were increasingly embraced by the working class and the peasantry in China and would explode in the Shanghai workers revolution a few months later.



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