

This week in history: January 18-24

17 January 2021

25 years ago: Arafat wins Palestinian vote

On January 20, 1996, PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat and his al-Fatah party won the election held among residents of the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem. The electoral triumph confirmed Arafat's role as the chief enforcer of Israeli dictates in the territories occupied by Israel since the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. Arafat won 88 percent of the vote for president of the Palestinian Council while his nominees took more than half the seats on the legislative body.

Turnout was heavy except in areas, mainly East Jerusalem and Hebron, where Israeli security measures kept Arab voters away from the polls. Most Arab residents of East Jerusalem, which the state of Israel had formally annexed, were required to travel to polling stations in the West Bank if they wished to vote. In Hebron, Israeli troops and heavily armed Zionist settlers blocked access to the polls through road blockades. The fundamentalist Hamas group, which opposed the Israeli-PLO accord under which the Palestinian Authority was established, called for a boycott but made no attempt to disrupt the vote.

The Israeli government did its best to boost Arafat's fortunes at the polls, releasing 800 Palestinian prisoners on the eve of the vote and staging a well-publicized eviction of 100 Zionist settlers who had illegally occupied an apartment complex near Hebron. The imperialist powers gave their seal of approval, with a team of nearly 1,000 international observers headed by former US President Jimmy Carter and former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

Despite this support and Arafat's extensive use of executive power to dictate candidate lists for Fatah, limit campaigning and media access by opponents, and set the election rules, there was opposition to the Israeli-PLO accord expressed in the vote. At least a dozen candidates struck from the Fatah list by Arafat were elected anyway, as independents. The highest vote total among any of the candidates for the legislative council went to Haidar Abdel Shafi of Gaza, former head of the PLO negotiating team who opposed the Washington accord.

The elected legislative council had no powers over foreign

policy, external security or the ongoing negotiations with Israel, which remained under control of Arafat and the Palestinian National Council, the chief legislative body of the PLO. The PLO leader hailed the result of the vote as another step towards a Palestinian state.

50 years ago: OPEC countries threaten oil embargo

During the week of January 18, 1971, negotiations were held between representatives of the major Western oil companies and the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) over export taxes on crude oil.

Present in the negotiations on the side of the oil companies were both company executives and government officials from the United States, Britain, France, the Netherlands, West Germany, Japan, Italy, and Sweden. Member nations of OPEC present included Iran, Iraq, Libya, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. OPEC, formed in 1960, controlled more than half of the global oil supply. While at the time the United States only consumed about 3 percent of its oil from the Middle East, the European countries and Japan were thoroughly dependent on supplies from OPEC. American oil companies nonetheless were, as a group, the dominant player in the global industry.

The main issue under discussion was the price that OPEC would set on oil taxes per barrel exported by the oil foreign oil companies. In recent years demand for oil had risen dramatically, attributable to increased global industrialization as well as the ongoing stalemate war between Israel and Egypt that prevented the shipment of oil through the Suez Canal.

Throughout the week negotiations continually broke down. The OPEC countries were demanding a significant price increase. In an attempt to move the situation forward, US President Richard Nixon sent Under Secretary of State John N. Irwin to visit Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait and convince them to help put forward a settlement.

OPEC threatened an embargo, with some of the more militant member states even warning of the nationalization

of their oil wells, cutting the foreign companies out of direct production completely. It was only after these threats that the oil firms largely acceded to OPEC demands. The resulting agreement stipulated a 55 per cent tax on the net income of the oil companies and an immediate increase of 35 cents per barrel of oil exported from OPEC member states.

75 years ago: More than 750,000 US steelworkers strike

On January 21, 1946, more than 750,000 steelworkers walked off the job over wages, in one of the largest strikes to that point in American history. The stoppage was the first nationwide steel strike since the strike of 1919, amid the mass labor unrest following the end of World War I and the Russian Revolution.

The 1946 steel strike was part of a wave of industrial unrest that involved up to 25 percent of unionized workers in the space of 12 months. In the steel industry, and other sections of manufacturing, the major corporations reacted to the end of war production contracts by slashing overtime. This effectively amounted to a wage cut, after the trade unions had enforced an effective (inflation-adjusted) pay freeze through most of World War II.

Fearing the emergence of a broader movement, President Harry Truman personally oversaw negotiations at the White House over the steel dispute. At a meeting in early January, Ben Fairless, president of United States Steel, declared that the industry barons would accept no more than a 15 cent an hour wage rise. Philip Murray, president of the United Steelworkers of America union, demanded 19.5 cents. Truman sought to broker a compromise at 18.5.

The strike was called when the owners rejected compromise. The Socialist Workers Party, then the American Trotskyist organization, published an article January 21 that argued: “Today at one minute past midnight the battle was joined in the most titanic and crucial labor struggle in American history. Eight hundred thousand CIO steel workers—the flesh and bones and blood of America’s basic industry—threw down the gauntlet before the steel corporations, the most voracious and ruthless monopoly in the world.”

The SWP noted that with the steel walkout, “Today no less than 1,700,000 workers are on strike at one time.” The concurrent stoppages, which involved some 220,000 GM autoworkers, 200,000 electrical and radio workers, 275,000 meatpacking workers, as well as other sections, were directed against the attempts of the ruling elite to return

wages and conditions to those that had existed in the 1930s.

The union leaders, including in the steel industry, sought to keep the disputes separate from one another and to strike different wage agreements with each section of industry. This was aimed at preventing the development of a general strike and a mass political movement of the working class directed against the Truman administration and capitalism.

100 years: Communist Party of Italy founded

On January 21, 1921, the Communist Party of Italy (PCI) was founded in Livorno, Tuscany, when left-wing delegates walked out of a Socialist Party congress.

The Italian Socialist Party had affiliated with the Communist International in 1919 but retained a substantial national-reformist faction. During the events of September 1920, when Italian workers seized the factories in the north of the country and the development of a revolutionary situation was imminent, leaders of the Socialist Party (which was represented in parliament), especially Filippo Turati, negotiated a criminal deal with the government of Giovanni Giolitti to disarm the workers and return the factories to the capitalists.

It was necessary for genuine revolutionaries to separate themselves from these elements, as the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI) noted in a letter to the members of the party in November 1920: “We appeal to all members of the Italian Socialist Party and trade unions ... our ranks must be cleansed of the ulcer of reformism. This must be done as quickly as possible, and at whatever cost. With the leaders, if they want to; without the leaders if they hesitate and hold back; against the leaders if they interfere with our carrying out this work.”

The ECCI urged the revolutionaries in the party to expel the opportunists, and at the 17th Congress of the Socialist Party in Livorno, a motion was put forward to do so. The opportunists, however, were able to assemble a majority and voted down the resolution. The Communists in the party, including Antonio Gramsci and his group organized around the newspaper *L'Ordine Nuovo* (The New Order), then assembled in their own congress to form the Communist Party.



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