

This week in history: June 4 - June 10

4 June 2012

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

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25 years ago: Mass protests against South Korean military regime

Massive protests erupted in South Korea on June 10, 1987 when US-backed military dictator Chun Doo Hwan formally announced former general and close friend Roh Tae Woo as his successor. The country had been under martial law for seven years, when Chun dissolved parliament in 1980, provoking confrontations with armed forces in cities across the country and resulting in the death of 2,000 protesters in what became known as the Gwangju Massacre.

The announcement of Roh as the next representative of the ruling Democratic Justice Party signaled to the population that Chun intended to extend his rule with a handpicked successor, rather than defer to popular elections. Protests in the street, initially by students, began on the same day as the announcement and went on for over two weeks, eventually involving workers and middle class demonstrators, becoming known as the June Democracy Movement.

The response of the regime was force. Troops indiscriminately fired thousands of gas grenades into crowds and neighborhoods, choking families in their homes. In one confrontation, protesters overran a section of riot police, stripped them of their weapons and began beating them. Then, stacking up their riot gear, they burned it up. While the regime threatened a ruthless crackdown, its 120,000 riot police were unable to contain the protests in cities such as Busan, Jinju and Daejeon. Over a million people became involved in the protests.

In the midst of the conflict the Reagan administration in the United States sent Assistant Secretary of State Gaston Sigur to Seoul to consult with the country's military rulers.

By June 29, the regime was forced to call new presidential elections, held in December, which Roh eventually won.

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50 years ago: Kennedy calls for tax cuts for the rich

On June 7, 1962, US President John F. Kennedy launched a campaign for “across-the-board” tax cuts for individuals and corporations to take effect January 1, 1963. The tax cuts would disproportionately benefit the rich.

The proposed tax cuts were presented as anti-recessionary measure—the US had been in recession in 1961— by removing less income from the potential investment pool. The cuts were not to be offset by spending cuts. On the contrary, the Kennedy administration was driving forward a large increase in federal spending, both the military and domestic. It had in previous weeks launched a public campaign for a federal health insurance program for the elderly, which would later be called Medicare.

Kennedy's tax cut proposal became bogged down in the Senate, where Republicans and conservative Southern Democrats held sway. The actual cut would ultimately be implemented by Kennedy's vice president and successor, Lyndon B. Johnson. But Kennedy had given the signal for what would prove to be a five-decade-long rollback of the progressive income rate.

At the start of Kennedy's administration, the richest income earners in the US, those taking home more than \$200,000 per year, faced a high-end tax rate of 91 percent, a legacy of the social reform agenda of the New Deal during the Great Depression. By 1965 the high-end tax rate had dropped to 70 percent. By the end of the Reagan administration in 1989 the income tax system had ceased to be “progressive” in any meaningful sense of the term.

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75 years ago: Police violence continues in “Little Steel” strike

In the aftermath of the massacre of ten Chicago steel workers by local police only days earlier, the strike against “Little Steel” including Republic Steel Corporation, continued.

June 10, 1937, proved to be a crucial day in the strike. In Columbus, Ohio, representatives of SWOC (Steel Workers Organizing Committee) met with representatives of Little Steel—the steel producers that had refused union organization—in a meeting chaired by Ohio Governor Martin Davey. J.C. Argetsinger, vice president of Youngstown Sheet and Tube Company, told the union that under no circumstances would they sign an agreement with SWOC.

The same day, a number of striking workers and their supporters were injured by police when they resisted an attempt to break the picket line outside Republican Steel in Youngstown, Ohio. Local police tried to run the gauntlet of strikers and deliver food to scabbing employees inside the plant. When they failed, police resorted to the use of tear gas to disperse the pickets.

Also on June 10, in an attempt to reopen the Republic Steel plant at Monroe, Michigan local police recruited 500 civilians and swore them in as “special constables.” The right-wing veterans’ organization, the American Legion was also mobilized to intimidate workers. Once again tear gas was used against the strikers.

At the very last minute the United Automobile Workers union withdrew its support for a “Labor holiday,” i.e., a mass picket to support the steel workers’ cause, capitulating to government pressure.

The same week, the CIO (Committee for Industrial Organisation) announced a strike against Bethlehem Steel Corporation, America’s second biggest steel manufacturer, the largest of the “Little Steel” holdouts, to begin on June 11. The rolling wave of strikes was to begin at Cambria Mill, Johnstown, Pennsylvania, which employed some 15,000.

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100 years ago: US military intervention in Cuba

On June 5, 1912, citing its authority under the so-called Platt Amendment (a provision in a joint resolution of the US Congress), the Taft administration dispatched 570 US

Marines to Cuba to suppress social unrest that had broken out in May. The Platt Amendment provided unlimited sanction to the United States to supervise Cuba’s public administration. It also authorized the US government to land troops to maintain law and order.

Social discontent fueled an uprising against the Gomez government in May, which resulted in the slaughter of more than 3,000 rebels in what were dubbed “race riots.” Along with the rebel uprising, there was also industrial unrest. Strikes beginning in May 1912 among stevedores in Havana spread to Guantanamo, Santiago de Cuba, Manzanillo and Cienfuegos. Along the Cuban south coast, all shipping was suspended. US Minister Arthur M. Beaupre cabled the State Department: “Present strike seriously damages horticultural interests, which are mostly American, and important American shipping interests.”

The Marines and US naval vessels were deployed initially to the Naval Station at Guantanamo Bay in late May to support the Gomez government against armed insurrection led by rebel leader Everisto Estenoz. On June 10, the battleship USS Rhode Island and cruiser USS Washington anchored in the port in Havana, while two more ships were sent from Key West.

The *New York Times* wrote: “The movement of American troops to Cuba does not signify an intervention. It is the duty of our government to render such help as may be needed to the government of Cuba in the protection of life and property.” Rebel leader Estenoz was killed on June 27, and the Marines withdrew six weeks later, on August 5.

Between 1898 and 1920 the Marines were dispatched to Caribbean countries 20 times in the name of “order.” Washington sought not only preferential access to resources such as local markets and an abundance of cheap labor, but was committed to maintaining an economic environment that discouraged strikes, deterred unionization and depressed wages.

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