

This week in history: August 11-17

11 August 2014

25 Years Ago | 50 Years Ago | 75 Years Ago | 100 Years Ago

25 years ago: New York telephone striker killed by scab car on the picket line

On August 15, 1989, Edward “Gerry” Horgan was picketing along with other workers when he was struck by a car driven by the daughter of a high-level manager who was scabbing on the strike by NYNEX telecommunications workers. This was the tenth day of the strike, involving 62,000 workers in New York and along the Eastern seaboard, provoked by company demands for a system of deductibles and co-payments in health care.

The strike was a bitter one from the beginning. In its first days, 49 strikers were arrested at different picket locations. Just days before the killing of Horgan on the picket line in Valhalla, New York, a striker in Rhode Island was hit by a scab truck.

The *Bulletin*, a predecessor to the *World Socialist Web Site*, reported at the time, “Workers who saw the incident said that Horgan was hit by the car and thrown up on the hood. The driver then accelerated and carried Horgan another 100 to 200 feet as he shouted for her to stop, before he was thrown off onto the pavement head first.”

Gerry Horgan died from head injuries. He left behind his wife and two daughters. One worker told the *Bulletin* at the time, “Gerry Horgan was a martyr for the labor movement. Things are going back to the 1930s, when union people died on picket lines. This is a remake of the 1930s.”

The driver was never charged in Horgan’s death, and police never investigated the complaints of strikers that the scabs were racing through the line. Instead, they covered for the company, claiming that Horgan jumped on the hood of the car. They planned to charge the victim with criminal mischief if he had survived.

The NYNEX strike broke out while a strike of Eastern Airline mechanics and baggage handlers was in its sixth month and wildcat strikes of coal miners involving thousands had been raging for three months. The strategy of the AFL-CIO bureaucracy, which had been carried out since the 1981 PATCO air traffic controllers strike, was to isolate the struggles of workers from each other, allowing

corporations to inflict defeats on one strike after another. [top]

50 years ago: US sends military aid to Congo

This week in 1964 the Johnson administration announced its intention to send B-26 bombers to aid the embattled regime of its Congo client, Moise Tshombe, who was losing ground to a nationalist guerilla insurgency that had seized the third largest city, Stanleyville, and about a fifth of the territory of sub-Saharan Africa’s largest state.

Washington had already committed 106 pilots and paratroopers—allegedly all for non-combat missions—and announced its intention of funding mercenary soldiers sent from other African states, including Senegal, Liberia, Ethiopia, and Nigeria. The US had earlier sent several C-130 transport planes to Tshombe. The bombers and transports were reportedly piloted by mercenary Belgian, Cuban exile, and South African airmen. France and Belgium had also supplied aid to Tshombe, while the insurgent Popular Army of Liberation took material support from the Soviet Union.

Speaking on August 14, Senator John Stennis, a Mississippi Democrat, drew a parallel between the stepped-up involvement in the Congo with the US intervention in Southeast Asia, asking whether or not the sending of men and material would lead to “another undeclared war such as that in Vietnam.”

Tshombe had come to power by threatening the secession of his home province, Katanga, whose rich mineral deposits were dominated by the Anglo-Belgian mining giant, Union Miniere. Tshombe had personally overseen the brutal murder of Congolese nationalist prime minister Patrice Lumumba in 1961, after the latter had been turned over to Katanga authorities by Belgian and CIA agents. (see: Fifty years since the murder of Patrice Lumumba)

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75 years ago: Trotskyists force retreat of New York fascists

On August 17, 1939, a threatened counterdemonstration called by the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in New York City led the Christian Front, the goon squad of the fascist

leader and Roman Catholic priest Father Coughlin, to cancel a planned march to New York's Union Square set for August 19.

For weeks preceding the planned storm trooper-style march, Coughlin had used his organization's newspaper *Social Justice*, his radio program, and the bourgeois media to call for a mass attack upon the offices of several socialist organizations and premises of trade unions based in Union Square.

Coughlin had pledged to emulate "Franco's way"—a reference to the Spanish fascist dictator General Franco, heavily backed by the Catholic Church, who had come to power earlier that same year on the bones of the Spanish working class. The march was a call to violence against the workers movement in New York City, in which Coughlin's goon squads attempted to create an anti-communist and anti-Semitic atmosphere of terror. In the days leading up to the planned march, workers and socialists had been physically attacked and even stabbed by teams of fascists operating in broad daylight near Union Square.

The SWP was the only left-wing organization to uphold the principle of the workers movement that an injury to one is an injury to all. Animated by these sentiments, the SWP leadership and cadre in the New York region embarked on a week-long campaign designed to organize the largest anti-fascist demonstration ever witnessed on the east coast. Calling upon the workers of New York City to defend Union Square against fascist aggression, SWP members distributed some 300,000 leaflets. The SWP membership organized neighborhood parades, rallies and other activities to alert the working class of the dangers of Coughlin's planned display of naked force.

After extensive consultations with the local police force, who had planned to mobilize some 7,000 officers to protect the fascist march, Coughlin decided to cancel his plans to attack Union Square. This retreat in the face of the planned counterdemonstration by the working class was a dispiriting blow for the fascists.

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100 years ago: Britain declares war on Austria-Hungary

On August 12, 1914, just over a week after it had declared war against Germany, Britain declared war on Austria-Hungary, Germany's principal ally. By the second week of August, the major powers in Europe were at war in a conflict that rapidly assumed global dimensions and went on to claim the lives of some 9 million combatants and more than 7 million civilians.

Austria-Hungary seized on the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand by a Serbian nationalist in Sarajevo as a pretext to push back against a rising tide of opposition from the

oppressed nationalities within and on the peripheries of its Empire. This threat had been graphically demonstrated during the Balkan wars of 1912-13, which concluded with a victorious Serbia, backed by Russia, pushing for greater power in the Balkan region.

The maintenance of the Austro-Hungarian Empire was not just critical for the Hapsburg dynasty but also for the ruling classes of Germany. The rapid expansion of German capitalism in the preceding decades created the need for access to new sources of raw materials and markets. The ambition of the German ruling elite was to establish a broader economic foothold in Europe and to secure a predominant position on the world arena, while for the older imperialist powers Britain and France, the central question was to push back this new and dangerous rival.

Britain's declaration of war against Austria-Hungary, as with its declaration of war against Germany, was undertaken in order to defend the position of the British Empire, which was the foundation of the dominant world position of British finance capital. On August 5, Eyre Crowe, a senior diplomat in Britain's Foreign Office, had outlined British strategy in the war, commenting, "It should be our endeavour to bring into a system of fighting alliances a ring of Powers surrounding the enemies ... Even leaving out Turkey there would be a solid fence shutting off Germany and Austria from the rest of the world on practically all sides."

As the Russian Marxist Leon Trotsky explained in *War and the International*, his groundbreaking analysis of the objective socio-economic processes that underlay the global conflagration, "the capitalist states were led to struggle for the subjection of the world-embracing economic system to the profit interest of the bourgeoisie of each country."

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