

# This week in history: August 31-September 6

31 August 2020

## 25 years ago: French test nuclear bomb in Pacific, setting off protests in Tahiti

On September 5, 1995, the French government launched the first in a series of nuclear tests at Moruroa Atoll in the Pacific. Rioting and protests erupted in the Tahitian capital of Papeete in response, where one-third of the population was unemployed.

The explosion underscored the determination of the Gaullist government of Jacques Chirac to proceed with the nuclear tests announced in June, in spite of large demonstrations on June 29 and July 14—including internationally—in opposition.

The day after the explosion, a protest strike and blockade of the airport, called by leaders of the Asia I Mua trade union, was joined by 2,000 demonstrators, mainly youth from nearby shantytowns. Fierce clashes with heavily-armed police led to the stoning of aircraft and the burning of terminal buildings and vehicles. By the end of the next day, 14 buildings and 100 vehicles had been severely damaged following looting in downtown Papeete. The French High Commissioner's official residence was attacked, as was the building of the token Territorial Assembly.

The hatred shown toward colonial authorities, wealthy shopkeepers and the police was rooted in the social conditions in Tahiti. The city and the airport were symbols of the opulent lifestyle provided by elite tourism for a small section of the population, both French and Polynesian, as well as Paris's \$1 billion annual military budget in French Polynesia. In the slums surrounding the city, thousands lived in wooden shacks with mud floors, and were denied access to jobs, decent housing, schools and other basic facilities. Of a population of 100,000 in the Papeete urban zone, about 30,000 were unemployed.

The rioting was met with fierce police repression. More than 400 riot police and Foreign Legion troops were flown in from New Caledonia and France. They brought to 800 the number of black-shirted troops armed with tear gas, stun grenades, and water cannons. Twenty protesters were arrested and 13 were sentenced to prison terms within 24 hours of being detained.

## 50 years ago: Salvador Allende wins plurality in Chile's presidential election

Socialist Party leader Salvador Allende won a narrow plurality in Chile's national elections held on September 4, 1970, defeating right-wing candidate Jorge Alessandri, who had served as president from 1958 to 1964, and Radomiro Tomic of the conservative Christian Democratic Party.

After the votes had been totaled, Allende, who stood in the election for the left-wing Popular Unity coalition, had 36.6 percent of the vote. Alessandri took 35 percent, followed by Tomic with 28 percent. With no candidate having over 50 percent of the vote, the election was decided by the Chilean National Congress, which would select between the two candidates with the most votes, Allende and Alessandri.

The congressional vote was secured to Allende only after Popular Unity, which included both the Socialist Party and the Communist Party, made major concessions to the Christian Democrats. Allende agreed to sign a "Statute of Constitutional Guarantees," promising he would not implement any measures that would undermine the Chilean constitution. This oath committed Allende to not challenging capitalist property relations, thereby betraying and demoralizing the workers and peasants who had voted for him.

Despite Allende's commitment to defend Chilean property and to undermine the revolutionary struggle brewing in the working class, the right wing, backed by the United States through the CIA, began their preparations to overthrow his administration. In fact, the CIA had paid for between \$800,000 and \$1 million in anti-Allende propaganda even before the election, a Senate committee later revealed.

Just days before Allende's swearing-in as president, Army Commander-in-Chief General René Schneider, who had opposed a military coup to oust the new government, was assassinated by right-wing elements in the military who were supported by the CIA. After this initial attempt at a coup failed, the political right and the CIA began preparations for the 1973 coup that would overthrow the government, kill Allende, and replace him with the notoriously brutal dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet.

Allende's victory in the election can be attributed to his calls for the nationalization of all foreign enterprises and widespread hostility to imperialist intervention in Chile among the working class. But his political role was to hold back the development of a socialist revolution in Chile. Allende called for the establishment of "social peace" which meant, in the end, the subordination of the interests of the working class to the

capitalists and landowners.

Essential to Allende's election and the halt of working-class opposition was the support of the Stalinist Chilean Communist Party. Not only did the Stalinists back Allende as the "Chilean road to socialism" but they also promoted illusions in the military, which was dominated by the right wing and fascists such as Pinochet, as "the people in uniform."

## **75 years ago: Vietnam's independence declared after "August Revolution"**

On September 2, 1945, the Vi?t Minh declared Vietnam's independence from French and Japanese occupiers, amid a wave of anti-colonial struggles at the conclusion of the Second World War.

The Vi?t Minh, or League for the Independence of Vietnam, was under the political leadership of Ho Chi Minh and the Indochinese Communist Party. In line with the class-collaborationism of the Stalinists, it included nationalist organizations of the nascent Vietnamese capitalist class.

The declaration followed the "August Revolution," during which the Vi?t Minh had led mass struggles that secured control of a number of cities and rural areas throughout the country, including Hanoi. The independence fighters took advantage of Japan's crushing defeat at the hands of the Allied powers the previous month.

Vietnam had been a colony of France since the late 19th century. After France's capitulation to Nazi Germany in 1940, Japanese troops arrived in its strategically-critical colonial protectorate. For four years, the two imperialist powers would maintain an uneasy truce as they both occupied Vietnam. In March, 1945, Vietnamese Emperor B?o ?? annulled the agreement establishing French control, after he had reached an agreement with the Japanese.

Over the ensuing months of a period dubbed "fake independence," under the dominance of Tokyo, the Vi?t Minh and other nationalist groupings, anticipating Japan's defeat, began preparations for a decisive struggle. When Japan surrendered in August, they launched an insurrection, seizing control of Hanoi on August 19 and most of north Vietnam over the following days.

Ho Chi Minh's perspective, in line with his Stalinist politics, was to maneuver between the rival imperialist powers. He had established friendly connections with the US Office of Strategic Services, the predecessor of the CIA, prior to the independence declaration, on the basis of a fight against the Japanese. American imperialism was also anxious to prevent its French rival from regaining control of its colonial possessions at the conclusion of the war.

The Vietnamese Stalinists would go on to collaborate with

the Allied powers, including the British and French imperialists. When these policies provoked substantial opposition from workers and peasants, they would launch a bloody crackdown, including a murderous campaign against the Vietnamese Trotskyist movement, which had won a substantial following for its program opposing all of the imperialist powers and fighting for the independent mobilization of the working class.

## **100 years ago: French imperialism creates state of Lebanon**

On September 1, 1920, from the balcony of his official residence in Beirut, the French General Henri Gouraud proclaimed the state of Greater Lebanon under the terms of a League of Nations mandate that gave French imperialism authority over Syria and Lebanon.

The new colonial state was declared in the aftermath of the dissolution of the Arab Kingdom of Syria, the first independent Arab state in modern times, formed by Arab nationalists on March 8, 1920, with Faisal bin Hussein as its constitutional monarch. The territory of the Kingdom included the contemporary states of Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, and parts of Iraq.

The French, with British assistance, had suppressed the nationalist state by July, and the French army entered Damascus and reasserted imperialist authority.

Greater Lebanon was rigidly divided along communalist lines. The new government apportioned (as it does now) the main political offices to Maronite Christians, Sunni Muslims, Shia Muslims, Greek Orthodox Christians, and Druze. The communal distinctions were underscored by the fact that Maronite Christian volunteers had fought alongside the French against the Arab nationalists. Nevertheless, as one historian notes, "a large part of the population both rejected French control and saw themselves as a part of either Syria or of a wider Arab nation."

The boundaries of Greater Lebanon corresponded roughly to the area that had been promised for direct French rule by the secret Sykes-Picot agreement between the British and the French during World War I to divide up the Middle Eastern provinces of the Ottoman Empire.



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