

This week in history: August 9-August 15

9 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: US sells missiles to Iran to fund Nicaragua Contras

The Reagan administration began this week in 1985 a secret and illegal operation to sell missiles to Iran in order to fund the Contra war against the nationalist Sandinista regime in Nicaragua.

On August 8 the National Security Planning Group met and determined to sell 100 TOW missiles to Iran via Israel, and on August 15 aid to the Contras resumed in open defiance of the Boland Amendment that barred US funding for the Contras. It is likely, but not proven, that the decision was approved by President Ronald Reagan.

Israel, ostensibly a bitter enemy of Iran, would supply the Islamic Republic with the missiles. Iran, then in the midst of a bloody war with Iraq under the Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein, would launder money back through Israel to a secret organization headed by Marine lieutenant colonel Oliver North. This money would be used to fund the Contra dirty war in Central America.

The Iran-Contra affair was a milepost in the turn by the US ruling class toward criminal methods. Just over a decade after Watergate, another US presidency was organizing a conspiracy against democracy from within

the White House, this time to fund counter-revolutionary death squads in Central America.

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50 years ago: First communications satellite launched

On August 12, 1960, the first satellite launched specifically to facilitate global communications was launched into orbit by the US National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA).

The Echo One was designed as a passive reflector of microwave signals broadcast up from Earth in one location and then received at another. It successfully redirected intercontinental radio, television, and telephone signals.

Put into low-Earth orbit at an altitude of about 1000 miles, 100-foot diameter reflective-metal balloon was clearly visible from Earth, and in many places the brightest object in the night sky. Because of its large area-to-mass ratio, Echo One was also able to provide data on atmospheric density and solar pressure.

The US was attempting to catch up with the Soviet Union in the “space race.” The two countries had launched a number of satellites in the previous three years, the USSR leading the way with its two Sputnik launches of 1957. Although considerations of military advantage and national prestige predominated, the dueling space programs contributed to a series of major scientific and technological breakthroughs, including satellite communications.

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75 years ago: Roosevelt signs Social Security Act

On August 14, 1935, President Franklin Roosevelt signed the Social Security Act into law. One of the essential social reform programs of the New Deal, the act established a “system of Federal old-age benefits” which led to a significant improvement in the living conditions of millions of senior citizens in the US.

The nation’s patchwork quilt of charities, private pensions, and mutual benefit associations had collapsed under the weight of the Great Depression, which had driven unemployment upwards of 25 percent and had slashed the income of a typical family by 40 percent. Millions of retired workers were also devastated, with over half of senior citizens living in poverty. In 1932, only 15 percent of the US workforce received a pension through their employers; only 17 states had a form of legally mandated pensions for senior citizens.

Worker previously forced to rely on meager savings, the assistance of family members or charity organizations now began receiving a guaranteed federal old-age pension upon reaching the age of 65.

Yet the Social Security system also revealed the limitations of New Deal reformism. A payroll excise tax deducted from the paychecks of current workers to fund retirees, it excluded broad sections of the working class, including most agricultural laborers, government employees, domestics, and, of course, those who could not work.

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100 years ago: Streetcar strike in Columbus, Ohio erupts in violence

The three-month-old strike of streetcar drivers in the capital of the state of Ohio took on the character of a general strike this week in 1910. The struggle for union recognition, higher pay, and work rules was one of the

most ferocious ever waged against a utility in the US.

All over the city workers fought battles with company guards and scabs. Workers supporting the Amalgamated Association of Street and Electric Railway Employees (AASERE) destroyed dozens of streetcars, blocked and ripped up rails, and injured scores of strikebreakers who were dragged from cars and beaten, one of them dying..

Violence went both ways. The boss of the imported strikebreakers, John Brady, fatally wounded a 10-year-old girl when he fired on strike sympathizers. And an actress was gravely wounded when she was shot in the head in her own home by a stray bullet fired by streetcar guards.

The sympathy of the population for the strikers was such that the city lost control of its police department. When Mayor George Marshall on August 12 gave 300 police officers an order to shoot “rioters,” a large share of the force announced their sympathy for the struggle and simply refused the order. Later in the day, another large group of officers refused to enforce Marshall’s order. According to one account the mayor, “with tears in his eyes, begged and pleaded the men to stick with him,” but to no avail. And “not a response was received” when the mayor appealed for 2,000 volunteers to join the few loyal police.

The number and intensity of strikes was on the rise in the US in 1910, with major actions by coal miners, railway workers, and garment workers having taken place in the preceding months.

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