

# This week in history: July 13-19

13 July 2020

## 25 years ago: Detroit newspaper workers go on strike

On July 13, 1995, 2,500 *Detroit Free Press* and *Detroit News* workers went on strike, facing the most concentrated union-busting attack in the city in decades. Gannett Corporation and Knight-Ridder, owners of the two papers and at the time the two largest publishing chains in the country, were determined to destroy hundreds of jobs, slash health care benefits, and impose brutal working conditions.

The attack was part of a broader campaign to destroy jobs and increase profits in the media industry. One day after the Detroit workers went on strike, media giants escalated this even further. The Times Mirror company announced the closure of *New York Newsday*, destroying 800 jobs. A further 700 jobs were cut from that company's flagship daily, the *Los Angeles Times*. A few days later the Gannett Company announced that they were acquiring Multimedia Inc. for \$1.7 billion.

Pressmen, mailers, truck drivers, journalists and others had already been facing years of wage freezes, concessions and job losses as members of the Teamsters and The Newspaper Guild. When the workers refused the companies' new demands, including the imposition of a merit-pay system on Newspaper Guild members, the corporations went on the offensive.

All the institutions of big business were brought in behind the newspaper publishers. The city's administration, under Mayor Dennis Archer, brought police in to protect scabs from the picket lines. One worker was driven off a highway by security guards the first night. Strikers were subject to harassment, arrests, and mace in both Detroit and suburban Sterling Heights, while the mass media began portraying the strikers as "violent." Columnist and best-selling author Mitch Albom infamously crossed the picket line shortly after the strike began, and penned a column calling for his coworkers to get back on the job.

The union leadership ultimately called off the strike in February of 1997, after failing to mount an effective struggle against the strike-breaking operation. On December 17, 2000, the last of six union locals ratified an agreement sanctioning huge wage and job cuts.

## 50 years ago: British dock workers begin strike

On July 15, 1970, nearly 50,000 dock workers in the United Kingdom walked off the job and began a strike, refusing to load

and unload ships coming into the country's major ports. This was the first national strike among longshoremen in 44 years, with the last walkout having taken place in 1926.

The strike had been forced by the rank-and-file workers against the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU) leadership of Jack Jones. It had begun a few days earlier, with workers leaving ports backed up in Southampton, Dundee, Glasgow, Liverpool and a handful of other port cities. By July 15 it had spread throughout the UK, bringing the country's imports and exports to a grinding halt, and gaining official union support.

Workers demanded a £20 per week minimum and to block the so-called "Devlin Plan" of "modernizations" which mainly sought to replace older, experienced workers with lower-paid younger workers. The basic rate before the strike was just £11 per week for work that was often dangerous and physically grueling.

The strike prompted the recently elected Tory government to declare a national emergency. Troops were deployed as a show of force to threaten workers. In some critical areas the Royal Navy was ordered to unload some ships with critical cargo. But in the great majority of ports the import economy was frozen.

The Socialist Labour League, the Trotskyist movement in Britain at the time, fought to win workers to a revolutionary program during the strike. The SLL wrote in their paper *Workers Press* that "it is absolutely necessary that the dockers' struggle be treated, first and foremost, as a political struggle whose victory can be secured only by integrating it into the political battle for socialism and the overthrow of capitalism."

The SLL's explanation of the need for a political struggle by the workers and the necessity to break with the union bureaucracy was confirmed July 30 when the dock workers union conceded the £20 demand and delivered a massive victory to the shipping and port owners. The workers received only a minor pay increase that would be mostly eaten up by inflation within a matter of a few years.

After the concessions were announced the SLL continued to clarify the significance of the defeat. "Dockers must not allow this retreat to develop into a rout," it wrote. "Jones and his Stalinist allies can and must be defeated, but only if we learn the political lessons of this dispute and begin immediately to build the alternative Marxist leadership in all the major ports in Britain."

## 75 years ago: Allied leaders gather at Potsdam Conference

On July 17, 1945, leaders from Britain, the United States and the

Soviet Union gathered in the German city of Potsdam in the last of the major Allied conferences of the Second World War. The event was held in the wake of the defeat of the Nazi Third Reich and the occupation of Germany by the Allies, which heralded the end of the war in Europe, and amid preparations for a final US offensive against Japan in the Pacific.

