

This week in history: June 11-17

11 June 2018

25 years ago: US military slaughters Somali civilians

On June 11, 1993, six months after US troops landed in Somalia for the supposed purpose of feeding starving people, US warplanes reduced large parts of the capital city, Mogadishu, to rubble, while United Nations troops carried out house-to-house raids and cold-blooded massacres.

US AC-130H gunships attacked targets throughout Mogadishu with 105mm computer-guided howitzers capable of firing enormously destructive shells with overwhelming rapidity. Hundreds of Somalis were killed and many more wounded in a week of one-sided bloodshed.

The action was the first major military operation of the Clinton administration, which had taken office in January. It was purportedly in retaliation for the death of 23 Pakistani soldiers in a clash with Somalis on June 5. These “peacekeeping troops”—mercenaries sent by the military dictatorship in Islamabad—died in a battle in which they killed at least three times as many Somalis, after a raid in which the UN troops sought to seize control of a radio station which had broadcast statements opposing the foreign occupation.

The work of food relief agencies, the supposed aim of Operation Restore Hope, ground to a halt. An official of the CARE relief agency told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation: “The UN is now regarded as the enemy, not someone who came to help.” The US attacks were highly destructive, he explained: “The targets are specific, but the weaponry is enormous and the damage is huge.”

President Clinton described the US mission as “opening up the country again to the beginnings of civilization.” The onetime protester against the Vietnam War was now embracing gunboat diplomacy with more modern killing machines.

The bombing and killing in Somalia were supported by a barrage of media propaganda in the United States. Somali militia leader Mohammed Farah Aidid became the latest figure in the pantheon of villains, following the examples of Manuel Noriega in Panama (1989) and Saddam Hussein of Iraq (1990-91), denounced as a “warlord,” while Somali collaborators with the US-UN occupiers were dubbed “statesmen.”

Two days after the US bombing raids, thousands of Mogadishu residents took part in the first mass anti-US demonstration. Pakistani “peacekeepers” opened fire, killing at least 20 people, the majority of them women and children. Most of the dead appeared to have been shot in the back as they

tried to flee from the gunfire. Victims lay in pools of blood. One journalist eyewitness, wrote, “They have picked off defenseless men, women and children, even those who had nothing to do with the demonstration.”

50 years ago: De Gaulle orders repression of the left in France

On June 12, 1968, the French government announced sweeping repressive measures against left-wing organizations as the general strike movement ebbed. Seven student organizations and four political parties were ordered disbanded, including the Organization Communiste Internationaliste, the French section of the International Committee of the Fourth International. The Federation Etudiantes Revolutionnaire (FER), the student arm of the OCI, was also banned.

The government further prohibited all street demonstrations until the general elections scheduled for June 23 and 30. The army was mobilized in all parts of the country.

The measures were adopted at a cabinet meeting chaired by President Charles de Gaulle. The pretext used was renewed clashes between students, workers and police in Paris and several other cities. In Sochaux, in eastern France, a striking worker was shot to death by police, and another striker died of injuries he received in a clash with police.

While stepping up repression against workers and students and their organizations, de Gaulle offered an olive branch to the ultra-right, readmitting from exile several leading fascists.

De Gaulle called for new elections to the National Assembly after it became clear that he might lose if he went ahead with plans for a referendum. The Stalinist Communist Party of France supported the call for elections and used the campaign to prod workers to end their strikes. The PCF called for a popular front government in alliance with “progressive” bourgeois politicians.

In a television speech, Premier Georges Pompidou called on voters to give the Gaullists an increased majority in the elections. He said the ruling party needed additional support to save France from the danger of “communist totalitarianism.”

While the number of workers still on strike was greatly reduced from the height of the general strike movement, about 500,000 were still out in various parts of France.

75 years ago: Hundreds of thousands of US coal miners strike

Hundreds of thousands of coal miners across the United States began indefinite strike action on June 11, 1943, demanding a wage increase and improvements to their working conditions. The stoppage, the second in the industry in less than two months, pitted the workers against the administration of President Franklin Roosevelt and the CIO union bureaucracy which had pledged to suppress strikes throughout the duration of World War II.

At the beginning of May, half a million coal miners had walked out throughout the country after the expiration of a previous contract between the United Mine Workers (UMW) union and the major coal companies. The unrest was prompted by the growing divergence of stagnant wages and a rising cost of living. There was also widespread opposition to the profiteering activities of the major corporations, who were making record returns on the back of war production.

The UMW leadership headed by John L. Lewis ended the May strike after Roosevelt issued an executive order directing government authorities to take control of the mines. Talks between the union and the administration, however, failed to result in an agreement.

The June strike thus involved a direct confrontation between the miners and the federal government officials who were running the mines. Roosevelt threatened to ask Congress to draft the miners into the army and impose military discipline upon them. Lewis again responded by ordering strikers back to work. In an indication that the struggle was getting out of the control of the union leadership, around 150,000 miners were still on strike on June 28, six days after Lewis had called off the stoppage on June 22.

The Socialist Workers Party, then the American section of the world Trotskyist movement, noted that the miners struggle reflected a developing political radicalization of the working class. A commentary in the SWP's newspaper *The Militant* indicted the AFL and CIO leaders and the Stalinists who supported the administration, and declared, "Finally, however, the class struggle broke through. The miners' fight, month after month, pounded home the real meaning of Roosevelt's line. And, with the eyes of millions of CIO and AFL workers now opened to the real situation, Roosevelt's control over the labor movement is drawing to its close."

100 years ago: American socialist leader Eugene V. Debs calls on workers to oppose the First World War

On June 16, 1918, 14 months into American participation in the first imperialist war, socialist leader Eugene V. Debs gave his famous anti-war speech in Canton, Ohio, calling for the international unity of the working class.

Debs noted at the outset of the speech that he had to take care in how he expressed his hostility to the imperialist bloodbath, saying sarcastically, "It is extremely dangerous to exercise the constitutional right of free speech in a country fighting to make democracy safe in the world."

In addition to the unity of all workers in the struggle against capitalism, the themes of his speech were the growth of socialism and the need to stand firm in principles under government repression. Debs gave a historical overview of the struggle against war, including by German Marxists, and defended Lenin, Trotsky and the Russian revolution and the peace treaty of Brest-Litovsk, which the new Soviet government had been forced to sign with imperial Germany.

Although he did not call for resistance to the draft, Debs was arrested on June 30 on ten counts of sedition, especially for defending in the Canton speech those who had been convicted of calling for such resistance.

Debs had unparalleled standing in the American working class, having led struggles as far back as the Pullman railway strike in 1894. Debs went on to found the Socialist Party of America in 1901 and was its presidential candidate in 1904, 1908, 1912 and 1920 (from prison). In the last two elections he received over 900,000 votes.

After the First World War erupted in Europe in August 1914, he opposed American participation and became the leader of the internationalist trend within the Socialist Party. As the American ruling class moved closer to entry into the war in March 1917, Debs gave antiwar speeches side-by-side with Russian revolutionary leader Leon Trotsky, then exiled in New York City. After the entry of the US in the war, Debs' antiwar position earned him the hatred of the American ruling class. President Woodrow Wilson called him "a traitor to his country."

Debs delivered the Canton speech under the pall of state censorship. The United States had become increasingly militarized as hundreds of thousands of American troops crossed the Atlantic. The Espionage Act, enacted June 15, 1917, made verbal and written opposition to the war a crime. A radical monthly, *The Masses*, was suppressed and dozens of socialists and left-wingers convicted of sedition by the time Debs delivered his speech.

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