This week in history: November 2-8

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

1 November 2026

25 years ago: New York City firefighters storm Ground Zero

On November 2, 2001, over 1,000 off-duty firefighters marched to the rubble of the World Trade Center. They were protesting Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's decision to scale back recovery efforts of the remains of victims who had perished in the September 11 attacks. Union officials appeared ready to send the firefighters home after a few speeches, but the angry crowd began chanting “Shut it down!” and surged toward the police cordons. Chanting “bring the brothers home,” firefighters reached police barricades, broke through the line and engaged in a melee with police officers enforcing Giuliani's shameful cutbacks.

When the marchers reached the area where cranes and loaders were pulling out debris, police formed another skirmish line. The heavy machinery ground to a halt as ironworkers and operating engineers climbed off their equipment and joined the protesters, while other construction workers stopped work to watch. A dozen protesters were arrested, some charged with felonious rioting and assault, and were held incommunicado in a Harlem precinct far from the rally site.

The firefighters organized the protest after failing to persuade the mayor and the Fire Department to change course. Almost 200 had been assigned for recovery efforts on staggered 24-hour shifts, but the political establishment slashed the number to 64. Fewer than 90 bodies of the 343 fire department personnel killed in the collapse had been recovered, and the remains of thousands of civilians were still believed to be entombed in the wreckage.

Anger had been building for some time against Giuliani and Fire Commissioner Thomas Von Essen, the former president of the Uniformed Firefighters’ Association who left the union to run the department. Firefighters charged that Von Essen used confidential information from his union days for vindictive retribution. At the rally they chanted “Suck it up, Tommy Von,” mocking his televised advice that firefighters with problems after September 11 should “suck it up,” a remark condemned as grossly insensitive in a department where nearly everyone had lost close friends and comrades.

Most of the serious criminal charges were dropped against the firefighters, but the episode shattered the facade of national unity and patriotism in the early months of “the war on terror.”

50 years ago: Jimmy Carter Wins 1976 US Presidential Election

On November 2, 1976, Democratic candidate Jimmy Carter **narrowly defeated incumbent Republican President Gerald Ford in the United States presidential election. Carter secured 297 electoral votes and 50.1 percent of the popular vote against Ford's 240 electoral votes and 48 percent. The former Georgia governor restored the traditional Democratic dominance of the South, which had been lost to Republicans in the previous presidential election, alongside key industrial states including New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. Ford swept the western states.**

The election was the first presidential contest following the Watergate crisis and the August 1974 resignation of Richard Nixon. Ford’s subsequent unconditional pardon of Nixon, coupled with the fall of Saigon in 1975 and the deepest economic recession since the 1930s fueled deep hostility toward the Republican administration. In the previous years workers had suffered high inflation, plant closures, and an official unemployment rate near 8 percent.

Reflecting growing opposition to both parties, overall voter turnout fell to 53.5 percent, the lowest level recorded in nearly three decades. Tens of millions of industrial workers still cast ballots for Carter. But the motivation was primarily to oust the Nixon-Ford administration, which oversaw declining real wages, rather than enthusiasm for Carter.

The victory of the Democratic ticket was driven by the trade union bureaucracy. AFL-CIO President George Meany and United Auto Workers (UAW) President Leonard Woodcock expended tens of millions of dollars and utilized the union machinery to keep workers tied to the Democrats, selling Carter as a reformist “populist” committed to full employment.

In reality, the incoming administration represented a government dedicated to resolving the deepening crisis of American capitalism by making workers pay. Far from delivering social reforms, Carter’s presidency initiated an aggressive corporate offensive. He introduced deregulation across the trucking and airline industries, attempted to enforce statutory wage guidelines, and invoked the Taft-Hartley Act against striking coal miners in 1978. His appointment to head the Federal Reserve in 1979, Paul Volcker, drove up interest rates to set off a recession and crush demands for higher wages.

The election also registered profound shifts in global geopolitics following Washington’s defeat in Vietnam. Under the guidance of his anti-communist national security advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter’s foreign policy escalated the Cold War against the Soviet Union and expanded imperialist interventions across southern Africa and the Middle East.

The Workers League, forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party, stood in the election to mobilize the working class on an independent socialist program. Running congressional candidates under the Workers Party banner, including Helen Halyard in New York and Jean Brust in Minneapolis, the party fought for a complete political

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break with the capitalist two-party system and the construction of a socialist movement in the working class.

