

This week in history: July 22-28

22 July 2019

25 years ago: Strikes break out in South Africa

On July 26, 1994, a strike wave of over 100,000 workers broke out in South Africa. Mining, steel, telecommunications and postal unions declared official disputes with employers, giving effective strike notice. The Council of Mining Unions, representing white workers, followed the lead of the National Union of Mineworkers, representing black workers, in declaring a dispute with the main diamond and gold mining companies. About 300,000 autoworkers in the region scheduled to take a strike ballot by the end of the month.

Daily clashes between strikers and police escalated throughout the country, the most bitter fight occurring at Pick n Pay stores where 15,000 workers went on strike weeks earlier. Workers demanded a \$92 per month pay increase to boost wages of \$590 per month. More than 1,000 workers were arrested under apartheid-era laws which made a crime of “trespassing” for workers to picket within 500 yards of any store. When these laws were defied, police cracked down with rubber bullets, dogs and truncheons.

The government headed by Nelson Mandela, which had just come to power two months before, intervened in several strikes, seeking to defuse confrontations between workers and police, relying on the bureaucracy of the COSATU union federation to hold back, disorient and betray the offensive. Mandela issued public warnings expressing fears that strikes would discourage foreign capital investment.

At an unprecedented 5 a.m. meeting of the African National Congress cabinet members and senior national and provincial officials at Mandela’s residence a few weeks later, the South African president declared that “gang warfare” was increasing, crime escalating, and the number of police killed rising.

The question of imposing a national state of emergency was discussed and government officials began implementing impromptu road blocks, raids and searches. South Africa’s Chief Police Commissioner even called for the reintroduction of the death penalty for anyone found guilty of killing police.

Together with the Stalinists of the South African Communist Party, the trade union bureaucrats claimed that the government was on the side of the working class but that employers were “trying to stampede the government into taking sides against workers.”

“We are not going to make the same mistake other

governments in Africa have made, and then gone bankrupt,” Mandela said to a meeting of bankers and industry heads. “The whole business and investment world is watching to see who we appoint as our finance minister and financial advisers.”

50 years ago: “Nixon Doctrine” acknowledges US setbacks in Asia

During a stop in Guam on July 25, 1969, while on a diplomatic tour of Asia, US President Richard Nixon outlined his foreign policy strategy that became known as the “Nixon Doctrine.” The policy was consistent with Nixon’s “Vietnamization” strategy to reduce direct American involvement in the ongoing war and transfer primary responsibility to the South Vietnamese government.

Nixon told reporters, “I believe that the time has come when the United States, in our relations with all of our Asian friends, be quite emphatic on two points: One, that we will keep our treaty commitments ... but, two, that as far as the problems of internal security are concerned, as far as the problems of military defense ... that the United States is going to encourage and has a right to expect that ... the responsibility for it taken by, the Asian nations themselves.”

In effect, the president was conceding that US imperialism no longer had the resources to sustain direct military intervention in Asia with its own military forces, because the domestic consequences of such troop commitments had become politically unsustainable.

Reflecting on the meeting in a later memoir he added that he told US allies that there would be no more US troop deployments on the scale of Korea or Vietnam: “From now on, I said, we would furnish only the material and the military and economic assistance to those nations willing to accept the responsibility of supplying the manpower to defend themselves.”

In the face of massive popular opposition to the Vietnam war at home, Nixon sought to reduce the number of American lives that would be lost in propping up US allies and puppet regimes. While the doctrine was most specifically aimed towards Vietnam and providing a basis for troop withdrawal, it also had a lasting effect in terms of arms sales to US-backed

dictatorships. Arms sales to Iran in 1970 were \$103.6 million. But, by 1972 that number had jumped to over \$550 million. Saudi Arabia also saw an increase in US weapon purchases increasing from \$15.8 million to over \$312 million during the same period.

75 years ago: Soviet troops capture Majdanek concentration camp

On July 24, 1944, Soviet troops captured the Majdanek concentration camp on the outskirts of the Polish city of Lublin. It was the first Nazi death camp to be seized almost intact by Soviet or Allied forces, providing proof of the Third Reich's war crimes that would be cited extensively at the Nuremberg trials after World War II.

The seizure of the camp took place amid major Soviet advances during Operation Bagration, an offensive aimed at expelling the German occupiers from Poland. Because of the rapid movement of the Red Army, the SS officers who operated the camp did not have time to destroy evidence of their atrocities, as they had elsewhere. Soviet troops found thousands of surviving prisoners, along with proof of mass killings, including partially intact crematoria.

Majdanek was established in October, 1941. It was initially planned to serve as a mass detention center for tens of thousands of Soviet prisoners of war, as well as Jewish workers and opponents of the Nazi occupation. Prisoners were forced to build the facility.

In 1942, Majdanek was integrated into Operation Reinhard, the Nazi plan for the mass extermination of Poland's Jewish population. Initially, it served as a storage center for property and valuables stolen from the victims of the genocide.

In March 1942, however, the camp was repurposed as a killing center. Gas chambers were built. Prisoners were also murdered by firing squads. During Operation "Harvest Festival," a mass killing spree, tens of thousands were murdered at the camp. On November 3, 1943, the bloodiest day at the camp, an estimated 18,400 Jewish prisoners were killed.

Recent estimates of the total number of killings at the camp stand at around 78,000, with almost 60,000 of those being Jewish.

100 years ago: Clemenceau survives no-confidence vote in French parliament

On July 22, 1919, the French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau, who had ruled the country since 1917, received a

narrow vote of confidence in the Chamber of Deputies, by a margin of 272-181. The call for a vote was a result of dissatisfaction by elements in the French bourgeoisie with the Treaty of Versailles with Germany, which had been signed on June 28 and officially ended the First World War.

While the treaty was generally humiliating and onerous for Germany, a faction of the French bourgeoisie believed that Clemenceau—an anti-German chauvinist—had made unacceptable compromises with British and American imperialism by failing to annex Germany's Saar basin and make its Rhineland into an independent buffer state. Many had demanded that Germany pay for the whole cost of the war. Opposition politicians in the Chamber of Deputies also resented that they had been excluded from the Versailles negotiations by Clemenceau.

In his speech to the chamber before the vote, Clemenceau boasted of leading France to victory in the world war, then declared, "It is harder to make peace than it is to make war." France had borne the brunt of the fighting in the First World War on the Western Front, with large parts of its northern territory occupied by German armies and largely destroyed. By 1918 hundreds of thousands of houses and over 20,000 workshops had been demolished.

Two million Frenchmen of military age had died or were severely wounded out of a population of 39 million, and, most terrifying to the ruling class, a radicalization of the French working class had begun during the war itself, which saw mutinies in the French army. The Chamber of Deputies was forced to pass eight-hour-day legislation for large sections of workers after April 1919.

While Clemenceau survived the no-confidence motion, the closeness of the vote was seen as an indication that time was running out for his government. The Treaty of Versailles was ratified by the Chamber of Deputies in October, but the next month saw a further shift to the right, with a sweeping victory of the right-wing National Bloc in parliamentary elections. While Clemenceau was affiliated with the National Bloc, he was displaced by more right-wing figures, leaving office in January 1920.



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