

This week in history: September 30-October 6

This column profiles important historical events which took place during this week, 25 years ago, 50 years ago, 75 years ago and 100 years ago

29 September 2024

25 years ago: London rail crash kills 31, injured 417

On October 5, 1999, two commuter trains in West London collided at speeds topping 200 kilometers per hour on the Great Western Main Line, killing 31 people and injuring 417. The disaster known as the Paddington crash, after the nearby station, was the second accident on the same line in just over two years in almost the same spot.

One of the train's cars burst into flames trapping, suffocating, and burning its victims. Riders were thrown from the train or trapped in the wreckage for days. A passenger said one carriage was "ripped apart like a sardine can." Both train drivers died. The preventable disaster was the worst in terms of dead and wounded since the Clapham Junction rail crash in 1988, which had killed 35 and injured 484.

While the corporate-controlled press initially pointed the finger at the train drivers in an effort to deflect attention from management culpability, numerous reports surfaced disclosing significant safety issues with the placement of the signal, which acts as a traffic light. Over the previous six years, eight trains missed the signal on red and even the train companies complained to Railtrack—which assumed responsibility for signals during privatization—that the signal was partly hidden by a pylon.

The attacks on rail workers, especially following the privatization of the rail industry, contributed to deteriorating safety standards. In an interview a few days after the accident on BBC Radio 5, a driver said, "People keep blaming the drivers, but we are only human. People get tired and can't do their jobs." He said that some years earlier the privatized rail companies had agreed to a shorter basic working week with the drivers, "but with all the companies that I have worked for, drivers are pressured to work their days off. Many drivers are working 13 days out of 14." He added that some night shifts could last 10 or 11 hours.

Investigations into the rail crash had uncovered that the privatized rail network sacrificed lives for private profit. Since the Clapham Junction crash, passengers and rail workers had called for additional safety measures to prevent another tragic accident. There were calls for the implementation of a fail-safe automatic train protection (ATP) system to prevent future disasters after the Paddington collision, at the cost of 1 billion pounds. But the Labor government under Tony Blair, bowing to the capitalist profit system, proposed 150 million pounds on the less safe train protection warning system, which train workers called a "Mickey mouse system."

50 years ago: Portuguese military dictator steps down amid working class upsurge

On September 30, 1974, the president of Portugal António de Spínola resigned his office after major working class protests and strikes against his rule. Spínola was immediately replaced with another member of the ruling military Junta, General Francisco da Costa Gomes.

Spínola and his successor Costa Gomes had been elevated to the highest levels of state power following the military coup by the Armed Forces Movement in April 1974 that had seized power from the fascist Estado Novo government. The main objective of the coup however was not to fight fascism, but to prevent the working class from taking power for itself.

The decision to replace Spínola was made with similar considerations. The day before he stepped down Spínola had planned a rally for his right-wing supporters in an attempt to prove he ruled with a popular mandate. In response, thousands of workers marched through the streets of Lisbon to protest the rally. Workers so vastly outnumbered the Spínola supporters that the pro-government rally was called off. Fearing that the demonstrations would turn revolutionary the military mobilized tanks and troops throughout the city.

Understanding that he could not rule without a major confrontation with the working class, Spínola opted to resign. In his resignation speech he stated bluntly that no measures of democracy would be permitted by the military junta. "The peace, progress and welfare of the nation are compromised by the economic crisis to which we are fast heading, by unemployment, uncontrolled inflation, by the breakdown of business, by the retraction on investments... the formation of a democracy is not viable at this time."

The Portuguese Communist Party played a treacherous role in allowing one dictator president to be replaced with another. Both the Stalinists and the reformists in the Socialist Party had accepted positions in Spínola's cabinet to assist him in suppressing the working class strike waves.

In April, workers had paralyzed all industries in a massive general strike, posing a situation of dual power. The Stalinists, taking their directive from Moscow, worked to prevent the working class from taking power independently and gave support to Spínola and his anti-strike laws, claiming that Spínola would eventually bring about a democratic form of rule.

The Portuguese situation demonstrated the assessment made by Trotsky at the founding of the Fourth International: "The historical crisis of mankind is reduced to the crisis of the revolutionary leadership."

The Portuguese situation was undeniably revolutionary. Workers in 1974 took massive and powerful strike action that brought down the fascist regime. However, under the treacherous leadership of Stalinists, Social Democrats, and the trade unions, capitalism was allowed to survive under one dictator after another until it could stabilize itself to allow for a bourgeois democratic form of rule.

