

This week in history: January 26-February 1

26 January 2015

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: Haitian strongman lifts state of siege

The state of siege declared in Haiti by Lt. General Prosper Avril was ended on January 30, 1990. The measure was imposed after the January 19 slaying of an army colonel by an “unidentified gunman.” Declaring “there was no other choice” but to take emergency action, Avril launched a crackdown on political opponents and suspended the country’s 1987 Constitution.

The government announced the decision to rescind the measures in a communiqué read on Haiti’s state-run television station. The state of siege was planned to last 30 days, but the regime came under strong condemnation from US, France and Canada, its traditional foreign aid sources.

The crackdown was also denounced by the Haitian Chamber of Commerce and the Industrial Association of Haiti. Rumors circulated of plans for a general strike. A spokesman from the US Embassy told the press that it hopes that the government will address “the question of the people who were exiled, the question of press freedom and the very important question of how to restore faith and confidence in the electoral process and the government’s commitment to that process.”

The US comments were particularly cynical as Washington had a long history of supporting and financing one brutal military regime after another in Haiti. Avril came to power in a September 1988 coup, overthrowing the military government of General Henri Namphy. Both Namphy and Avril were part of the military apparatus of the hated Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier dictatorship, which collapsed in 1986.

In rescinding the emergency measures, Avril made no reference to the restoration of press freedoms, yet insisted that the free elections would still be scheduled for October of that year. A US court later charged Avril with a “systematic pattern of egregious human rights abuses.”

[top]

50 years ago: Mass arrests in Selma, Alabama

On February 1, 1965, Selma Sheriff James G. Clark arrested 770 people, among them Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who were protesting Alabama’s stringent voter registration requirements. Five hundred of those arrested were black high school students who stayed away from classes to picket the county courthouse. The student demonstration was organized by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

Students were hauled away in school buses to an old armory, where they were turned over to a county juvenile judge and cited for truancy. Most of the students refused to sign slips giving their

names and addresses and were held overnight. The adult protesters were charged with parading without a permit. King refused to post bail and was held in jail.

The action marked the first mass arrest in four weeks of civil rights protests in Selma under the leadership of King. In earlier actions, civil rights leaders had divided protesters into small groups in order not to violate Selma’s parade ordinance. Protests continued the next day, with hundreds of high school students returning to join a march on the County Board of Registrars. There were more mass arrests when students refused again to disperse on orders of Sheriff Clark.

Despite the signing of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, Alabama and other Southern states continued to maintain literacy tests and other procedures designed to keep blacks from registering to vote. Selma was the symbolic heart of the resistance to the struggle for civil rights. Highlighting the racist authorities’ determination to deny blacks their elementary democratic rights was the announcement that the voter registration office in Selma would be open for only two days in the entire month of February.

[top]

75 years ago: United Mine Workers leader denounces President Roosevelt

On February 1, 1940, a break between John L. Lewis, Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) president and

leader of the United Mine Workers (UMWA), and President Franklin D. Roosevelt exploded into public view during the week long UMWA convention. The rift put into question the CIO and UMWA's endorsement of Roosevelt for a third term.

Lewis lashed out at Roosevelt and the Democratic Party, charging, "After seven years of power (the Roosevelt administration) finds itself without a solution to the major questions of unemployment, low national income, mounting internal debt, increasing direct and consumer taxation and restricted foreign markets. There still exists the national unhappiness that it faced seven years ago."

Lewis pointed out, "In the Congress, the unrestrained baiting and defaming of Labor by the Democratic majority has become a national pastime." He also highlighted several incidents of the last four years to illustrate Roosevelt's callousness and hostility to the struggles and plight of the working class.

As head of the CIO, Lewis was acutely aware of the enormous discontent in the American working class. But instead of a break with capitalist politics and fighting for the establishment of an independent Labor party, Lewis sought to contain the mass discontent within the channels of bourgeois politics "by an accord between the Democratic Party and Labor" under a new president.

Lewis spelled out his politics of class collaboration: "Labor has not been given representation in the cabinet, nor in the administration or policy-making agencies of government."

[top]

100 years ago: British authorities brutally suppress African uprising

This week in January 1915, British colonial authorities launched a brutal crackdown following an uprising in Nyasaland, modern-day Malawi, that had begun on January 23. Villages were looted and destroyed by colonial militias, while around 40 alleged rebels were shot dead, and another 300 imprisoned.

The rebellion was led by John Chilembwe, a millenarian Christian pastor who had been educated in the US, and had grown increasingly hostile to the marginalization of the educated black middle class, and the servility of tribal chiefs to the colonial authorities. Chilembwe appealed to widespread hostility to attempts to dragoon the native population into fighting for the British Empire in World War I, and opposition to the horrific conditions confronted by plantation workers. Many were engaged in "thangata labour"—i.e., work without pay—and were effectively treated as slaves.

Chilembwe issued a public letter in November 1914, calling on British authorities "not to recruit more of my countrymen, my brothers who do not know the cause of your fight, who

indeed, have nothing to do with it." Chilembwe instead called on the British to recruit the plantation owners, traders, missionaries and other "white settlers" to fight in the global conflict.

Planning for the uprising is thought to have begun in late 1914. On the night of January 23, Chilembwe delivered a speech at his church in Mbombwe, calling for an uprising aimed at highlighting the plight of the African population, and pressuring colonial authorities to redress it. He anticipated that all of the rebels would be killed in reprisal attacks.

The rebellion began following Chilembwe's speech. Coordinated attacks on colonial outposts and plantations were carried out in southern and central Nyasaland, killing three colonists, and wounding five others. An estate manager notorious for his abuse of impoverished workers was decapitated.

The largely disorganized character of the rebellion enabled colonial authorities to launch a counter-offensive, beginning on January 26, which included the capture of Chilembwe's stronghold in Mbombwe. Rebel fighters either fled, or were killed or captured, as vicious "reprisal" attacks were launched. Chilembwe was shot dead on February 3, while seeking to flee Nyasaland.

A commission of inquiry carried out by British authorities, while pointing to the brutal conditions facing the native population, rejected any fundamental changes. The commission called for sections of the black middle class to be integrated into local government structures, in order to prevent further upheavals.

[top]



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