

This week in history: August 3-9

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25 years ago: US deploys troops for war against Iraq

On August 8, 1990, US President Bush announced that US ground troops were sent to Saudi Arabia because “America will stand by her friends.” Bush famously declared, “A line has been drawn in the sand,” after Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait six days earlier. The massive deployment of aircraft carriers, stealth bombers, cruise missiles and tens of thousands of troops was not to protect the “friends” of the US, but to safeguard the profits of Exxon, Mobil, Texaco, Shell and British Petroleum.

With the backing of Britain, France, Germany and Japan, the purpose of the mobilization of the military was the reimposition of unrestrained domination by the imperialist powers over the oil resources of the Middle East.

Bush would not reveal how many combat troops were being sent, but officials said it could be as many as 90,000. A fleet of aircraft carriers and warships had already been dispatched into the Persian Gulf.

As Iraq announced that Kuwait had been annexed as the country’s “19th province,” the US media spewed hysterical reports that Iraq was stockpiling chemical weapons, developing nuclear weapons and carrying out unspeakable atrocities in the occupied sheikdom. Kuwait, which was carved out of Basra governate by British imperialism in 1899, had provoked Iraq by stealing oil through slant drilling into Iraq’s Rumaila oilfield and overproducing, thereby driving oil prices down, threatening Iraq with bankruptcy.

Democrat as well as Republican politicians supported the rapid deployment of military force. Liberal Senator Edward Kennedy praised Bush for having “skillfully worked with other nations to isolate Iraq and apply maximum diplomatic and economic pressure to reverse Iraq’s illegal seizure of Kuwait.”

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50 years ago: Johnson signs Voting Rights Act

On August 6, 1965, US President Lyndon Johnson signed into law the Voting Rights Act, which undermined voting restrictions that disenfranchised minorities and the poor, especially African Americans in the South.

The Voting Rights Act won bipartisan congressional support as a necessary concession to the mass movement of blacks in the South and, increasingly, in the urban North, that had gathered strength from the mid-1950s on. The immediate impulse was the voting rights struggle in Selma, Alabama, in the spring of 1965, where the brutality of racist police, broadcast around the world, had enraged workers and youth across the US and exposed the Johnson administration’s claims to be fighting for “freedom” in Vietnam.

The bill was introduced in the Senate by Mike Mansfield (D-MT) and Everett Dirksen (R-IL), and passed the upper chamber on May 26, 1965 by a margin of 77 to 19. An amended version passed the House on July 9, 1965, by a margin of 333 to 85. Almost all of the 104 senators and congressmen who voted against the bill were southern Democrats, though their opposition to racial equality had gained the support of the 1964 Republican presidential nominee, Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona.

The US Constitution (1787) and Bill of Rights (1789) had left it to the states to determine voting requirements. Until the Civil War the franchise was restricted to white men in most southern and even northern states. The Civil War and Reconstruction resulted in the 13th, (1865) 14th (1868), and 15th (1870) amendments to the Constitution, which, respectively, outlawed slavery, guaranteed citizenship, and protected voting rights.

However, the Northern bourgeoisie, having defeated the slave-owning southern elite, soon collaborated with the latter to secure domination of the working class. In the South this meant the evisceration of the 14th and 15th amendments through Jim Crow segregation. A panoply of rules were put in place beginning in the 1890s that effectively stripped almost all blacks, and most poor whites, of the right to vote. These included literacy tests and other subjective requirements, poll taxes, and “grandfather clauses” that stipulated that, in order to vote, an applicant’s grandfather had to have been a citizen, i.e., not a slave.

Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act prohibited any jurisdiction from putting in place “voting qualification or prerequisite to voting, or standard, practice, or procedure [that] results in a denial or abridgement” of the right to vote. Section 5 required

certain areas—including all of the Deep South—to get “preclearance” from the US Attorney General or the US District Court in Washington, DC before altering voting requirements.

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75 years ago: Italy attacks British colonies in Africa

On August 4, 1940, Italian forces launched attacks against British troops in Cyrenaica (eastern Libya) and British Somaliland as the struggle among the European imperialists to divide the globe spread to the northeastern quadrant of the African continent.

It was the first major military action by Italy in the Second World War. Previously, Italian forces had seized small pieces of territory on the border with France after the armies of its German ally had done the major work of smashing the French Army in the north. Italian fascist leader Benito Mussolini anticipated that Britain would, like France, quickly collapse under an invasion by Hitler’s military forces, thus opening up an opportunity for the Italian bourgeoisie to grab British colonies in Africa.

Mussolini hoped to add Egypt, Sudan, British Somaliland and Kenya to Italy’s disconnected colonial possessions of Libya and Ethiopia, consolidating all of northeast Africa under Italian control. Besides resources, these new colonies would offer Italy control over the strategic navigation route to the Far East through the Suez Canal and the Red Sea. It also would lock the British Navy out of the Mediterranean and limit its points of attack against Germany to the Atlantic. Mussolini had the promise of Hitler that German forces would be committed to the North African campaign once Italy had reached the strategic point of Mersa Matruh on the Egyptian coast, bringing the Nile delta within reach.

The half-million-strong Italian Army dwarfed the British forces in Africa, which totaled only 50,000. But due to Mussolini’s shortsightedness the army was ill-equipped for the desert war, especially in terms of mechanized units. For the first month the Italian forces moved slowly through Cyrenaica, not even reaching the frontier with Egypt. In British Somaliland the Italians managed after four days of difficult fighting to force an inferior British garrison to evacuate by sea.

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100 years ago: Strike wave in US munitions plants

This week in August 1915, a major strike wave swept the

northeastern United States, with machinists and other munition plant workers taking industrial action despite the efforts of the International Association of Machinists (IAM) to prevent it. Workers were reacting to the high profits being generated by war production and the long hours they were forced to work. The eight-hour day was at the centre of many of the disputes.

Workers at Aluminum Company of America in Massena, New York, at the Remington Arms plant in Utica, New York, at the Locomotive Co. of America in Bridgeport, Connecticut—involved in the production of army trucks for Russia and England—were among those on strike. The DuPont Powder Co. granted its 50,000 employees the eight-hour day at no reduction of pay in order to avert strike action.

Vice-President of the IAM J.J. Kepler announced a drive for the eight-hour day and wage increases that would directly affect 500,000 workers, threatening a general strike if they were not met. A conference was held in Hartford, Connecticut over the weekend of August 7-8 of the leadership of the IAM which beat back proposals for an immediate general strike.

Union President William H. Johnson articulated the fear of the union bureaucracy over the growing movement of rank-and-file workers, stating, “I’m afraid the men will act on their own initiative. The hardest task we have now is keeping them at work and we are being severely criticized in many places for keeping the men in. In many places in New England the men feel grieved because we won’t give them the word ... In the last two weeks in New England alone, 15,000 new members have been admitted. The men will accept nothing short of a straight eight-hour proposition, which machinists have hoped and prayed for these many years.”

Leaders of 500,000 rail workers announced on August 8 their decision to join the campaign for an eight-hour day.

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