Costa Gomes would hold power until 1976 when the first parliamentary elections were held in more than 50 years.

75 years ago: Mao Zedong proclaims People's Republic of China

On October 1, 1949, Mao Zedong proclaimed the establishment of the People's Republic of China at a mass rally in Tiananmen Square in Beijing. The new government was formed as the outcome of a revolutionary struggle involving millions, particularly in the peasant-based People's Liberation Army (PLA).

Over the preceding months the PLA had routed the bourgeois Kuomintang (KMT) of warlord Chiang Kai-Shek, expelling its forces from all of their major strongholds and eventually compelling them to flee to the island of Taiwan, where they would establish a decades-long military dictatorship.

The revolutionary victory underscored the sympathy of broad layers of the population for the Chinese Communist Party and hostility to the KMT, which had committed many crimes, including the bloody suppression of the 1925-27 Chinese Revolution. It occurred despite the military, economic and geopolitical support of the imperialist powers for the KMT.

At the same time, the overthrow occurred despite the bankrupt Stalinist perspective of the CCP. In 1925-27, it had subordinated the working class to the KMT, preparing for the defeat by proclaiming that such an alliance was necessary because of the supposedly democratic, not socialist character of the revolution. After the defeat, the CCP turned away from the working class and to the peasantry.

In keeping with the Stalinist/Menshevik two-stage theory, which held that the socialist revolution had to wait until after a successful bourgeois revolution, Mao had repeatedly overseen negotiations for a power-sharing deal with the KMT, up to 1949. Soviet dictator Josef Stalin oppose any CCP seizure of power. The KMT's intransigence, its subsequent disintegration and the logic of the military conflict played more of a role in the outcome than Mao's bankrupt political perspective.

In keeping with these Stalinist conceptions, the new state was described as a "people's," not a "workers' republic. In his speech, Mao hailed the revolutionary struggle that vanquished the KMT. He declared that the new regime would represent "the will of the whole nation." Mao did not mention socialism or workers' power, and his sole reference to international developments was to declare the government's willingness to "establish diplomatic relations with any foreign government that is willing to observe the principles of equality, mutual benefit, and mutual respect of territorial integrity and sovereignty."

100 years ago: League of Nations passes bankrupt anti-war protocol

On October 2, 1924, in its fifth General Assembly, the 47 members of the League of Nations passed the Geneva Protocol for the Pacific Settlement of International Disputes, a mechanism "to kill all war," in the words of the league.

The protocol provided for the arbitration of international disputes in a world court. Nations that refused to comply would be considered aggressors, and the League was then bound to give assistance, including economic sanctions, to victimized nations. The Protocol did not apply to nations that were not members of the League, such as the United States.

British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald, leader of the first Labour government, and French Prime Minister Édouard Herriot, leader of the

Radical Party, proposed the measure which had gone through complex negotiations in Geneva for over a month.

Japanese imperialism, at the last moment, raised objections about the settlement of immigration disputes that impacted Latin America, North America and Australia. The objections were widely understood to relate to the complete ban on Japanese immigration to the United States set forth in the Immigration Act of 1924, though the Japanese also raised other issues. A compromise, however, was reached.

The international press greeted the vote with enthusiasm. "The protocol that promises so much for the peaceful development of civilization has already been signed by an imposing group of nations under the unswerving leadership of France," the *New York Times* wrote. The League, it said, "will hunt down the wolves of war in their secret lair."

The *Times* said that the negotiations had been conducted under the aegis of an "American spirit" and referred to the ideals of the late President Woodrow Wilson, a Democrat, who had initially proposed the League of Nations.

The Democratic candidate in the ongoing American presidential election, John W. Davis, called for a return to the ideals of Wilson in a speech in New Jersey on October 4 and called for the US to join the League of Nations and participate in a disarmament conference to be held next year.

Powerful forces, however, opposed the protocol. President Calvin Coolidge said in a speech at the unveiling of a military monument in Washington D.C., "We do not propose to entrust to any other power or combination of powers any authority to make up our minds for us."

The Evening Standard in Britain, a Conservative paper, opposed the agreement and called for Australia, Canada and New Zealand to withdraw from the League. The Conservatives returned to power at the end of October and refused to ratify the Protocol in 1925, after which it was a dead letter.



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