

This week in history

12 October 2009

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25 Years Ago: CIA execution manual published

On October 13 1984, a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) manual was leaked to the press that instructed Contra forces on how best to carry out executions of public officials and civilians in Nicaragua.

Nicaragua's government was dominated by the Sandinista movement of Daniel Ortega, which, because it had adopted certain nationalist land and business reforms, was targeted by US imperialism with a war that lasted a decade and cost thousands of lives.

The manual, "Psychological Operations in Guerilla War," whose authenticity was confirmed by CIA personnel, was delivered to Honduras in 1983 where the Contras organized their terror campaign on neighboring Nicaragua.

Written in Spanish, the manual advised Contras to hire professional criminals for "selective jobs," including the "use of violence" to "neutralize" government officials. If Contra forces shot civilians attempting to flee, the manual counseled, they should tell villagers the executed individual was "an enemy of the people."

The publication of the manual was further proof that the criminal methods of the Contra war and the brutal counterinsurgency campaign in El Salvador were organized in Washington.

America's dirty war in Central America marked a further shift by Washington toward openly criminal methods that, at the same time, corroded democracy within the US.

It had been learned the previous April that the CIA had directed the mining of Nicaragua's harbors, an act of war that clearly aimed to cause civilian casualties. Popular outrage and international condemnation was such that the US Congress placed sharp limitations on funding to the Contras.

In response, the Reagan administration funded the Contras through the illegal sale of arms to Iran, which was in the midst of a bloody war with neighboring Iraq.

When these illegal activities came to light, the Democratic Party made certain that high-ranking members of the Reagan administration escaped prosecution.

50 Years Ago: Eisenhower invokes Taft-Hartley against steelworkers

Between October 7 and October 20, 1959, President Eisenhower moved to invoke the anti-working class Taft-Hartley Act in a bid to send a half million steelworkers, who had been on strike since July, back to work. Taft-Hartley allows the US president to end strikes if he declares that they threaten a national emergency.

The strike began when workers, organized into the United Steelworkers of America (USW), refused contract demands that would have allowed management to cut jobs and hours.

On October 21, a district court in Pennsylvania ruled in favor of the federal government's invocation of Taft-Hartley, but granted a stay on the back-to-work order pending appeal. On November 7, the US Supreme Court ruled 8 to 1 against the steelworkers. McDonald and the USW bureaucracy bowed to the court injunction, ordering workers back for an 80 day "cooling off period."

During this period, steelworkers voted down a final management proposal. At this point, politicians intervened, including Vice President Richard Nixon--who was running for president--and secured an agreement from management for a short-term contract that preserved limitations on the reorganization of work.

Yet the strike also presaged the collapse of the labor movement. The steelworkers were isolated by the AFL-CIO bureaucracy under George Meaney, which was cowed by denunciations from the media and politicians that steelworkers were jeopardizing "national security."

The capitulation of the USW and AFL-CIO before Taft-Hartley demonstrated that, even at its zenith, the labor bureaucracy was subordinate to the state and US capitalism, and could be counted on to force anti-democratic back-to-work orders on membership.

Over the ensuing decades, the union bureaucracy's subservience to the state and the profit system converted the AFL-CIO from an instrument that achieved limited gains for workers, into one dedicated to the driving down of wages and the suppression of strike activity.

The workforce in the steel industry began a rapid decline soon after the 1959 strike that would lead to the decimation of once vibrant cities such as Pittsburgh, Buffalo, Cleveland, and Gary, Indiana.

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75 years ago: Chinese Stalinists begin Long March

On October 16 1934, an army of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) led by Mao Zedong, facing annihilation at the hands of the Kuomintang forces of Chang Kai-shek, made a desperate retreat to the deep interior of China. The army reputedly travelled about 8,000 miles in just over a year, much of it on foot.

Mao's forces had been encircled in their rural stronghold of Jiangxi province. The incompetence of the military leadership of the Comintern-appointed Otto Braun helped Mao consolidate his power in the early phases of the march.

Mao's forces ultimately linked up with the remnants of two other Red armies, which had undertaken their own long retreats, uniting in Shaanxi province in late October, 1935.

Though celebrated by the CCP, by most measures the Long March was a military disaster. Less than a tenth of Mao's army remained after the march. However, hostilities between the CCP and the Kuomintang were soon suspended--after the Japanese invasion of 1937--to resume after WWII. The CCP gained power as the Kuomintang collapsed, emerging victorious in 1949.

The Long March was the outcome of Comintern policies under Stalin in the late 1920s, which had ordered China's communists to build an alliance with Kai-shek and the Kuomintang in the hope that this might recruit China as an ally against imperial Japan. Tens of thousands of communists and militant Chinese workers were slaughtered as a result of these disastrous policies.

The destruction of the urban Marxist cadre and much of the working class set the stage for the CCP's retreat, both physical and political, to the peasantry and layers of the national bourgeoisie.

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100 years ago: Spanish anarchist Ferrer executed

On October 13, 1909, the Spanish anarchist, educator, and free-thinker Francesc Ferrer i Guàrdia was executed in Barcelona by firing squad in the wake of the Catalan working class uprising known as the Tragic Week. The execution provoked enormous protests across Europe.

A general strike erupted in Barcelona on July 26 of 1909, triggered by King Alfonso XIII's order calling up Catalan reserves for a colonial mission in Morocco. By the next day, workers had taken over the city and begun to construct barricades. The government declared a state of war, but Catalan soldiers refused their orders. Ultimately battalions were sent in from locations distant from Barcelona.

In the wake of the uprising, the government ordered the arrest of political opponents. Ferrer was seized late in September and given a speedy trial. The guilty verdict made clear that Ferrer's crime was his political opposition to the regime.

He in fact had little to do with the July events. Ferrer had made himself an enemy not only of the government, but of the Catholic Church, through his promotion of free thinking and science in the pedagogical movement he founded, La Escuela Moderna.

Ferrer's arrest, trial, and execution provoked large working class protests. In Paris, a crowd of 100,000 attacked the Spanish embassy, which was defended by over 1,000 police, one of whom was killed in the melee. The protests, described by the *New York Times* as "wild scenes of tumult" lasted into the night, and demonstrations took place throughout France for days. In Lyon on the 14th, thousands of workers attacked the offices of right-wing newspapers.

Rome erupted in spontaneous riots that also targetted the Spanish embassy. Italian longshoremen initiated a strike against Spanish vessels. Government cavalry charged protesters in Milan and Florence.

Large meetings and protests were held in Brussels, Berlin, and Frankfurt. In Vienna, soldiers fired on protesters. In London, a crowd numbering in the thousands marched on the Spanish embassy, and in New York, thousands gathered at Carnegie Hall to protest against the killing.

Ferrer's execution had thus revealed not only the brutality of the Spanish regime, but the brittle state of class relations that prevailed in Europe on the eve of WWI.

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