

This week in history: December 2-8

2 December 2019

25 years ago: Over 300 killed in fire in China

On December 8, 1994, a fire in a crowded theater in the northwest Chinese oil town of Karamay in Xinjiang province took the lives of 323 school children and their teachers. A further 100 people were injured. The blaze erupted as 800 teachers, children and parents were inside the theater for a celebration of a literacy campaign in the minority Uighur community.

Witnesses claimed that spotlights near the stage either fell or short-circuited, setting the curtains on fire and engulfing the entire auditorium within minutes. Survivors insisted that a security official ordered the teachers and students to remain seated and to “let the leaders walk out first,” until 20 Communist Party officials had safely exited the building. By the time they were outside, it was too late for the rest of the 1,000 attendees. Seven of the eight emergency exits had been locked and barred, leaving only one way out.

The fire was blamed on “sloppy safety measures” by the “money-hungry” owners of the property, according to Chinese fire officials. The electrical system, the cause of the fire, was poorly maintained.

According to press accounts, local Communist Party officials “fled the scene, leaving the children to perish.” Fourteen officials and theater staff were later jailed for up to seven years for fleeing the scene and failure to report the fire. A similar blaze killed 233 young people in a dance hall the previous month in the northeastern city of Fuxin.

Many details surrounding the tragedy were not known until 12 years later, when Chen Yaowen, a China Central Television reporter, posted a documentary on his blog that had been censored by the government. “I felt the need to do something to comfort these innocent souls ... comfort angry survivors and the injured who are better off dead,” he wrote. In 1995, 300 family members of victims traveled to Beijing to attend the National People’s Conference to demand a hearing. They were led by security guards to buses that took them back to Xinjiang.

50 years ago: Black Panther leader Fred Hampton murdered by Chicago police

Fred Hampton, chairman of the Chicago branch of the Black Panther Party and member of the Panther Central Committee, was shot and killed by Chicago police officers while he slept in his bed

on December 4, 1969, at the group’s headquarters. He was just 21 years old.

The Chicago Police Department carried out the premeditated political assassination under the guise of making arrests for illegal weapons, and using a floor plan provided to them by an informant named William O’Neil. The night before the raid, O’Neil, a petty criminal placed in the organization through the FBI’s notorious COINTELPRO program, drugged Hampton’s dinner with barbiturates that caused him to enter a deep sleep from which he would never awake.

Upon entering the Panther offices, the police shot and killed Mark Clark, who was on security duty and was seated with a shotgun that discharged into the ceiling when he fell, the only shot fired by the Panthers during the raid. Hampton’s pregnant girlfriend Deborah Johnson tried but failed to wake him. She was arrested and removed from the room. Police then fired two shots into Hampton’s head, killing him instantly. As the police dragged his body out, they continued firing on the other Panthers, seriously wounding several. All of those not wounded were arrested.

In his teens, Hampton was involved in the youth section of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). He helped organize hundreds of young African-Americans in Chicago’s western suburbs into the NAACP. There Hampton worked to help develop community assistance and education programs. Seeing the political limits of organizations like the NAACP, that insisted conditions can be improved by working within capitalism, Hampton moved to revolutionary politics and joined the Black Panthers in 1967, demonstrating skill as an organizer and quickly assuming a leadership position in the party.

One of Hampton’s main initiatives as a leading member of the Panthers was to form a “Rainbow Coalition” to unite various radical and left-wing groups around a common multi-racial struggle against oppression. The Chicago Panthers also ran a free breakfast program for children that helped raise the stature of the party among the urban poor.

Hampton’s popularity made him a target of the FBI, which began investigating the young leader in 1967. As was common in the FBI’s COINTELPRO infiltrations into left-wing organizations, O’Neil, upon entering the Panther in 1968, adopted a provocative attitude and encouraged members to engage in reckless attacks on police. O’Neil’s rhetoric made him appear radical to many of the Panther members, who lacked political experience, and he was elevated to leadership positions, even acting as Hampton’s bodyguard.

