

This week in history: June 3-9

3 June 2013

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

25 Years Ago | 50 Years Ago | 75 Years Ago | 100 Years Ago

25 years ago: Union Carbide reneges on \$192 million in Bhopal relief payments

On June 3, 1988, the US-based chemical giant Union Carbide announced its refusal to pay \$192 million in relief compensation to the victims of the 1984 Bhopal gas leak disaster. The interim payment was ordered by the Supreme Court of India. Union Carbide issued a statement saying, “The needs of the victims will be fully addressed only in the context of a final resolution of all issues.”

Since the Bhopal gas disaster on December 3, 1984, Union Carbide proceeded in callous disregard for the hundreds of thousands of victims of the worst industrial accident in history. More than 40 tons of deadly methyl isocyanate gas and other unknown poisons, used in the manufacture of pesticide, were released from its Bhopal plant. The surrounding area was turned into a virtual gas chamber, exposing at least a half a million people to the toxic gas and claiming an immediate 8,000 fatalities. Some 170,000 residents were treated in hospital and temporary dispensaries.

Carbide’s refusal to pay the \$192 million was part of its corporate strategy to minimize its responsibility for the catastrophe in Bhopal. The “final resolution” that was demanded by the multinational corporation was intended to pressure the Indian government to limit the human casualties while the death toll was still increasing from the cataclysm just three-and-a-half years earlier.

The company statement accused the Indian government of delaying “final resolution of all issues.” Yet Union Carbide, in order to limit both its financial and criminal liability, refused even to release the list of toxic chemicals that were stored at the plant.

A 2002 book, *Five past Midnight in Bhopal*, written by Dominique Lapierre and Javier Moro, describes the health effects, of the catastrophe:

“Today, Bhopal has 150,000 people chronically affected by the tragedy, which still kills 10 to 15 patients a month.

Breathing difficulties, persistent coughs, ulcerations of the cornea, early-age cataracts, anorexia, recurrent fevers, burning of the skin, weakness and depression are still manifesting themselves, not to mention constant outbreaks of cancer and tuberculosis.... Finally, retarded growth has been noted in young people between 14 and 18, who look scarcely 10. Because Carbide never revealed the exact composition of the toxic cloud, to this day medical authorities have been unable to come up with an effective treatment.”

A 1989 out-of-court settlement for \$470 million—less than 16 percent of the \$3 billion originally demanded by the government of India—was approved by the Indian Supreme Court. When the compensation was finally distributed, victims received on average the pitiful sum of 12,000 rupees—US\$500.

[top]

50 years ago: Riots in Iran after Khomeini arrest

Two days of rioting erupted in Iran after the June 5, 1963 arrest of the cleric Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who had delivered a speech in Qom sharply condemning Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the US-backed dictator. The shah declared martial law and issued a shoot-to-kill order. The military and police arrested over 400 people and killed hundreds, perhaps thousands, as they crushed the revolt. Khomeini was released in August, and would soon thereafter be sent into exile, most of which was spent in neighboring Iraq.

The shah had announced in January 1963 a new reform program he dubbed the White Revolution, which included promoting peasant ownership of land by buying off the feudal landlords, along with certain social reforms, including offering women the right to vote and improving education. The Shiite clerics bitterly opposed the program’s implicit challenge to their moral authority and their control over education. In addition, many high-ranking clerics were drawn from the landed feudal order compromised by the shah’s reforms. Finally, Khomeini sought to forestall and disorient working class and peasant opposition to the shah.

This was made possible by the Communist Party of Iran, or Tudeh Party, which in the 1940s and early 1950s had exercised decisive influence in the working class. However, following the

Stalinist “two-stage” theory of revolution, it let pass opportunities to challenge for power, creating condition where the US could orchestrate the shah’s return to power through a 1953 CIA coup. By the early 1960s, the Tudeh Party had shifted still further right and was seeking to curry favor with dissidents from within the shah’s own regime.

[top]

75 years ago: Sino-Soviet non-aggression pact made public

A visit to Russia this week in 1938 by Sun Fo, the Chinese president of the National Legislative Yuan, was the occasion for details of the secret Sino-Soviet Non-aggression Pact to publicly emerge. For the first time the Foreign Commissariat in Moscow acknowledged that negotiations between the two Eurasian states had begun during the summer of 1937, after the Japanese invasion of China, and that a provisional agreement had been signed in August of that year.

The London *Times* reported that the agreement had brought about a great deal of activity on the routes between the Soviet Union and China, especially in Chinese Outer Mongolia. According to the British newspaper it was an open secret that officers of the Red Army were conducting the military training of Chinese “volunteers” in this region. Once trained, the newspaper reported, these soldiers go to the front as members of the Chinese Eighth (Communist) Army.

One of the tasks of this army unit was to organize and conduct extensive guerilla warfare in Japanese-held territory, often behind Japanese positions, in order to disrupt supply lines and create tension amongst the invading army. Sources in Moscow stated that the Chinese Eighth Army boasted some 300,000 men at its disposal, who were organized into some 200 separate fighting units.

The pact demonstrated the double game being played both by Stalin and Chiang Kai-Shek, head of the Kuomintang regime in China. Stalin sought to sustain the Chinese Communist guerrilla forces as a potential lever for Moscow while avoiding direct Soviet military hostilities with Japan, which was allied with Nazi Germany and fascist Italy in the Anti-Comintern Pact, signed in 1936.

Chiang Kai-Shek agreed to the flow of aid and training to the Chinese Communist Party, his political opponents within China, in order to retain Moscow’s support for the Kuomintang regime against Japan. His corrupt regime, rooted in the landlord class and viciously oppressing the peasantry, fought as many battles against the CCP-led guerrilla forces as against the Japanese.

[top]

100 years ago: Mine union officials indicted for seeking higher wages

On June 7, 1913, 20 union officials of the United Mine Workers of America (UMW), including the president John White, were indicted by a federal grand jury in Charleston, West Virginia on charges of violating the Sherman anti-trust law. The anti-labor indictment charged the officials with conspiring with Western Pennsylvania, Ohio, Illinois and Indiana coal operators to raise wages in West Virginia in order to prevent it competing with other states in the Western markets.

The Sherman Antitrust law was enacted in 1890, ostensibly to curb the powers of corporate monopolies like Rockefeller’s Standard Oil Trust by outlawing illegal conspiracies by business entities to restrict competition, such as price-fixing and collusion to divide up markets and production quotas. Using the law against a trade union was both reactionary and legally questionable.

The claim by federal prosecutors was that UMW efforts to organize and raise the wages of miners in West Virginia, then a bastion of violent, anti-union coal operators, constituted a criminal conspiracy. The indictment charged that members and officials of the UMW “unlawfully combined and conspired together with the object and intent of unionizing and making members of said organization the laborers employed in and around the coal mines of the State of West Virginia.”

Those indicted included White, president of the union, and all 19 of its regional and district officials, underscoring that the purpose of the effort—mounted under a Democratic president, Woodrow Wilson—was to effectively outlaw union activity in the West Virginia coalfield, the scene of many bitter struggles over the previous decades.

[top]



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact