

This week in history: June 24-30

23 June 2024

25 years ago: GM closes Flint Buick plant

On June 29, 1999, General Motors closed the doors of its Buick City complex in Flint, Michigan, its last operating car assembly plant in the city. The plant closure dealt a further blow to the industrial city, the birthplace of both the giant car company and the United Auto Workers union, that had lost tens of thousands of auto jobs over the previous two decades.

GM ended Buick production in Flint where the large model cars had been made since 1904. The 235-acre Buick City facility had only 1,200 workers left—1,000 full-time employees and 200 temporary workers—a fraction of the 28,000 auto workers who once produced cars there during the peak production years of the mid-1960s. Many higher-seniority workers either retired or were forced to transfer to other plants throughout the country.

In 1984 GM brought together a half-dozen factories to form the massive complex and dubbed it Buick City. This was supposed to be GM's answer to rival Toyota City and a symbol of the US carmaker's determination to fight foreign competition. The company's share of the car and truck market declined from around 40 percent in 1984 to 30.7 percent in 1997. In response, GM consolidated its large car production because of greater demand for its more profitable light trucks and sport utility vehicles. Production of Buick LeSabres was transferred to more modern large car plants in Detroit/Hamtramck and Lake Orion, near Pontiac, Michigan.

The plant closing was part of GM's strategy to eliminate 38,000-50,000 jobs in its North American operations. Between the 1970s and 1990s, the world's largest carmaker wiped out over a quarter of a million jobs, including nearly 50,000 in the Flint area alone. Wall Street criticized GM for not carrying out the same pace of job-cutting that had made number-two automaker Ford more efficient and profitable.

Flint was devastated by the closure. GM employment in the Flint area fell from 77,000 workers in manufacturing and office centers in 1978 to 33,000 in 1999. The official unemployment rate in the city was 9.7 percent, more than double the state average, and the bulk of better-paying auto jobs were replaced with low-wage employment in the service sector.

50 years ago: Soviet Stalinists welcome Nixon as Watergate noose tightens

On June 27, 1974, US President Richard Nixon arrived in the Soviet Union for what would be his last state visit before his resignation in August. Nixon was warmly received by Stalinist leader Leonid Brezhnev. The two were meeting to negotiate trade agreements and a ban on nuclear weapons testing.

It was the third summit between Nixon and Brezhnev. The first, in 1972 was the first time a US president had visited Moscow. Then in 1973, Brezhnev traveled to Washington for a similar meeting.

In all the summits, the agreements to be signed were negotiated and worked out long in advance, making the proceedings more for ceremony and pomp than actual diplomatic discussions. Of most significance at the 1974 meeting was the Threshold Test Ban Treaty, in which both countries agreed that no nuclear bombs exceeding 150 kilotons could be tested and developed.

Brezhnev spared no expense in treating Nixon to the highest luxuries in the Soviet Union, taking him to lavish resorts that were only available to the most privileged members of the Stalinist bureaucracy. Following the Stalinist policy of accommodation to imperialism, Brezhnev's aim was to bolster Nixon's reputation as a world leader willing to make peace with the Soviet Union—even though Nixon's White House was on the brink of collapse amid the Watergate scandal.

In fact, on the same day that Nixon arrived in Moscow, the US Senate Watergate Committee published the results of its investigation into the Nixon administration's role in the break-in at the offices of the Democratic National Committee. The findings made clear that Nixon was engaged in a major cover-up operation to suppress evidence that would expose his criminal activities.

No strangers to methods of lies, deceit, and thuggish behavior, Brezhnev and the other Stalinists did not hesitate to lend Nixon all the support they could. Nixon had pursued a policy that became known as "détente," which was to relax the threat of military action against the Soviet Union in return for favorable economic deals, and no Soviet interference with imperialist plundering.

Brezhnev jumped at the opportunity to demonstrate the Kremlin's reliability. For example, the Soviet Union played only a limited role in supporting its official allies Egypt and Syria in the Yom Kippur War against Israel, despite the fact that Nixon sent unprecedented levels of arms to the Zionist state to forestall its defeat.

Just days before his arrival in Moscow, Nixon attended a meeting with the heads of NATO and signed a pledge to maintain US nuclear forces in Europe and to continue military funding of NATO forces. Nixon told the NATO meeting, "We will never sacrifice the interests of our allies to reach agreement with the Soviet Union. We go into negotiations at the Soviet summit

motivated by our interests and yours.”

