

This week in history: August 26-September 1

26 August 2019

25 years ago: IRA declares ceasefire throughout UK

On August 31, 1994, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) announced the “complete cessation of military operations” in Northern Ireland and Great Britain. Following in the footsteps of Yasser Arafat’s Palestinian Liberation Organization and Nelson Mandela’s African National Congress, the IRA’s declaration represented a milestone in the collapse of bourgeois nationalism as it prepared to officially make peace with imperialism.

As the ceasefire was announced, 18,000 British troops remained stationed throughout the North with no talk of reunification. Over the previous quarter-century, the IRA campaigned to force the withdrawal of British troops from Northern Ireland in an attempt to reunite the six provinces of Ulster with the 26 provinces of the Irish Republic.

The solution to the brutal repression and anti-Catholic violence of the British and their far-right Ulster allies was never resolved through the IRA’s petty-bourgeois terror bombings and assassinations. These tactics provided British imperialism with countless pretexts for the buildup of the state against workers, Irish and British alike. The criminal killing of British workers in England in random acts of violence like the bombing of bus stops, department stores, and pubs, was a political dead-end for the working class, only serving to deepen the isolation of Ulster’s Irish Catholic workers.

Upon announcement of the ceasefire, there was public rejoicing in the streets of Catholic Belfast—those for whom the IRA claimed to be fighting recognized the bankrupt character of the organization’s strategies. “No one should mourn the passing of the IRA’s ‘armed struggle’ campaign, in which more than 3,000 people died in a territory the size of Connecticut,” the *International Workers Bulletin* noted. “But what follows promises to be no less edifying. Gerry Adams, the Sinn Féin political leader, will now take his place at the end of a long queue of bourgeois nationalist leaders, former ‘revolutionaries’ with tin cups in hand, seeking aid and favor from imperialism.”

The ceasefire lasted 17 months and nine days. On February 9, 1996, the Provisional IRA detonated a lorry bomb in the London Docklands an hour after announcing an end to the ceasefire. The bombing killed two, injured 40, and caused £150 million in damage. The attack triggered a further round of talks and led to another ceasefire declared the following year. In July 2005 the IRA announced the final end to its armed campaign.

50 years ago: Gaddafi coup takes power in Libya

On September 1, 1969, a group of 70 Libyan army officials calling themselves the “Free Officers Movement” and led by Colonel Muammar Gaddafi launched a coup d’état against the monarchical government of King Idris I. The coup established the rule of the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) as the official governing body of Libya, with Gaddafi as chairman.

The coup against Idris was bloodless. Not a single death was recorded during the seizure of power. Rather, the repressive apparatus of the state—the armed forces, the police, the prisons—simply shifted hands to Gaddafi.

Idris came to power in 1951 through the intervention of the United Kingdom and the United States, who gave the monarchy hundreds of millions of dollars in exchange for the establishment of military bases in Libya. Idris oversaw a regime of mass political repression. He banned all political parties and all government officials were selected directly by the monarchy.

The political crisis in the country was greatly heightened in 1959 when oil was discovered and vastly increased Libya’s wealth. In 1951 Libya’s GDP per capita sat at around \$30. By 1969 it had jumped to \$2,000. Most of this new wealth was concentrated in the hands of a few privileged individuals who were close to the monarchy. This extreme inequality combined with massive political repression made Idris wildly unpopular with the Libyan masses.

In an address to the country after the coup succeeded Gaddafi exclaimed, “By a single stroke it (the army) has lightened the long dark night in which the Turkish domination was followed first by Italian rule, then by this reactionary and decadent regime which was no more than a hotbed of extortion, faction, treachery and treason.”

Gaddafi and the other officers were able to exploit the unpopularity of the Idris monarchy to their benefit. Making appeals to anti-imperialism, Arab nationalism, and using vague socialist rhetoric, the RCC established a bourgeois nationalist regime heavily inspired by Maoism.

Gaddafi would remain in power until 2011 when his government was toppled by the US-backed NATO bombardment under the Obama administration.

75 years ago: Toulon and Marseille liberated from Nazi occupation

This week in August 1944, French troops and partisans of the Resistance, along with British and US allied forces, secured a decisive victory over Nazi occupiers in the strategically crucial port cities of Toulon and Marseille. The defeat of the German forces followed the successful landing of Allied troops in southern France earlier in the month, and the liberation of Paris just days before.

