

This week in history: August 18-24

18 August 2014

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25 years ago: Black Panther leader Huey Newton shot dead in Oakland

On August 22, 1989, former Black Panther leader Huey Newton was shot three times in the head and killed in Oakland, California, by a gunman from a rival organization, the Black Guerrilla Family, as he was leaving a crack house. Newton had been sentenced earlier in the year to 90 days in San Quentin Prison, charged with violating the terms of his parole for possessing drug paraphernalia.

His death came more than a decade after the disintegration of the Black Panther Party, the movement he helped to build and lead, and for which he became internationally known. Newton founded the Panthers in Oakland in 1966, appealing to the most oppressed sections of working class youth. This was the period of the ghetto rebellions, the spontaneous mass eruptions of black workers and youth in major cities throughout the country, expressing their class hatred of the capitalist state and demanding decent living conditions and an end to police brutality.

Born in poverty in rural Louisiana—he was named after the late governor of the state, populist Huey Long—Newton moved with his family to California at the age of three, and grew up in Oakland, graduating from Oakland Technical High School as an illiterate and petty criminal. He later taught himself to read and developed a voracious interest in political theory, including the distortions of Marxism popularized by Mao Tse-tung and Frantz Fanon.

Espousing a mixture of black nationalism, armed self-defense and solidarity with revolutionary movements in the Third World, the Black Panthers won wide popularity among black working class youth, as well as on college campuses in the midst of the anti-war upheavals. Just as quickly, they became the targets of violence and frame-ups by local police, state governments and the FBI. Newton himself was imprisoned from 1967 to 1971 on frame-up charges stemming from the killing of an Oakland cop in a shootout.

As the *Bulletin*, a forerunner of the World Socialist Web Site, observed in a statement at the time of Newton's death, "While the Panthers quickly attracted the support of youth throughout the country, they were completely unprepared politically for the attacks of the capitalist state... The bourgeoisie responded to the revolutionary threat expressed in a distorted way through the organization of the Black Panthers with what can only be described as a campaign of extermination. The Panthers were

massively infiltrated by the FBI and other police agencies, with the notorious J. Edgar Hoover guiding the campaign from Washington."

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50 years ago: Johnson spurns Freedom Democratic Party

On August 23, 1964, supporters of the so-called Freedom Democratic Party were blocked in their attempt to displace the official Democratic Party delegation from the state of Mississippi, as the credentials committee of the Democratic National Convention ruled against them, acting on instructions from President Lyndon Johnson.

The bi-racial FDP delegation sought to challenge the all-white regular Mississippi delegation to the national convention on the grounds that blacks were systematically excluded from the delegation selection process. A compromise proposed by the committee would allow the Freedom Democrats seats on the convention floor, but no voting rights.

The intervention at the convention was an outgrowth of Freedom Summer, when hundreds of college students from the North had been recruited by CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) and SNCC (Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee) and other civil rights organizations to participate in a massive voter registration campaign. During the campaign, three civil rights workers were kidnapped and murdered near Philadelphia, Mississippi.

Testimony at the credentials hearing exposed the brutal racism of the Democratic-controlled local and state governments in Mississippi. The wife of a sharecropper told how she had been arrested, jailed, and beaten for registering black workers to vote, while Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., told the committee, "This is the party that allows an atmosphere of violence and lawlessness."

Organizers of the FDP promoted illusions that the national Democratic Party and the Johnson administration could be pressured into dumping the racist southern wing of the party. They argued, in fact, that they should get seats because they were more loyal supporters of the Johnson administration than the official Mississippi delegation.

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75 years ago: Hitler-Stalin pact signed in Moscow

On August 24, 1939, German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop and Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov, a chief henchman of Joseph Stalin, met in Moscow to sign a non-aggression pact between fascist Germany and the Soviet Union.

The agreement paved the way for Germany to wage war in Europe under the most favorable conditions for the Nazis, avoiding the prospect of a two-front war against both the USSR in the east and Britain and France in the west, as Hitler prepared to attack and destroy Poland.

