

This week in history: September 2-8

2 September 2019

25 years ago: Sani Abacha crushes anti-government strike in Nigeria

On September 5, 1994, bowing to ferocious pressure from Nigeria's military junta headed by President Sani Abacha, oil union leaders called off a two-month strike of 200,000 workers. The bulk of the strikers had begun returning to work even before the official decision, under threat of arrests, firings, and the hiring of foreign labor by multinationals like Total and Shell.

Nigeria's junta responded to the strike with growing repression. Oil union leaders were ordered removed from office, and Nigeria Union of Petroleum and Natural Gas Workers (NUPENG) general secretary Frank Kokori was detained, along with many local-level officials. In a radio broadcast, Labor Minister Samuel Ogbemudia threatened to "find, fix and finish" any union leaders who continued the strike. Gunmen attacked the home of Gani Fawehinmi, the lawyer for the dissolved unions, and police raided the homes of human rights activists.

Nigeria had been on the edge of economic and political chaos since June 1993, when the military government of General Ibrahim Babangida annulled elections that were expected to transfer power to an elected, civilian government. Abacha assumed power as military dictator five months later.

In the two weeks leading up to the collapse of the strike, the junta stiffened its resistance to any agreement to release the jailed victor of the presidential election, Chief Moshood K. Abiola. Nigeria had been under military rule for 28 of the 34 years since its formal independence from Britain.

The strike expressed the grievances of Nigeria's oil industry workers, who shared little of the immense profits reaped from their labor. But throughout its course, the unions—which were infiltrated by the CIA and AFL-CIO front, the African American Labor Center—subordinated the industrial power of the oil workers to courtroom maneuvers and private talks with generals and various tribal chiefs like Abiola, a millionaire newspaper publisher. In calling it off, union leaders claimed that their demand for the military dictatorship to release Abiola had not won sufficient public support.

The unions made no appeal to the grievances of Nigeria's peasant masses or workers outside of southern Nigeria. It remained limited to the Yoruba and Ibo-speaking regions in south and southwest Nigeria, having virtually no effect in the Hausa regions in the north, where the majority of the population lives.

50 years ago: Ho Chi Minh dies

Ho Chi Minh, leader of the Vietnamese independence movement, the country's first president and prime minister, and a founder of the communist party in Vietnam as well as in France, died in office on September 2, 1969, at the very height of the Vietnamese struggle against American imperialism. The 79-year-old suffered from heart failure connected to many illnesses, including diabetes.

Ho's public funeral was attended by over 250,000 people and the government of North Vietnam declared an official state of mourning until September 11. His body was embalmed and remains on display in Ba Dinh Square in Hanoi. The position of president was not immediately filled. Instead a council of government ministers and military officials oversaw the North Vietnamese government and the war with the US. Later, Ton Duc Thang would assume the presidency.

Ho began his political career in France in the early 1920s calling for the independence of Vietnam and other colonies at the end of World War I. He helped found the French Communist Party and held a position on the Colonial Committee. During this time Minh formed a relationship with the Stalinist Dmitri Manuilsky, who helped land him a position in the Comintern carrying out educational and diplomatic work throughout Asia. While in Hong Kong in 1930, Ho chaired the meeting that formed the Communist Party of Vietnam. One year later he was exiled from Hong Kong and moved first to the Soviet Union and then to China, where he functioned as an agent of the Comintern.

It was not until 1941, more than 20 years after leaving the country of his birth, that Ho Chi Minh returned to Vietnam and took up a leadership role in the Viet Minh independence movement, which was, at that point, supported by the US Office of Strategic Services, predecessor of the CIA, to carry out guerrilla attacks on Vichy French and Japanese occupation forces.

Operating within the political framework of Stalinism, Ho hoped to maintain close relationships with both the Soviet Union and the Maoist forces in China. Under Soviet pressure, he accepted the return of French colonial troops to Vietnam at the end of the World War II. An uneasy period of mutual suspicion followed, until the French authorities launched an unprovoked assault on the Viet Minh, beginning with the bombardment of Haiphong in November 1946, in which 6,000 Vietnamese were slaughtered.

In the war that followed, Viet Minh forces quickly dominated the countryside and waged guerrilla warfare, while the French ruled the cities. In the course of the war, the Viet Minh forces carried out assassinations of political rivals in addition to fighting colonial

forces. Most notably Vietnamese Trotskyists like Ta Thu Thau, who had large support among workers in the south, were targeted and killed.

