

This week in history: October 21-27

21 October 2019

25 years ago: Assassination of Gamini Dissanayake

On October 24, 1994, Gamini Dissanayake, United National Party (UNP) candidate for president of Sri Lanka, was assassinated at an election rally. An explosion detonated by a suicide bomber from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) killed 50 others and injured 200 more.

Dissanayake accumulated many enemies in the course of his bloodstained political career. The UNP candidate held a long record of anti-Tamil racist attacks, dating back to his role as the minister in charge of the Mahaweli Project, in which Sinhalese peasants were transported from the south and settled on newly irrigated lands in the north central region, claimed by the Tamil minority.

He was also believed to be responsible for the burning of the Jaffna Public Library in 1983, an action which set the stage for the anti-Tamil pogroms incited by the UNP regime in which thousands of Tamils were murdered. He backed the 1987 Indo-Lankan accord under which the Indian army occupied the Tamil-populated provinces and sought to suppress the LTTE.

Dissanayake opposed the peace talks with the LTTE initiated by Prime Minister Chandrika Kumaratunga and called for a military offensive in the north and east. The LTTE responded with death threats. He played a major role in the factional infighting which ripped apart the UNP regime. In 1991 he introduced an impeachment motion in parliament against President R. Premadasa, backing the minority faction of Lalith Athulathmudali, which sought a harder line against the Tamils and broke with the UNP to found a new Sinhala-chauvinist party.

After the assassination, President D.B. Wijetunga imposed a state of emergency. There were widespread suggestions in the press that the upcoming presidential election would be postponed, but the curfew was lifted 24 hours later and the vote proceeded.

The Sri Lankan section of the International Committee, then known as the Revolutionary Communist League, issued a statement warning that the assassination demonstrated the intensification of the civil war in Sri Lanka and the growing danger of violent methods of repression from the ruling class, not only in Sri Lanka but throughout the Indian subcontinent.

50 years ago: Willy Brandt takes office as West German chancellor

On October 21, 1969, the West German Bundestag (Parliament) voted to elect Willy Brandt as the new Chancellor of Germany, defeating the incumbent Chancellor Kurt Georg Kiesinger, a former Nazi party member. Brandt's election was a result of his party, the Social Democrats (SPD), forming a coalition government with the smaller liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP).

The Bundestag election that was held on September 28 was a victory for the SPD, which won the plurality of votes of any single party with 14.4 million, or 44 percent of the electorate. The SPD gained 20 seats in the Bundestag. Following the SPD in the vote was the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), with 37 percent, and losing one seat. However, West Germany's other conservative party, the Bavarian-based Christian Social Union (CSU) won 9.5 percent of the vote, bringing the CDU/CSU coalition to about 48 percent of the total votes.

Yet neither faction, the SPD or the conservative coalition, won enough seats to form an independent government. Over the next month the issue would be decided by the Free Democratic Party (FDP), which won just 1.5 million votes and had lost 19 seats in the election. Ultimately, the FDP chose to join with the SPD, in a coalition that held 268 seats, just enough to form a government with 51.7 percent of the seats in the Bundestag.

Brandt, who in an earlier period was forced to flee Germany to avoid Nazi persecution, remained then, and on his election as chancellor more than 30 years later, an opponent of the independence of the working class.

In 1933, Brandt had broken with Trotskyist members of his socialist "International Youth Office," writing, "there exists ... a fundamental contradiction between us and the Trotskyists regarding the development of the proletarian party and the relationship between party and class. The Trotskyists see their task to be the creation of an ideologically exactly aligned vanguard standing above the working class. We regard it our duty to contribute to the creation of truly communist proletarian mass organizations, based on the western European labor movement and emerging from the practical life and tradition of the working class of our own country."

The reference to "truly communist proletarian" organizations was mere radical phrasemongering that Brandt quickly discarded. His true orientation was to the gradualist and reformist tradition "of the working class of our country," by which he meant the Social Democratic and trade union apparatus, not the masses of German workers who had engaged in mass revolutionary struggles in 1918-1919, and fought heroically against the rise of Hitlerism.

In essence, Brandt rejected socialist internationalism and the revolutionary role of the working class. As chancellor he would implement his *Ostpol i tik* policy, which worked to gain access to

Eastern European markets while undermining the Eastern Bloc planned economies. Ultimately, Brandt served the interests of German capitalism by pacifying growing West German strikes through education and wage reforms, and working for the restoration of market economies in East Europe.