In addition to the public non-aggression pledge, the contents of the Pact included a secret division of Poland and the Baltic countries between Nazi Germany and the USSR. Germany was to receive western Poland and Lithuania, while the USSR seized eastern Poland, eastern Lithuania, and all of Latvia, Estonia, and Finland.

The most significant aspect of the treaty was the Kremlin's complete contempt and indifference toward international working-class opinion. During the negotiations, Stalin toasted Hitler, saying: "I know how much the German people love their Führer." Stalin did not seek the release of imprisoned German Communists, including KPD leader Ernst Thälmann, who were killed in Nazi death camps.

Following the line from the Kremlin, the Communist Parties of France and Britain adopted an official policy of neutrality towards the fascist regime, the embodiment of anti-working-class reaction. Repulsed by the counterrevolutionary actions of the Kremlin bureaucracy, thousands of Communist Party members in country after country denounced the Stalinists and renounced their party membership.

Leon Trotsky had previously predicted that Stalin, facing acute internal crises and a series of hostile regimes in Europe produced by his counterrevolutionary policies, might seek an alliance with Hitler. This would be particularly urgent, he explained, because Stalin had decapitated the Red Army through the savage repression of the 1937-38 purges, in which the bulk of the most capable military leaders were murdered, leaving the Soviet Union acutely vulnerable.

After the signing of the Hitler-Stalin pact, Trotsky wrote, "The simpletons who are 'pro-Soviet' deem it self-evident that the Kremlin hopes to overthrow Hitler. The case is otherwise. Without revolution the overthrow of Hitler is inconceivable. A victorious revolution in Germany would raise the class-consciousness of the broad masses in the USSR to a very high level and render impossible the further existence of the Moscow tyranny. The Kremlin prefers the status quo, with Hitler as its ally."

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100 years ago: Lenin authors statement against SPD betrayal and world war

Days after the German Social Democratic Party and the other major parties of the Second International betrayed the cause of socialism by supporting their "own" governments' war efforts,

Vladimir Lenin authored a statement advancing a revolutionary internationalist response to the barbarism of World War I. Titled "The Tasks of Revolutionary Social-Democracy in the European war," the statement is thought to have been written around August 24, and was adopted by a group of social democrats at a meeting on August 24-26 in Berne, Switzerland, where Lenin had recently arrived.

The document labeled the war a "bourgeois, imperialist and dynastic" conflict on all sides, and explained that it arose out of a "struggle for markets and for freedom to loot foreign countries, a striving to suppress the revolutionary movement of the proletariat ... a desire to deceive, disunite, and slaughter the proletarians of all countries by setting the wage slaves of one nation against those of another."

It made an analysis of the actions of the major parties of the Second International, specifically naming the German, French, and Belgian sections, and labeled their support for their own government's predatory war efforts a "sheer betrayal of socialism." It stated that the collapse of the Second International as a revolutionary force had been caused by "the actual prevalence in it of petty-bourgeois opportunism, the bourgeois nature and the danger of which have long been indicated by the finest representatives of the revolutionary proletariat of all countries." As instances of this trend, it noted the dominance of reformist, pacifist, and nationalist conceptions among the opportunist sections of the Second International.

Already, Lenin advanced the necessity for a new international organization, writing, in reference to the prevalence of opportunist tendencies in the Second International, "It must be the task of the future International resolutely and irrevocably to rid itself of this bourgeois trend in socialism." Lenin outlined three tasks at the conclusion of the statement: the propagation of the perspective of socialist revolution and the unity of the international working class, an immediate slogan for Republics in those countries ruled by absolutist monarchies, and a struggle for revolution in Russia, in opposition to the Pan-Slavic nationalism of the Tsarist regime.

The statement was smuggled into Russia, where it was discussed by sections of the Bolshevik Party over the following months, and would become the basis for a subsequent Bolshevik manifesto, also authored by Lenin. It played a critical role in politically arming socialist workers and intellectuals in Russia and elsewhere with a revolutionary and internationalist perspective, under conditions of the confusion generated by the betrayal of the Second International.

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