

This week in history: December 24-30

24 December 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 arrests in first Palestinian *intifada*

One thousand Palestinians, mostly youth, arrested during two weeks of violent protest in the Occupied Territories were put on trial by an Israeli military court on December 27, 1987. The spontaneous actions by Palestinians against the conditions of squalor and the brutal policy of Zionist forces, known as the “Iron Fist,” erupted on December 8, and came to be known as the *intifada* (meaning “uprising”).

Confronting tear gas, rubber bullets and live ammunition of the Israeli forces, Palestinian youth fought back with rocks and Molotov cocktails, challenging the troops with taunts of “Come and kill us all or get out!” The rebellion quickly won the support of the Palestinian population in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and inside of Israel itself. A general strike on December 21 had widespread effect.

By the time of the trial, at least 21 Palestinian protesters had been shot to death and hundreds injured. Despite the brutality used by Israeli forces to deal with the rebellion, the first *intifada* would continue until 1993, until the Oslo accords were signed, recognizing the Palestinian National Authority. By the end of the first rebellion over 1,000 Palestinians were killed and 120,000 arrested by Israeli forces.

The generation of Palestinians born after the 1967 Mideast war, which greatly expanded the Arab population under Israeli occupation, was at the center of the largely spontaneous rebellion. The leadership of Palestinian bourgeois-nationalist movement, the Palestine Liberation Organization, was caught unawares.

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50 years ago: US warns Europe on balance of payments

On December 27, 1962, a US congressional panel demanded

that European nations reduce their tariffs and take other measures to help the US reduce its balance of payments deficit. If the three countries singled out for censure, West Germany, France, and Italy, failed to implement such policies, or if measures undertaken proved inadequate, Washington was prepared to “move backward toward the old restrictive policies,” stated the 10-page report by the subcommittee on international exchange and payment of the Joint Economic Committee chaired by liberal Democrat Henry S. Reuss of Wisconsin.

The threats, which harked back to the “beggar thy neighbor” policies of the first years of the Great Depression, included new tariffs on imports, restrictions on overseas capital investments, and limits on the amount of money American tourists could spend abroad. The committee called for a new round of tariff reductions with the European Economic Community, but requested that this be preceded by “immediate, unilateral reductions” from Europe in advance of any US action.

In a separate statement Reuss laid the blame squarely on Europe for the balance of payments deficit. “The cause is not incorrect United States policies,” he said, “but rather inappropriate policies followed by certain Western European countries which are accumulating gold and dollars instead of spending more of their rising export income on imports, on contributions to mutual defense costs, and on long-term aid to developing countries.”

The growing balance of payments deficit pointed to one of the central contradictions of the postwar order. The reemergence of the European and Japanese economies, rebuilt by the US after World War II, cut into American-dominated export markets—markets which were ultimately secured by immense US military spending all over the world. The resulting outflow of money put a question mark over the role of the dollar as international reserve currency, which had been established by the Bretton Woods Agreement of 1944, and thereby the functioning of the global capitalist economy.

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75 years ago: Parisian workers clash with Popular Front government

The French Popular Front government reacted with fury to an unofficial transport and municipal services strike by Parisian workers on December 29, 1937. Transport systems in the French capital were brought to a virtual standstill, litter accumulated on the streets and undertakers conducted only urgent burials.

Accusing the workers of a political provocation and rejecting negotiations, Prime Minister Camille Chautemps threatened that without an immediate return to work the French government would take over the running of services with military support and there would be no talks with the strikers' representatives until work resumed.

With the unanimous backing of both Radical Party and Socialist Party cabinet members, Chautemps threatened the striking workers with a decree published in 1926 that declared should workers not immediately return to their posts and return the transport system to normality, then the French state would take over the running of the railway, and compel workers to return to work.

The day of the strike was marked by incessant inter-ministerial consultations, including a three-hour cabinet meeting, with the government unanimously deciding to take a firm line with the workers' stoppage. Chautemps presented an ultimatum to the trade union leadership, but the strike was beyond their control, with workers not waiting for the prevarication of the union leaders to interfere with their demands and stoppage.

The Parisian Metro, omnibus and tram system was brought virtually to a complete standstill. All but key distribution workers were out on strike in the water, gas and electricity services. Refuse workers turned up and only a skeleton staff continued to work at the undertaker's office. Hospital workers ceased work between 2 a.m. and 4 a.m., though serious cases continued to receive medical attention.

The London *Times* noted that Chautemps was "aware of the explosive possibility of the situation. For unless the dispute is quickly settled there is a grave danger of its extension to a nationwide cleavage between Labour and Capital, and in consequence, the bitterest form of class warfare."

Working to rescue beleaguered French capitalism was the Stalinist French Communist Party, which hailed a supposed promise from Chautemps that he would meet the strikers' demands if they ended the walkout. The Stalinist-controlled CGT union federation declared a "great victory," but Chautemps subsequently reneged and said he had given no assurances.

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On December 27, 1912, the outgoing governor of Arkansas, George Washington Donaghey, pardoned 360 convicts, freeing them from convict leasing, a form of virtual slave labor. Common in the Southern states of the US, convict leasing was a system of penal labour that began during the Reconstruction Period (1865-1877) when slaves were emancipated as a result of the American Civil War.

With the emancipation of the slaves, farmers and businessmen were no longer able to directly exploit unfree labour. In response, some Southern legislatures passed so called "Black Codes," laws designed to restrict African-Americans' freedom of movement and coerce them into highly exploitative employment. Under the codes, African-Americans were frequently arrested on the merest pretext, resulting in a predominantly African-American prison population in the South.

African-Americans convicted of vagrancy or other misdemeanors would be imprisoned and leased out as cheap labor to private industries, including railroad, farming, logging and mining. Some Northern states such as Massachusetts leased convict labor, but the practice was predominantly based in the South. The Southern prison populations increased dramatically as a consequence, with some states such as Mississippi reporting a fourfold increase between 1871 and 1879; in Georgia it increased tenfold between 1868 and 1908.

Although involuntary servitude and slavery were outlawed after the Civil War, the Thirteenth Amendment to the US Constitution permits forced labor as punishment for a criminal offence. Conditions for convicts were brutal. In Coal Hill, Arkansas, 60 prisoners were housed in a stockade about 40 by 18 feet, with only three small windows, where they died of malaria, scurvy or were murdered.

Governor Donaghey, anxious to preserve his "progressive" reputation and placate popular hostility to convict leasing, had previously appealed to the state legislature to end the practice, but had been met with opposition—largely because leasing generated major state revenues, and provided highly exploitable labour to private businesses. His decision to free the 360 convicts was widely seen as the end of convict leasing in Arkansas and the practice was officially abolished the following year.

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100 years ago: Arkansas governor moves to end convict leasing