

This week in history: April 28-May 4

28 April 2014

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Jury returns verdict in trial of Iran-Contra defendant

On May 4, 1989, after 11 days of deliberation, the jury cleared Lt. Col. Oliver North of nine of the 12 charges against him. The three charges for which he was found guilty were characterized by a congressional supporter as proving the former White House aide only of “cutting corners and not breaking the law.” North was described as “absolutely elated” at the verdict.

Even the prosecutor, John Keeker, joined in the praise for the trial proceedings. After the announced verdict, Keeker said to the press, “Some said the system of justice could not deal effectively with this case. Some said it could not even be tried. Col. North has been convicted of three very serious charges. The jury has spoken.”

North was found guilty of one charge of helping to obstruct a congressional inquiry into Iran-Contra operations, one charge of shredding official US documents that investigators were seeking and one count of personal financial misconduct for accepting a gift of a \$14,000 home security system from Iran-Contra conspirator Maj. Gen. Richard Secord. Ostensibly, conviction on these charges left North liable for up to 10 years in prison and \$750,000 in fines.

The jury acquitted North of three counts of lying to Congress, three counts of obstructing Congress, one count of lying to the attorney general, one count of embezzling \$4,300 from the government and one charge of tax fraud. The 12 charges against North were all that remained after the main charges of conspiring to conduct a secret war and theft of US documents to deceive Congress were dropped in negotiations between the outgoing Reagan administration, the incoming Bush administration and US District Judge Gerhard Gesell.

The North trial was conducted as a formality—a showpiece for the US justice system—while covering up the real crimes of North and his fellow conspirators. It centered around North’s role as a national security aide to President Ronald Reagan, in a conspiracy to maintain the flow of resources to anti-Sandinista “Contras” in Nicaragua during 1985 and 1986, despite a congressional ban on support for the counterrevolutionary

forces.

The trial never examined the establishment of a “shadow government” within the Reagan administration to conduct actions that were illegal and deeply unpopular. This followed the pattern of the congressional investigation, directed by the Democratic Party leadership, which covered up the preparations of the Reagan administration for dictatorship.

North was responsible for drawing up the secret plan, known as REX84, which included measures for declaration of martial law and rounding up hundreds of thousands, if not millions of political opponents in the event of war in Central America.

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50 years ago: May Day protests against fascism, Stalinism, war

May 1, 1964 was marked by protests in Europe, Asia and the Western Hemisphere, some of them suppressed violently by the police of fascist or Stalinist regimes.

In Portugal, a plainclothes policeman of the fascist Salazar regime murdered a worker at a Lisbon rally and wounded another with a small caliber weapon. A Ministry of the Interior statement blamed the demonstration on “Communist propaganda from abroad” and the murder a “clash among civilians firing on each other.” In fascist Spain, the Franco regime ordered police on high alert to break up demonstrations. Secret organizations had called for “silent demonstrations” in Madrid, Barcelona, Bilbao, and other cities.

In Prague, 3,000 students and youth gathered in Kinsky Park where their rally was infiltrated and broken up by club-wielding plainclothes policemen dispatched by the Czechoslovak government. The students chanted “Gestapo” at the police, before reconvening at Wenceslas Square. It was the third consecutive May Day protest against the Stalinist regime. Thirty-one were arrested.

In Tokyo, police used water cannons and clubs to break up a demonstration of 900 outside the Diet. Throughout Japan about 1.5 million workers participated in May Day marches and celebrations, among the largest workers’ actions of the day.

In the Dominican Republic, policemen of the US-backed regime attacked a demonstration of 2,000 with tear gas and live

gunfire, wounding a number of workers.

The United States saw the first significant student protest demonstrations against US military intervention in Vietnam. Nearly a thousand students marched through Times Square, New York and another 700 in San Francisco. Smaller marches also occurred in Boston, Seattle, and Madison, Wisconsin.

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75 years ago: Moscow Stalinists call for Popular Front alliance with “democratic” bourgeois parties

A May Day manifesto published in the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy’s main organ, *Pravda*, on May 1, 1939, perverted the traditional call for international workers unity by calling instead for the subordination of workers to bourgeois parties. The manifesto instructed Communist parties in bourgeois democratic countries to enter into “Popular Fronts” with their respective capitalist governments. *Pravda* declared, “You must demand from the bourgeois governments of England, France and the United States aid in the fight against fascism.”

The Stalinists opposition to proletarian revolution made a second world war inevitable. In the early 1930s Moscow and its satellite parties equated social democracy with fascism, and thereby refused to fight for unity between the German social democratic and communist workers, which led directly to the Nazi victory in 1933. Then, reacting to this catastrophe, the Stalinists adopted the Popular Front—seeking alliances with the major “democratic” imperialist powers. This led to the crushing of the Spanish Revolution (1936-38) in the name of supporting the capitalist republic, which in any case was abandoned by the UK, France, and the US and wiped off the map by Franco, Mussolini, and Hitler.

Leon Trotsky, leader of the Fourth International, characterized the impending world war as one between various gangs of capitalist thieves in which the working class must establish its political independence from all the ruling classes regardless of their political coloration, whether fascist or nominally “democratic.”

The Socialist Workers Party, then the US party in sympathy with Trotsky’s views, drew a crowd of 1,500 to its New York May Day rally. Under the leadership of James P. Cannon, the SWP sought to mobilize the American workers for the forthcoming struggle on the basis of proletarian internationalism. The rally called for the overthrow of capitalism in every country, whether ruled by a Roosevelt, Mussolini, Chamberlain or Hitler.

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100 years ago: Police attack mass May Day rally in New York

This week, 100 years ago, a May Day rally in New York, celebrating the revolutionary holiday of the international working class, was brutally attacked by baton-wielding police, injuring dozens.

The marchers, composed of 40,000 workers, many of whom were marching under socialist banners, took some four hours to fill up Union Square before the police attack took place. Police used a quarrel between socialists, IWW members, and anarchists as the pretext for launching an assault on the marchers, with 200 police storming a section of the parade, clubbing workers, and triggering a stampede.

One press report described the scene: “Clubs flew right and left, police jumping over the bodies of prostrate men, women and boys and even two babies...” At one point, police drove the crowd against an iron-spiked railing, knocking down a 30-foot section of it, and pinning two women on top of it.

The rally itself was dominated by popular hostility to the massacre of striking coal miners in Ludlow, Colorado, carried out by state forces and John D. Rockefeller’s hired goons, and the US imperialist invasion of Mexico the previous month.

The famous author Upton Sinclair had begun a hunger strike in response to the events in Ludlow, while pickets were stationed outside Rockefeller’s office and home. Supporters of Sinclair disrupted a church service on May Day that they suspected Rockefeller might have been attending, but the millionaire had absented himself.

A resolution calling for the arming of workers in opposition to company thugs and state forces was passed at the May Day rally in Philadelphia, while resolutions calling for a general strike were advanced by miners in Illinois and West Virginia.

The attitude of the trade union bureaucracy stood in marked contrast to that of the increasingly militant and socialist-minded working class. The head of the AFL-CIO, Samuel Gompers, repeatedly expressed his opposition to May Day and the internationalist perspective it was associated with, calling on workers to instead participate in the state-sanctioned Labor Day in September.

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