After the defeat of the French at the siege of Dien Bien Phu in 1954, Moscow and Beijing intervened again to rescue imperialism, depriving the Viet Minh of their nationwide victory by imposing the division of the country into North and South Vietnam. Ho again acceded to this Stalinist betrayal, becoming prime minister and president of North Vietnam, while biding his time for the resumption of guerrilla war in the South, which erupted in 1960, and was met by US military intervention. Ho would oversee the ensuing war with the US but did not live to see the defeat of the imperialist superpower.

75 years ago: *Fourth International* warns against persecution of Uruguayan Trotskyists

This week in September 1944, the *Fourth International*, the theoretical journal of the world party founded by Leon Trotsky six years earlier, carried an editorial warning against the persecution of Trotskyists in Uruguay as part of a broader crackdown on the movement internationally.

The editorial began: “In their ferocious campaigns of repression against the labor movement the capitalist rulers in one country after another have singled out the Trotskyists for their first attacks. The Trotskyists are first in the line of fire because they are the spearhead of militant resistance to the developing reaction. The strategy of the governmental agents of capitalism is to strike at the extreme left wing of the labor movement in order to behead its vanguard.”

The *Fourth International* noted that the method of raids and imprisonments carried out against its sections in the US and Britain had “recently been deliberately imported into the South American republic of Uruguay by the capitalist regime there.”

It reported that earlier in the year, the Uruguayan government had placed the Swift packing-plant National Frigorifico under state control after a major strike. The implementation of this policy was accompanied by a “Red Scare” directed against the Revolutionary Workers League.

This had been initiated by the government during debates in June over the National Frigorifico bill. The minister of the interior had condemned the Revolutionary Workers League: “These are already amongst us ... In our midst they say that this is actually an imperialist war; that the working class must not believe in the vote; they malign parliamentarism; they say that the victories of justice be supplanted by the social tragedy of direct revolutionary action.” He waved a copy of the party’s newspaper, exposing the class character of the war, as he spoke.

The minister declared: “This preaching which has appeared in our country is not produced solely in Uruguay. That preaching has appeared at the same time in Great Britain, in the United States, in South Africa and in our own country.” He hailed the repression of the Trotskyists by Churchill in Britain and Roosevelt in the US.

The government official warned of the US Socialist Workers Party: “They are dangerous because of their intelligence and of their extraordinary activity carried on in the US trade unions and because with their aggressive language they appear at the head of the workers’ actions, provoking and encouraging strikes. They oppose any agreement with the bosses and denounce all reformist politics.”

His comments, the *Fourth International* warned, made clear that the government attacks in Uruguay were part of an internationally coordinated campaign. The Stalinists in the South American country were involved, with their deputies in parliament naming the Trotskyist leaders, branding them as “traitors” and calling for them to be punished.

100 years ago: Jan Smuts becomes prime minister of South Africa

On September 3, 1919, Jan Smuts became the second prime minister of the Union of South Africa, a self-governing dominion of the British Empire.

The Union had been formed in 1910 in the aftermath of the Boer War of 1898-1902, as an alliance between the Afrikaner bourgeoisie and British imperialism based on the oppression of black African workers and peasants. Smuts personified this alliance. He had led a Boer (Afrikaner) militia unit fighting Britain during the Boer War, but in the First World War he led the capture of German South West Africa (modern Namibia) by British forces.

Smuts was appointed to the British Imperial War Cabinet in 1917, and played a significant role in the British delegation to the Paris Peace Conference of 1919. An advocate of the League of Nations, Smuts helped to formulate the South African mandate over South West Africa in the Treaty of Versailles. He was ultimately dissatisfied with the mandate, since he sought full control of the area by South Africa. He represented the most expansionist elements of the South African bourgeoisie and favored South African rule as far north as the Zambezi River in modern Zambia.

Smuts continued to play a significant political role in the upper echelons of British imperialism in the interwar period, and was elevated to South Africa’s prime minister in 1939 at the beginning of the Second World War, a position he held until 1948. He was a supporter of racial Apartheid in South Africa, and an early advocate of the establishment of the state of Israel. In 1946, the African National Congress noted at the General Assembly of the United Nations the brutality of the police under his government against African mineworkers.



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