Both port cities were unsuitable for an Allied amphibious landing, because of heavy German fortifications, meaning that they had to be taken by a land assault.

Beginning on August 16, Allied bombers made almost 30 raids targeting German artillery batteries and submarine posts surrounding Toulon. Heavy fighting on August 18 forced German defensive units to retreat into the city. On the same day, the Free French Forces launched a major assault on Toulon, involving more than 16,000 troops. Over the following days, their numbers would swell to some 50,000.

Over the following days, the French troops won a series of victories in close combat in Toulon's suburbs. By August 23, French forces were dominant throughout the city, leading to the overrunning of most German positions the following day. The Free French Forces turned their attention to the German naval base, with a massive artillery bombardment. With any escape route blocked, German command surrendered on August 28.

Free French Forces began their approach to Marseille at the same time their counterparts were securing victory in much of Toulon. The setbacks to the German occupiers prompted resistance groups to seize control of the Marseille prefecture and other strategic positions throughout the city. The Nazi troops were unable to defeat the poorly-armed resistance fighters because of their focus on the approaching allied troops, and the broad popular support for the uprising.

On August 24, the 3rd Algerian Infantry Division occupied the center of Marseille, after Free French Forces had entered the city with little resistance. Over the following days, German defensive pockets were decisively routed. The German garrison surrendered on August 27, and two days later, marines on heavily fortified islands near the city handed themselves over to the allies.

The British and US authorities, together with the Republican forces of General Charles de Gaulle, moved rapidly to secure control of the situation. De Gaulle insisted on the need for "national unity," and immediately moved to integrate the French Resistance groups into the regular national army, to prevent them from posing any challenge to the re-establishment of a French capitalist state. The Stalinist Communist Party played the central role in disarming the partisans and subordinating them to the French ruling elite.

100 years ago: Communist Party of America founded

On September 1, 1919, a portion of the left-wing of the Socialist Party founded the Communist Party of America in Chicago, led by Louis C. Fraina and C. E. Ruthenberg. Fraina, who had worked

with Trotsky on developing the Socialist Party's antiwar program during the latter's exile in New York in 1917, had been instrumental in popularizing the ideas of Bolshevism in his *Revolutionary Age*.

The conference was initially raided by the Chicago police, who arrested and beat delegates, but it was able to go forward later in the day. The Bureau of Investigation, predecessor to the FBI, had an observer stationed in the balcony, taking notes.

The day before, another faction of the left wing, whose delegates had been thrown out of the Socialist Party convention, also in Chicago, had formed the Communist Labor Party. Its leaders included John Reed and the future founder of the Trotskyist movement in the US, James P. Cannon.

The Communist Party of America included a large component of workers from the Socialist Foreign Language Federations. Representing immigrant workers, several of the Foreign Language Federations sought a more peremptory split from the SP. Instead, the Communist Labor Party had sought to fight for control of the Socialist Party, particularly so that it could appeal to the many native-born socialist workers in the Midwest. Both factions were inspired by the 1917 Russian Revolution and the founding of the Communist International in March 1919.

The Communist movement in the United States was born in an age of great social strife. The Russian Soviet republic was fighting for its life in a brutal civil war, and Soviet republics had been declared in Hungary and Bavaria. The US was experiencing its largest ever strike wave, as well as bloody race riots targeting African Americans in the North and the South. Meanwhile government authorities were meting out severe repression against militant workers and radicals, among them socialist leader Eugene Debs, who was imprisoned under the Espionage Act.

The young Communist movement was thrown into the middle of this tumult. Later in September, tens of thousands of workers would participate in the Great Steel Strike from Colorado to Ohio, Pennsylvania and New York.

Government repression under the attorney general, A. Mitchell Palmer became so intense that Communists were driven underground. The Communist parties, on the advice of the Communist International, joined to form the United Communist Party in 1921.

Despite the subsequent Stalinist degeneration of the Communist Party, James P. Cannon succinctly summed up the whole period: "The first six years of American communism—1918-1923—represent a heroic period from which all future revolutionary movements in this country will be the lineal descendants."



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