

This week in history: January 30 - February 5

30 January 2012

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

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25 years ago: ANC leader Tambo meets with Reagan administration

On January 28, 1987, Secretary of State George Shultz held a 50-minute meeting with African National Congress (ANC) President Oliver Tambo, the highest-level meeting the US had ever conducted with the South African anti-apartheid organization.

According to both ANC and State Department accounts of the meeting, the talks revolved around Tambo's appeals for the US to impose stricter sanctions against the South African regime and Shultz's attempts to pressure Tambo over what he termed "Soviet influence" in the ANC.

Tambo reassured Shultz, declaring, "I am not a communist." He later said that he and Shultz had "found a large area of agreement on the nature of the apartheid system and the need to abolish it..." In return, he had pledged the commitment of the ANC to a "multiparty democracy" and the maintenance of the basic capitalist structure of a post-apartheid South Africa.

The backdrop for this encounter was the explosion of revolutionary mass struggles within South Africa over the previous two years, which took Washington, Moscow, the South African Communist Party, and the ANC itself by surprise. The Reagan administration, until then the most stalwart international ally of the apartheid regime, was now preparing to bring forward the ANC as a means of defending capitalism in South Africa.

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50 years ago: Kennedy imposes embargo on Cuba

On February 3, 1962, President John F. Kennedy ordered a total ban on all exports to Cuba, a measure aimed at destabilizing the three-year-old nationalist government led by Fidel Castro. Earlier in the week, the US and its hemispheric allies pushed through a measure kicking Cuba out of the Organization of American States (OAS) at a gathering in Punta del Este, Uruguay.

The embargo represented a deepening of US subversion in Cuba that had been under way since 1959. Washington had previously cut off exports of refined petroleum, supported terrorist attacks on Cuban factories, recruited organized crime figures to assassinate Castro, and launched the failed Bay of Pigs invasion. The US effort to topple Castro had moved the Cuban regime to link itself more closely with the Soviet Union and nationalize a growing share of the economy. This, in turn, had led Castro to declare, *ex post facto*, that his revolution was "communist."

The expulsion of Cuba from the OAS announced the beginning of US-led counterrevolution across Latin America. Voting in favor of the measure on the grounds that Cuba was no longer "free" since the toppling of the US puppet Fulgencio Batista were the US, Columbia, Venezuela, Peru, Nicaragua, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Paraguay, Uruguay, Panama, Costa Rica, El Salvador and Guatemala. Many of these countries were run by bloody dictators, including Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua and "Papa Doc" Duvalier in Haiti. The US barely secured the two-thirds vote required. The major Latin American states of Brazil, Chile, Argentina, and Mexico abstained from voting. They were joined by Bolivia and Ecuador.

On the day of Cuba's expulsion, Venezuelan security forces sacked the offices of left-wing and trade union groups in Caracas and carried out raids in working class neighborhoods, arresting over 130. The same day, January 31, the leading generals of Argentina's military issued a statement demanding that President Arturo Frondizi break ties with Cuba and that Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Caracano be fired immediately for abstaining in the OAS vote. The next day, Frondizi announced that Argentina would withdraw its ambassador and move toward breaking all ties with Cuba.

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75 years ago: Besieged Flint sit-down strikers remain resolute

In Flint, Michigan, Circuit Court Judge Gadola granted General Motors (GM) an injunction against the sit-down strikers occupying the Fisher Body works on January 30 1937. The court order directed the strikers to evacuate GM's premises within 24 hours and enjoined them and the United Automobile Workers (UAW) to desist picketing GM's facilities and surrounding areas.

On February 5, after an application from GM, the same judge issued a writ attachment ordering the arrest of 14 of the strike's leaders, including the president and vice president of the UAW.

The American Federation of Labor weighed in on behalf of the government and big business by denouncing the strike. Speaking on behalf of the anti-communist trade union outfit, John P. Frey told engineering and steel unions to keep their distance from the dispute and offer no support to the auto workers. Frey engaged in red-baiting and implicitly invited violence on the workers, claiming the strike carried the "hallmark of Moscow" and would usher in a dictatorship.

After an attack on supporters and families of the strikers by assorted thugs in the pay of GM, four thousand National Guard troops, armed to the teeth, took control of the streets surrounding those GM factories and machine shops occupied by workers. Bristling with machine guns and bayonets, the troops threw up cordons to limit entry to GM plants. The goal was to starve the strikers by stopping the supply of food. Nobody was allowed to proceed towards the factories without a military permit. Flint's Fisher Body No. 2 plant was targeted by the army for special attention. Machine gun nests were set up at prominent sites.

After a sheriff read the court papers ordering them to leave GM's premises forthwith, the striking workers at the Fisher Body plants telegraphed Michigan Governor Frank Murphy that, even though they knew an assault upon them by the army and company goons would result in many deaths, they would not move.

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featured the works of well-known Italian Futurist painters such as Gino Severini, Luigi Russolo, Giacomo Balla, Umberto Boccioni and Carlo Carrà. The exhibition traveled throughout Europe and was shown in its entirety in London, Berlin and Brussels.

Futurism developed after 1909 with the publication of a manifesto by Filippo Marinetti outlining the principles of the new movement: opposition to artistic tradition; a glorification of violence, war, and patriotism; and a desire to give artistic expression to the dynamism of the modern world. Many of the futurist canvasses depicted the workings of the modern city, crowd scenes and machinery.

According to art historian David Ohara, "The dynamic analysis of the futurists, unlike the static analysis of the cubists, sought to depict a face that appeared and disappeared; not static images but images of a bus in motion, not a quiet landscape but buildings throwing themselves on a bus going by."

The Paris exhibition was deliberately provocative and controversial. The Futurist artists aggressively intervened in the Parisian art scene, engaging in debates and heated arguments with representatives of the various avant-garde tendencies. Prior to the exhibition, Marinetti distributed a manifesto which included a polemic against the French cubists, whose depiction of nudes, use of a limited palette, and linear rigidity the Futurists opposed. The famous French poet Apollinaire was highly critical of the exhibition and denounced Futurism as "popular, flashy art." He wrote a manifesto entitled *Futurist Antitradition* the following year.

Ironically, the exhibition contributed to a cross-pollination of Futurist and Cubist influences. Among other things, Cubist painters increasingly used bright colors, while Futurist painters experimented with the grey palette associated with Cubism.

Leon Trotsky later explained that the emergence of Futurism and its aggressive program reflected the breakup of the previous political and economic equilibrium and anticipated major social explosions.

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100 years ago: Futurist exhibition in Paris

On February, 5, 1912, the first Futurist exhibition outside Italy opened at Galerie Bernheim-Jeune in Paris. The exhibition