75 years ago: Massive naval battle over control of Philippines

On October 23, 1944, the Battle of Leyte Gulf began, pitting some 300 Allied warships and auxiliary vessels against 67 Japanese craft. The battle, one of the largest naval conflicts of the 20th century, followed the US-led invasion of the Japanese-occupied Philippines several weeks before.

The US operation, in addition to restoring control over its former colony, was aimed at cutting off Japanese forces in southeast Asia from Japan, and disrupting their supply lines. The battle, fought over a series of engagements, was marked by a huge disparity of forces, which the Royal Japanese Navy sought to overcome by mobilizing its whole Pacific fleet and initiating kamikaze attacks. In a series of costly engagements, over 12,000 Japanese sailors and some 3,000 Allied naval personnel were killed or wounded. Within several days, the US and its allies had routed the Japanese naval forces.

General Douglas MacArthur and the US puppet Sergio Osmena held a ceremony in the city of Tacloban where they announced President Franklin Roosevelt's restoration of the United States colony, the Philippine Commonwealth. Osmena was officially sworn in as president, and Tacloban was made the provisional capital of the Philippines pending the recapture of Manila. MacArthur and Osmena made brief speeches calling on the Filipino masses to rise up against the Japanese occupation.

Japanese occupation was almost as brutal as the turn-of-the-century US colonization and "pacification" of the Philippines when 200,000 people were slaughtered. In 1943, one year after defeating US forces and occupying the island, Japan had set up its puppet "Philippine Republic" and received the collaborative support of the Philippine capitalists and landowners. Its brutality had generated a powerful anti-Japanese guerrilla movement which reflected the determination of the Philippine masses to throw off all forms of imperialist domination.

In 1934 the United States had scheduled the Philippines for "independence" in 1946. While this promise continued to be maintained, it was combined with the Roosevelt administration's denunciations of Japanese atrocities, and pledges to arrest and put Philippine collaborators on trial.

This attempt to bring the Philippine revolution under US control was primarily aided by the Philippine Communist Party, which heralded Stalin's popular front alliance with Allied imperialism. During the invasion, MacArthur gave aid to the guerrillas. But after the invasion, he would disarm and arrest them, exonerate the collaborators and place them back in power. MacArthur had prewar ties to many of the Philippine elite. Just before he abandoned the Philippines in the wake of the 1941 Japanese

invasion, he had received a half-million-dollar gift from then-President Manuel Quezon.

100 years ago: US Congress passes Volstead Act to begin Prohibition

On October 27, 1919, the US House of Representatives passed the Volstead Act, formally known as the National Prohibition Act, which effectively illegalized alcoholic beverages. The Senate passed the bill the next day. On January 16, 1919, two-thirds of the US States had ratified the 18th Amendment to the Constitution, which banned the "manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors." President Wilson had initially vetoed the act, but Congress was able to override the veto. The legislation went into effect on January 17, 1920.

Neither the Volstead Act nor the 18th Amendment prohibited individual purchase or consumption of alcoholic beverages, and the Volstead Act made provision for the scientific, industrial and religious use of alcohol.

The act and amendment were the product of decades of campaigning by evangelical Christians, capitalizing on popular revulsion over the abuse of alcohol. As Upton Sinclair noted of America in his 1906 novel of the meatpacking industry, *The Jungle*, "there are a few other things that are great among us including our drink-bill."

Prohibition, as it came to be known, which lasted until 1932 when the 18th Amendment was repealed by the 21st Amendment, decreased alcohol consumption and alcohol-related diseases such as cirrhosis of the liver, according to statistics.

At the same time, it had a huge and negative cultural impact on the United States by driving the alcohol trade and sales underground. It was a boon for organized crime, which flourished in the 1920s. Many a fortune was made of "bootlegging," and mobsters controlled establishments ("speakeasies") where alcohol could be illegally obtained. Alcohol was often of poor (or deadly) quality, and was frequently mixed with other substances, giving rise to the cocktail as a popular drink. The police apparatus, particularly the Federal Bureau of Investigation, honed its skills in surveillance and repression by its war on organized crime.



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