Chicago and the FBI followed up their bloody crime with a cover-up, claiming that police had been fired upon first by the

Panthers. No police officers or government officials have ever been charged with the deaths of Hampton or Mark Clark.

75 years ago: British troops open fire on Greek protesters

On December 3, 1944, British soldiers and Greek police opened fire on a mass demonstration of workers and youth in Athens, killing at least 28 and wounding an estimated 100.

The brutal attack exposed the fraudulent character of the claims that the Allies were fighting to bring democracy to countries they liberated from the Nazis and underscored their fear that mass anti-fascist movements would develop in the direction of a struggle against capitalism.

The confrontation followed the ouster of the Nazis from Greece the previous month. The defeat of the occupation and its local collaborationist agents was the result of a protracted partisan war in the countryside, and the emergence of mass strikes and protests within the urban centers, including Athens. Partisans had established quasi-autonomous zones, with local governing structures and armed militias.

Following the defeat of the Nazis, the Greek ruling elite and the British scrambled to organize a conservative, pro-capitalist government of “national unity,” headed by Georgios Papandreou and British Lieutenant-General Sir Ronald MacKenzie Scobie, who commanded Allied military forces in the country.

The Communist Party, which played a leading role in the anti-fascist militias, joined the government under instruction from the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union, which had struck an agreement with the Allied powers for the carve-up of Europe after the war, based upon the maintenance of capitalist rule in Western Europe.

One of the first orders of business for the new government was to disarm the militias, which were intent on a reckoning with Greek collaborationist forces. On December 1, the government called for the handing in of all weapons by December 10 and for the disbandment of the Greek People’s Liberation Army. The following day, ministers from the National Liberation Front, including representatives of the Greek Communist Party, fearful of being further discredited, resigned from the government.

On December 3, a mass protest was called against the measure in Athens. Some 200,000 people took part. British tanks and police units had been placed to try and impede the rally. When the demonstrators reached the city’s police headquarters, they were met with a barrage of artillery fire. Eyewitnesses claimed to have seen the chief of police personally give the order to fire on the peaceful protest.

The attack, which provoked anger from workers around the world, triggered full-scale clashes between the partisan forces and the Greek and British authorities. Bloody clashes would continue throughout December. They were a precursor to the civil war that erupted in Greece following the end of World War II.

100 years ago: Senators demand US prepare to invade Mexico

On December 3, 1919, two members of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Republican Albert Fall of New Mexico and Democrat Gilbert Hitchcock of Nebraska, announced they would visit President Woodrow Wilson to ascertain his attitude on the breaking of diplomatic relations with Mexico, the first step toward a declaration of war.

At issue was the imprisonment of the US consular official in the Mexican city of Puebla, William O. Jenkins. A wealthy industrialist, Jenkins had been kidnapped in mid-October but was being held by the government of Venustiano Carranza on suspicion of having faked the kidnapping. The US alleged that these charges were false.

The US had issued official demands for Jenkins’ release in early December and the Carranza government had refused to comply or to respond. A movement had been building in Congress and in the media for tougher action on Mexico, and Republicans in the Senate, along with some Democrats, had begun preparations to break off relations with Mexico.

The American bourgeoisie sought every chance to provoke Mexico as it was passing through its revolution (1910-20). Mexico had further angered the American ruling class by refusing to support its imperial aims in Europe in 1917. American troops had invaded the country in 1917, 1918, and as recently as June 1919.

On the day that the senators visited Wilson, who had had a stroke and whose competence was questioned, the Carranza government released Jenkins. On December 6, the *New York Times* noted, “The liberation of Jenkins, while to that extent relieving the situation, leaves the relations between the two countries still at the point where it may be considered necessary at any time to withdraw the de facto recognition that has been accorded to the Carranza government. It can be stated on authority that the Jenkins case was merely an incident in a long ‘train of wrongs’ to which American citizens have been subjected at the hands of Mexicans as a result of the failure of the Carranza authorities to control the situation in that country.”



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