In a post-election statement published on November 5, 1976, the *Bulletin* emphasized that Ford's defeat registered "a growing radicalization of the working class." It warned that Carter was confronted with "economic chaos" and called on the labor movement to prepare for a capitalist offensive against living standards.

75 years ago: Britain deploys 6,000 troops to Egypt as workers' strikes paralyze the Canal Zone

On November 2, 1951, Britain completed a massive airlift of some 6,000 troops into Egypt's Suez Canal Zone amid an escalating confrontation between Egyptian workers and the occupying British military. The reinforcements, including units of the 1st Infantry Division, arrived in one of Britain's largest postwar military airlifts. Thousands more soldiers and military equipment were transported to the region by sea.

The aircraft were also used to evacuate British service families from the Canal Zone, which had become the center of an explosive anti-imperialist movement.

On October 8, the Wafd government of Prime Minister Mustafa el-Nahhas announced the unilateral abrogation of the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty, which had formalized Britain's continued military presence following Egypt's nominal independence in 1922.

Britain's refusal to recognize the abrogation intensified the mass movement. On October 16, British troops shot dead five Egyptians amid demonstrations in Ismailia. Tens of thousands of Egyptian workers employed in the Canal Zone joined strikes and withdrew their labor from British military installations.

A central purpose of the British military reinforcements was to maintain operations in the face of this movement. Soldiers were assigned duties previously performed by Egyptian workers, including loading and unloading military supplies. Strikes by dockworkers, railway workers and other employees severely disrupted British military operations and shipping through the canal, which had been dominated by British and French interests since the nineteenth century.

The scale of the movement was immense. A contemporary account published in the world Trotskyist movement's *Fourth International* reported that within a month the majority of the 30,000 to 40,000 Egyptian workers employed in British military camps had stopped work. Railway workers refused to transport British troops and supplies, construction workers struck at military airfields, and dockworkers joined the struggle.

The mass movement also threatened to escape the control of the Egyptian nationalist government. The Wafd administration sought to contain the strikes, directing workers to leave the Canal Zone rather than develop a broader struggle. It ordered some workers to remain at their posts and intervened to break particular strikes.

The British military buildup was another step in a crisis that continued to escalate. On January 25, 1952, British troops killed dozens of Egyptian police at Ismailia, provoking mass protests and the burning of Cairo the following day, in the events known as Black Saturday.

The deepening crisis culminated in the July 1952 coup by the Free Officers, which brought a nationalist military regime to power, containing the anti-colonial movement within the framework of bourgeois rule.

100 years ago: Polish government announces press censorship laws

On November 7, 1926, the Bonapartist ruler of Poland, Marshal Józef Pi?sudski, through the official channels of the government he controlled, issued a series of measures that put severe restrictions on the freedom of the press.

Fines of up to $1,000 (about $20,000 in 2026) and prison sentences of up to three months could be imposed, without the involvement of the courts, on editors who published information on the state or on ministers who caused public demonstrations. Ridicule or criticism of government officials or judges could be punished by a fine of up to $500 (about $10,000 today) or a prison term of a month. Material published about officials deemed to be derogatory could be punished by a fine of $300 (about $6,000) or a month's imprisonment. A new libel act allowed for punishments to be imposed without courts, and although the accused could appeal to the courts within seven days, any such appeal would not prevent fines or imprisonment.

The press decrees were a characteristic expression of the Bonapartist regime Pi?sudski had installed through his May 1926 coup. Resting on the army and police rather than any stable social base, Bonapartism inevitably moves to suppress the democratic rights through which the working class organizes.

Left-wing parties such as the Polish Socialist Party (PPS) and the Polish Communist Party (KPP) immediately opposed the law as a violation of the Polish constitution. The PPS, however, had actually supported Pi?sudski's coup, hailing him as a savior against the right-wing government—a catastrophic miscalculation it was only beginning to recognize by November. The KPP, likewise, had committed the notorious "May error," initially backing the coup before reversing course. Both parties' subsequent "constitutional" protest against the press decrees reflected their shared refusal to mobilize the working class independently—the PPS out of reformist deference to the bourgeois state, the KPP out of subordination to the Kremlin, under Stalin's control.

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