The conference was attended by Harry Truman, who had become US president after the death of Franklin D. Roosevelt in April, Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin, and British prime ministers Winston Churchill and Clement Atlee, whose Labour Party had just defeated Churchill's Tories in a general election.

France was not represented at the gathering, in an indication of tensions among the Allied powers over the division of the spoils of victory. The US, as part of its bid to become the dominant imperialist power, had already signaled its hostility to an attempt by France to regain its old colonial possessions in Africa and Asia.

The Potsdam Conference ratified the division of Germany into occupation zones to be controlled by the US, Britain, the Soviet Union and France. This included the effective partition of Berlin. Agreements were reached on the destruction of Germany's military industry and plans for the prosecution of some of its leaders responsible for war crimes. Germany's external boundaries were to be redrawn, with the country losing some 25 percent of its previous territory, including East Prussia, Silesia, West Prussia, and two thirds of Pomerania.

The conference allowed for the expulsion of German-speaking populations in Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia and their repatriation to Germany. It recognized a Provisional Government of National Unity in Poland, composed of the Stalinist Polish Workers' Party and bourgeois-nationalist groups. The Soviet Red Army had occupied broad swathes of Eastern Europe, defeating Nazi-aligned right-wing and fascist regimes.

The Stalinists, advancing the interests of the privileged Soviet bureaucracy, were hostile to any independent mobilization of the working class in the region, instead seeking to create their own sphere of influence, and initially did not move to implement policies of nationalization in the countries that they occupied.

The conference issued a demand that Japan immediately surrender, or face "prompt and utter destruction." During the gathering, Truman reportedly told Stalin that the US had a "powerful new weapon." Two weeks after the conference ended, the US would drop nuclear bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in an unprecedented war crime aimed at demonstrating post-war American hegemony, particularly in relation to the USSR.

## 100 years: Second Congress of the Communist International opens

On July 19, 1920, the Second Congress of the Communist International was opened in Petrograd by Grigori Zinoviev, chairman of the Executive Committee of the Communist International.

Delegates, accompanied by thousands of Petrograd workers, had marched from the Smolny Institute and assembled in the Uritsky Theater of the Tauride Palace. Delegates stood for a moment of silence in memory of the working-class fighters who had fallen in the last year-and-a-half since the first congress. Special tribute was paid to those communists who had been imprisoned by bourgeois regimes, including American workers who had been persecuted by the repression of the Wilson administration and Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer's newly formed Bureau of Investigation.

The delegates came from 38 countries, including members of sections of the Communist International with voting rights, and others from left-nationalist or social democratic parties and syndicalist and trade union groups who came as observers. Entry into the Soviet Republic was difficult because of an allied imperialist blockade and a war between Soviet Russia and Poland.

The opening session's main political report was given by V. I. Lenin of the Russian Communist Party, and leader, along with Leon Trotsky, of the October 1917 Revolution. Delegates were distributed reports, resolutions, and two newly-published books: Trotsky's *Terrorism and Communism*, and Lenin's "*Left-Wing*" *Communism: An Infantile Disorder*.

The congress, which moved to Moscow three days after its opening, debated, over the course of several weeks, the central issues of the revolutionary strategy of the day, including questions related to national independence and anti-colonial struggles, the trade unions, and conditions for membership in the Communist International. On this last point the congress produced its famous "21 Conditions" for entry into the Communist International.

In its final session on August 7, Trotsky expressed the sentiments of the Soviet working class on the congress:

And what joy, what pride, do we workers of Moscow and of the whole of Russia feel that the best fighters of the working class of the world have been able to meet for a second time in our country, that we have been able, on the basis of our experience, to help them to forge their weapons. With your hands, comrades, we have fanned a blaze in our Moscow forge. In this blaze we have heated the proletarian steel to white heat, we have worked it with the hammer of our proletarian soviet revolution, we have tempered it with the experience of the civil war and forged a splendid, and incomparable sword for the international proletariat. We will arm ourselves with this sword, we will arm the others with it. We say to the workers of the whole world: "We have forged a strong sword in the Moscow fire. Take it in your hands and plunge it into the heart of world capital."



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