

This week in history: August 2-August 8

2 August 2010

This Week in History provides brief synopses of important historical events whose anniversaries fall this week.

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25 years ago: South African workers take lead in anti-apartheid struggle

The 270,000-member National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) announced this week in 1985 that it would launch an open-ended strike against the apartheid regime unless a state of emergency imposed on the black masses of South Africa was lifted in one week's time. The NUM also threatened a nationwide boycott against white-owned businesses.

The strike, scheduled for August 25 1985, would be illegal, according to the regime of P.W. Botha, setting the stage for a showdown between the most powerful section of the working class and the state. The strike also threatened to shut down 70 percent of South Africa's gold mines and 20 percent of its coal mines, imperiling the struggling national economy.

The state of emergency had been imposed on July 21 in response to a growing revolt among black workers across the country. Hundreds were arrested and upwards of 20 were killed at the hands of the police, but state violence and curfews failed to stem the demonstrations. On August 8, mass rioting gripped the areas around the port city of Durban. Many of the demonstrations, and some acts of violence, targeted the black elite.

The growing class character of the protests alarmed

reformist elements in South Africa and internationally, who intensified their calls for measures that would promote an accommodation with the black elite. It was feared that the spreading revolt could topple capitalism in Africa's biggest economy.

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50 years ago: Castro nationalizes remaining US property

In response to the US embargo imposed on Cuba, Fidel Castro nationalized the remaining US-owned property in the small island nation this week in 1960.

The nationalization was the culmination of a deterioration in US-Cuban relations that developed slowly after Castro's guerrilla movement supplanted the US-backed dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista in 1959.

Castro's regime at first loudly proclaimed its opposition to socialism. "I don't agree with communism... we oppose communism," Castro declared in April of 1959, and he immediately sought an accommodation with Washington. But the Eisenhower administration feared that the nationalist movement in Cuba threatened major US commercial interests and might be emulated elsewhere in Latin America.

Washington organized a series of provocations against the young government and gradually tightened the screws on Cuba's economy, which was completely dependent upon the export of sugar to the US market in exchange for a host of industrial goods and oil. To compensate for the economic dislocation caused by the US embargo, Castro sought to cultivate relations with the Soviet Union.

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75 years ago: Britain, France capitulate to Italy on Ethiopia

In three-party discussions, Britain, France and Italy concluded an agreement on behalf of the Council of the League of Nations over the Italy-Ethiopia crisis in the Horn of Africa. The agreement amounted to a blank check for the fascist regime of Benito Mussolini to continue its war preparations against one of the two remaining African states not colonized by a European power. Ethiopia was not party to the negotiations.

The deal, the *New York Times* admitted, “accepts from beginning to end the Italian attitude on the whole matter. Italy is committed to nothing except continuation of the almost farcical conciliation proceedings.” Arbitration would focus on “border incidents”—Italian provocations inside Ethiopia organized from its colonies in Eritrea and Somalia—but would rule out of bounds any discussion of where these incidents took place.

The real negotiations between the “democratic” powers and fascist Italy were proceeding outside of the League of Nations and were based on a 1906 treaty which envisaged the eventual partition of Ethiopia into three separate spheres of influence dominated by London, Paris and Rome.

Though wary of Mussolini’s ambitions, France and Britain—who between them controlled the vast majority of Africa—hoped to maintain Italy as a possible counterweight to Nazi Germany.

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100 years ago: Oklahoma imposes literacy test to bar blacks from voting

On August 2, Oklahoma voters amended the state constitution to require literacy tests for any voting-age

citizen who was not descended from those who could vote before the end of slavery. The action effectively stripped the right to vote from about 30,000 African-Americans. The amendment passed by only a narrow margin.

Oklahoma was one of the last southern states to effectively bar African-Americans from voting. Beginning in the 1890s, state after state in the South passed a series of “Jim Crow” voting laws such as the literacy test, other “grandfather clauses,” and poll taxes. The laws also drastically reduced the vote among poor whites.

The new measures gutted the democratic gains of the Reconstruction period that followed the Civil War and buttressed sharecropping—the labor regime in the cash-poor South established to replace slavery.

The period was typified by intense violence and lynchings of blacks. Thousands were brutally murdered between 1890 and 1910, just as Jim Crow segregation and voting restrictions were being put in place.

The violence and racial laws were the southern oligarchy’s response to moves toward political cooperation among poor blacks and whites, which had first emerged in the populist movement’s Southern Farmers Alliance and the Colored Farmers Alliance in the late 1880s. The two farmers’ unions had millions of members—1.2 million in the Colored Farmers Alliance alone. They maintained that poor whites and poor blacks had common enemies. But the movement remained segregated and proved incapable of fighting off the emergence of one-party Democratic control of the South.

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