

This week in history: September 29-October 5

29 September 2014

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25 years ago: Crackdown on strikers in the USSR

On October 4, 1989, the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, presided over by Michael Gorbachev, decreed an immediate ban on strikes in “important industries,” including coalfields, power plants and transportation. The almost-unanimous vote of 364-to-6 set the stage for a decisive confrontation between the privileged bureaucracy and the powerful Soviet working class.

On the same day, the Stalinist legislative body also voted to break the strike of rail workers in Azerbaijan and significantly increase the number of troops available to use against the working class.

The deliberations of the Supreme Soviet took place in a state of near panic, under the shadow of a threat by militant coal miners to resume the mass strikes that shook the Stalinist bureaucracy to its roots the previous July. The Gorbachev regime had yet to carry out the promises that it made in order to end the strike, and the miners set a deadline of October 1 for the realization of their demands. Moreover, workers all over the country were taking the example of the miners by setting up strike committees in defiance of the bureaucracy.

Gorbachev’s original proposal was to outlaw all strikes for 15 months, saying that the pro-capitalist program of *perestroika* would be endangered by the movement of the working class: “We must avoid our reforms being taken hostage. These measures are being taken to prevent the escalation of a process, which if unchecked, can affect everything that we are doing.” However, fearing a head-on confrontation with the proletariat, the Supreme Soviet changed the legislation, with Gorbachev’s approval, to limit the scope and duration of the ban.

Gorbachev’s closest adviser, Leonid I. Abalkin, publicly expressed his disappointment with the amended measure: “I’m upset. We needed emergency measures.” Comparing the Soviet economy to a heart attack victim and the Soviet people to a mental patient, he said: “In

such circumstances, the patient needs a strict regimen and definite treatments. Our society suffers from an explosion of emotions now, and we need to take real measures to calm it down.”

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50 years ago: Free Speech Movement at UC Berkeley

On October 1, 1964, an attempt by University of California police to arrest a former student, Jack Weinberg, for setting up a recruitment table for the civil rights organization CORE (Congress on Racial Equality), ignited what came to be called the Berkeley Free Speech Movement. Involving thousands of students, it is generally considered the beginning of the massive youth protest movement of the 1960s.

Beginning in the 1930s, the University of California had imposed a series of regulations whose express aim was to block the influence of socialism on students. Students could not engage in political activity unless it was in support of the Democratic and Republican student organizations. For all other political groups, a small 26x40-foot strip on the edge of campus was made available for tables. But as the Berkeley students came under the influence of the civil rights movement, the university determined to crack down and remove even this restricted area. In response, a number of groups joined forces, including CORE, and, calling themselves the United Front, defied the new policy.

Weinberg’s arrest triggered a spontaneous reaction among students, who surrounded the police car where he was detained and would not allow it to leave. The car was blocked for 72 hours by thousands of students, and in the interim was turned into a speakers’ platform. Mario Savio, a recent transfer from Queens, New York, emerged as the most popular leader among the students. Students also occupied the administration building.

California’s Democratic governor, Edmund G. (Pat) Brown, fearing a violent confrontation, intervened with the university administration for a negotiated settlement, that included Weinberg’s release without charge. The

United Front dissolved itself and created the Free Speech Movement.

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75 years ago: Warsaw falls to invading German troops

The Nazi siege of the Polish capital Warsaw ended October 1, 1939, when German troops marched into the city unhindered. The Polish garrison capitulated on September 28 and the following day left the city to be taken as prisoners of war. Poland was invaded by Nazi Germany on September 1 and by the Stalinist Soviet Union on September 17.

The siege of Warsaw began with a massive aerial bombardment by the Luftwaffe, which had gained experience at terrorizing urban populations through its assistance to Franco's fascist forces during the Spanish Civil War. In the last week of September the Luftwaffe intensified its bombardment, even using transport planes, Junker 52s, to drop incendiary devices to set the city aflame.

Almost 26,000 civilians died during the siege and another 50,000 were wounded. Some 12 percent of Warsaw's buildings were destroyed, with the destruction of the municipal water works rendering all fire fighting attempts futile. The stench from corpses buried beneath rubble, together with the carcasses of dead horses, left the air fetid and overwhelming.

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100 years ago: British troops massacre Sikh deportees from Canada

On October 2, 1914, rioting broke out near Calcutta, India when Sikhs who had been denied the right to migrate to Canada resisted efforts by British colonial authorities to put them on board a train for the Punjab. Troops called in by the authorities indiscriminately opened fire on the crowd, killing 19. The remainder scattered to surrounding villages, and were rounded up by colonial authorities and detained for the duration of World War I.

Immigrants from India had begun to arrive in Western Canada in large numbers shortly after the turn of the century. This was part of a broader influx, with over 400,000 people, most of them European, migrating to Canada. However, the Canadian bourgeoisie, attempting to whip up racist jingoism, began denouncing what it dubbed an "Asiatic invasion." In 1908 authorities issued an order that excluded immigrants who had not made a "continuous passage" from their country of birth. In

practice this applied only to passengers on ships which began their voyage in India, the long distances necessitating a stop in the Asia-Pacific.

Gurdit Singh, a Hong Kong based Sikh businessman chartered the Japanese steamer, the *Komagata Maru*, in order to test the exclusion order, noting that as British citizens, the Indian passengers should have the right to land in any corner of the British empire.

When the steamer arrived at Vancouver, with 352 Indians on board, its passengers were refused permission to come ashore. The Sikhs, many of whom were ex-soldiers from border campaigns, resisted the order from the Canadian government to be deported as "undesirable persons." After a legal battle that lasted more than two months, the ship was forced to leave Canada.

As it approached Calcutta on its return to India, it was stopped by a British gunboat, and the passengers were placed under guard. The ship was taken to a dock outside of Calcutta, where police tried to force all the passengers to depart for Punjab on a special freight train. The crowd resisted and clashes broke out.

British imperialism, while gunning down Sikhs and other colonial subjects, sent Indian troops into the slaughterhouse of World War I. Indian troops landing in France to be sent to the trenches received the following message from King George: "I know with what readiness my brave and loyal Indian soldiers are prepared to fulfill their sacred duty in the field of battle, shoulder to shoulder with their comrades from all parts of the Empire. Rest assured that you will always be in my thoughts and prayers."

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