

# This week in history: May 2-8

2 May 2016

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## 25 years ago: South Korean workers and students clash with government over murder of union leader

On May 6, 1991, the body of South Korean union leader Park Chang-soo was found on the street outside Anyang Hospital. Two days earlier, he was admitted into the hospital with a fractured skull after three months' imprisonment.

The dictatorship of Roh Tae-Woo imprisoned Park and other trade unionists on April 21 on charges of organizing illegal labor protests. He was held at Anyang Prison, where he had gone on hunger strike over the killing of Kang Kyong-dae, a 20-year-old student at Seoul's Miyongji University, who was beaten to death by police during an April 26 demonstration.

After suffering suspicious head injuries over the weekend, Park was taken to the nearby hospital. On the morning of May 6, he was apparently thrown from its rooftop. Guards who were maintaining a continuous watch on Park claimed that they did not know how he had gotten to the roof. The regime claimed Park committed suicide, but both the National Council of Labor Unions and the Hanjin Heavy Industries Union immediately denounced this fabrication, calling sit-ins and strikes at 450 companies.

On May 7, riot police battled workers and students who were guarding Park's body at a hospital south of Seoul. More than 1,000 riot-equipped police attempted to storm the hospital at 5:00 in the morning in an attempt to seize the murdered union leader's body for a government autopsy designed to bolster the cover-up.

Hundreds of workers and youth resisted, holding the facility against repeated charges and a massive tear gas barrage. Finally, after nearly eight hours, the police gained entry to the hospital by cutting through a rear wall and overpowering about 40 workers, including Park's relatives, who were maintaining a vigil over the body. The corpse was rushed to four of the regime's doctors who immediately conducted an autopsy.

The following weekend, marches demanding Roh's resignation and the disbanding of the special combat police force used to repress demonstrations were held in Seoul and many provincial cities. In the capital, workers and others

spontaneously joined smaller demonstrations until tens of thousands choked the downtown streets, defying riot squads that repeatedly fired tear gas canisters and water cannon into the crowds.

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## 50 years ago: Nasser threatens Saudi Arabia

On May 1, 1966, in a speech marking May Day, Egyptian President Gamel Abdel Nasser threatened to invade and occupy parts of Saudi Arabia if the monarchy headed by King Faisal intervened militarily in the ongoing civil war in Yemen.

The bourgeois nationalist leader declared that Egyptian armed forces would seize the border towns of Qian and Najran, which were formerly part of the territory of Yemen. The two cities were being used as sanctuaries by Yemeni monarchist forces, supported by the reactionary Saudi regime, in a long civil war which had been raging in the former British colony at the tip of the Arabian Peninsula.

The Saudi monarchy signed a \$400 million arms agreement with the US and Britain during the winter, following its announced plans, with the backing of Britain, to construct an airfield five miles from the border, placing it directly opposite Egyptian military forces stationed in Yemen. On several occasions in the previous year, the Egyptian Air Force had bombed monarchist training camps inside Saudi Arabia, bringing sharp warnings from US imperialism that it would defend the "territorial integrity" of the monarchy.

The threats of military intervention by Egypt followed the collapse of a peace agreement between Nasser and King Faisal brokered by the United States in August 1965. Simultaneously, the Egyptian government demanded increased economic aid from Washington from the current level of \$55 million to \$150 million. But Washington announced it would put on hold all discussion of new economic aid.

After his invasion threats, Nasser held a six-day meeting with Josef Tito, the Stalinist leader of Yugoslavia, in an effort to use the support of the Stalinist and "nonaligned" countries to increase his bargaining power with US imperialism.

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## 75 years ago: Iraq rebels against British occupation

On May 2, 1941 Iraqi military forces launched an artillery assault on the British Royal Air

Force at the Habbania air base, situated on the Euphrates River just west of Baghdad. The clash was a byproduct of the conflict between German and British imperialism in the Second World War, then ending its second year.

The Nazi regime sought to undermine British colonial rule in Iraq and Palestine and to exploit the seething hatred against French domination in Syria. Oil-starved Germany sought to make use of a section of the Arab bourgeois nationalists to cut off the flow of oil by pipeline to the British fleet in the Mediterranean from the petroleum-rich regions of Mosul and Kirkuk in northern Iraq, and ultimately to secure this region for itself.

In April, Iraqi Prime Minister Rashid Ali, sympathetic to Germany, conspired with three Iraqi officers against the pro-British regent, Emir Abdul Ilia, who fled the country. Britain responded by landing forces near Basra, initially with the acquiescence of Rashid Ali, to guard the oil refinery at Abadan and take control of the lower Euphrates and Tigris river valleys.

When the British advised Iraq that it would land additional forces at Basra, Rashid Ali refused permission. The British defied his orders, leading Iraq to attack the RAF base at Habbania. Initially, the Iraqi artillery bombardment inflicted damage to the British, destroying a quarter of the RAF's planes. But gradually the RAF knocked out Iraqi gun emplacements and forced Iraq's troops to retreat.

British Prime Minister Winston Churchill ordered his military staff "to get a friendly government set up in Baghdad, and to beat down Rashid Ali's forces with the utmost vigor." In effect, he was demanding that the formal independence of Iraq, established in 1932, should be suppressed, and direct British colonial rule reimposed.

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## 100 years ago: Leaders of Easter Uprising in Ireland executed

Beginning on May 3, 1916, and continuing until May 12, British authorities carried out the execution by firing squad of 15 leaders of the failed Easter Uprising for Irish independence, including the socialist James Connolly.

On April 24, the first day of the uprising, the British government had declared martial law in both the city and county of Dublin. General John Maxwell was sent to Dublin as head of the British army's Irish Command, with dictatorial powers under martial law. At the same time the British

government, simultaneously embroiled in World War I, took measures for persons to be court martialed under the Defence of the Realm Act.

In the aftermath of the uprising, British forces arrested around 3,500 people who were either directly involved in the rebellion or who were thought to be sympathizers. Maxwell ordered that 183 of them be tried in a May 2, 1916, court martial held in secret without jury or defense counsel. Ninety were sentenced to death. Of those, 15 had their sentences confirmed by Maxwell and were shot by firing squad over the following 10 days.

The secrecy surrounding the trials and the swift execution of those found guilty led to anger within the Irish working class. Worried about the reaction to the executions, bourgeois Irish parliamentarians warned the British government of the dangers of the increasing unrest throughout the country. John Dillon, a leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party, said in the House of Commons, "Would not any sensible statesman think he had enough to do in Dublin and the other centres where disturbance broke out without doing everything possible to raise disturbance and spread disaffection over the whole country?"

By May 8, British Prime Minister Asquith was insisting that the executions stop. Maxwell, however, insisted on carrying out two further executions, including that of the mortally wounded Connolly, a revolutionary socialist leader of the Irish working class injured in the fighting. Connolly was carried to the site of execution on a stretcher and then propped up in a chair to face the firing squad on May 12. He was the last Irish leader executed for the uprising.

Following Connolly's execution, Maxwell bowed to pressure and the other death sentences were commuted to penal servitude. Almost 2,000 men were imprisoned at internment camps and prisons throughout England and Wales.

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