Stalinist foreign policy in many ways could be summed up by the inverse of this sentiment: “We will not hesitate to sacrifice the interests of the working class to reach an agreement with the United States so long as it increases our own personal wealth and privileges.”

75 years ago: Australian coal miners begin two-month strike

On June 27, 1949, some 23,000 Australian coal miners began a general strike that would span almost two months and involve a direct confrontation with the federal Labor government. It was one of the most significant industrial disputes in Australian post-World War II history.

Anger over inadequate pay and difficult conditions had been building. Workers’ demands since the end of the war had largely gone unmet. They included a 35-hour week, a 30-shilling increase in wages and the provision of long-service leave. Miners were compelled to work lengthy weeks while lacking conditions such as extended leave.

Amid widespread discontent and the failure to reach any agreement with the coal companies, the Australian Coal and Shale Employees’ Federation announced indefinite strike action throughout the coal fields. The stoppage extended across much of Australia’s vast landmass, including New South Wales, Queensland, Western Australia and the island state of Tasmania.

The response of the ruling elite was apoplectic. A typical article in the *Daily Examiner* began, “A general strike will begin on the coal fields tomorrow, which will lead to the greatest industrial dislocation in Australia’s history.” It preemptively blamed miners and the union for what it claimed would be a vast increase in unemployment and other social problems.

On June 29, the Labor government of Prime Minister Ben Chifley rushed extraordinary legislation through parliament, making it illegal to provide financial assistance to the strikers and their families. The next week, the union was ordered to hand over its financial records to an industrial registrar, while some of its leaders were raided and arrested.

Those attacks were a prelude to the first use of troops to break a strike in peacetime Australian history. On August 1, 2,500 soldiers began mining operations, in a move that successfully ended the stoppage and set a precedent for future use of the army against striking workers, including by the following conservative government of Robert Menzies.

The coal strike unfolded amid a deepening anti-communist hysteria, associated with American imperialism’s launch of an aggressive Cold War confrontation with the Soviet Union. The Communist Party of Australia was heavily involved in the union. During the course of the strike, the right-wing press, together with Labor leaders, openly discussed the possibility of banning the Stalinist organization.

100 years ago: Zionists assassinate Jewish leader in Jerusalem

On June 30, 1924, the Haganah, the Zionist militia and predecessor of the Israel Defense Forces, ordered the assassination of the Dutch-Jewish poet and religious leader Jacob Israël de Haan. The act was carried out by Avraham Tehomi, one of the founders of Ze’ev Jabotinsky’s fascist-Zionist terror group, the Irgun.

De Haan was born in Holland in 1881 and received a traditional Jewish education. In 1904 he lost his job as a teacher and his membership in the Dutch Social Democratic movement because he published a homoerotic novel.

He studied law and did humanitarian work on behalf of Russian prisoners, and by 1910 he had become a Zionist. He published four well-received books of poetry in Dutch before he emigrated to Palestine in 1919.

In Palestine, he became increasingly religious and associated himself with ultra-orthodox Haredi Jews. He opposed the Zionist treatment of Palestinians and sought to forge agreements with Arab nationalists. He eventually became a representative of Haredi Jews in Jerusalem and one of the best-known anti-Zionist Jews in the West, primarily through his journalism, which was widely published in Dutch and English.

After 1923, he began to receive death threats regularly from Zionists, which he wrote about for the European press. On June 30, he was shot three times as he was leaving a synagogue. His murder drew international attention, particularly in the Arab press, where he was viewed as a sympathizer of Arab culture. Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, a Haganah leader and later second president of Israel, tried to blame the murder on his sexual orientation, but it was widely known that de Haan was the victim of a political assassination.

After his death, an anonymous leaflet in Yiddish was distributed in New York that said de Haan was killed “[b]ecause he fought heroically for the liberation of the Agendath Israel, which stands for a life of independence from the Torahless Zionists, who use violence to enslave the pious.”

It was not until 1952 that an official Haganah history reported that leading members of the Haganah had decided to assassinate de Haan.

Tehomi was tracked down and interviewed by an Israeli television station in 1985. He told reporters, “I have done what the Haganah decided had to be done. And nothing was done without the order of Yitzhak Ben-Zvi. ... I have no regrets because he (de Haan) wanted to destroy our whole idea of Zionism.”



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