

This week in history: February 22-28

21 February 2021

25 years ago: Anti-Castro group aircraft shot down over Cuba

On February 24, 1996, Cuban fighter jets shot down two planes flown by the Miami-based anti-Castro exile group Brothers to the Rescue. It was the end result of a provocation calculated to induce US economic, political and military retaliation against Cuba.

The Clinton administration, the Republican Party and the big-business media had all presented the aerial confrontation over the Straits of Florida as an illegal and unprovoked act of “cold-blooded murder” and aggression. They cited international statutes prohibiting the use of military force against civil aircraft and touted the supposedly humanitarian mission of Brothers to the Rescue. The CIA insisted that Jose Basulto—pilot of the aircraft which escaped—and the other pilots were not paid US intelligence agents.

In fact, the “civil aircraft” flown by the organization were used to conduct repeated hostile overflights of Cuban territory, on occasion buzzing Havana and dropping leaflets calling on Cubans to rise up against the Castro government. The “humanitarian” intentions of the Brothers to the Rescue group were belied by the records of its leaders. Basulto participated in the abortive CIA-organized Bay of Pigs invasion, and later participated in other armed attacks on Cuba, including the shelling of a Havana hotel from a boat. Later he took part in CIA-directed support for the Contra terrorist movement which sought to overthrow Nicaragua’s Sandinista government.

The group’s activities were aimed at provoking an incident which could be used as a pretext for US retaliation against Cuba. As such, the shoot-down incident was a near-success. Though the Clinton administration did not respond with a direction military attack, it reversed its previous opposition to the Helms-Burton bill, imposing new and even more severe sanctions against foreign corporations doing business in Cuba, and prohibited the lifting of the US economic embargo against the island nation short of the overthrow of the Castro government. It was signed by Clinton in March.

In endorsing the legislation, the Clinton administration was responding to domestic political considerations. It was determined to secure the support of the Cuban exile lobby in Florida, a crucial state in the 1996 elections. The legislation, pushed through as part of a presidential campaign ploy, had far-reaching international implications. It amounted to the imposition of US law on foreign governments, companies, and citizens.

The Clinton administration was the ninth American administration that sought to topple the Castro government since the 1959 Cuban Revolution, following those of Eisenhower,

Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan, and George H. W. Bush.

50 years ago: New York City proposes 7,000 teacher layoffs

On February 26, 1971, the President of the New York City Board of Education, Murry Bergtraum, announced a series of major cuts to the city school budget, including the layoff of 7,000 teachers. The plan included the rollback of teaching services, a freeze on the hiring of substitute teachers, reduction of office personnel, elimination of all after-school activities, indefinite postponement of school repairs and maintenance, and cutbacks in the use of transportation passes by New York’s students.

New York Mayor John Lindsay’s office issued a statement endorsing the \$40 million in education cuts. “The Mayor shares the Board of Education’s pain in making their announcement today, as well as the pain of our entire school community,” the memo said. “As extremely difficult as it is, the Mayor believes the Board has taken the only responsible course.”

The attack on teachers and public education in the nation’s largest city was bound up with the shift toward austerity by the ruling class, spearheaded by the Nixon administration, driven by the declining profit rates and the erosion of the position of American capitalism on a global scale. To meet this onslaught, united working class action was needed, and a political struggle against the two major parties, which controlled New York City, New York state, and the federal government. This the trade union bureaucracy opposed with all its might. Its refusal to unite workers in even a single industry was underscored by the fact that, while Lindsay attacked workers in New York City, across the state line in neighboring New Jersey, teachers in Newark were in the midst of a bitter strike against austerity.

Teachers in Newark remained on strike for their fourth week despite vicious union busting. The strike was declared illegal and Newark Teachers Union president Carol Graves, along with two other union officials, were arrested and held for a bail of \$1,000 each. Teachers braved harassment on the picket lines from right-wing thugs. From the Democrats, racist appeals were used in a bid to divide the striking teachers, with members of the Board of Education effectively accusing white teachers of racism. Teachers, white and black, voted down a proposed “black contract” in which all white teachers would be removed from the Newark school system.

75 years ago: Ho Chi Minh appeals to Truman administration

On February 28, 1946, Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh sent a telegram to American President Harry Truman, asking the US to “urgently intervene” against French colonial forces in Vietnam. The unsuccessful overture was one of a series of maneuvers directed towards the major powers by the Vietnamese Stalinists as they sought to consolidate a nationalist government.

The defeat of Japan in World War II touched off political upheaval in Vietnam. Japan had displaced Vichy France as the colonial power ruling over Indochina in March 1945. As Tokyo surrendered to the Allied imperialist powers, Japanese forces in Indochina were hit by mass revolutionary uprisings in August 1945.

In line with its Stalinist program, the Vietminh, led by Ho, sought to prevent this movement from developing into a struggle for the overthrow of capitalism. It sought alliances with sections of the Indochinese capitalist class and acceded to the return of French and British troops in September, while viciously persecuting the Trotskyist movement.

Ho accepted the deal struck by Stalin with British and US imperialism at the Tehran Conference of 1943, under which Indochina would be partitioned after the war between the right-wing Chinese Kuomintang in the north and the British in the south. At the Potsdam Conference of Stalin and the Allied leaders in 1945, this was confirmed, with the recognition that British troops would serve as a ground force for the reestablishment of French colonial rule in the south.

Sections of the independence movement clashed with French forces in late 1945 and early 1946, as French authorities sought to stamp out opposition and consolidate the brutal colonial administration that had existed prior to the war. There were also indications that the French forces were seeking to extend their dominance beyond the south.

Ho’s telegram to Truman referenced fears that the French were preparing to secure control of Hanoi, in the country’s north, where his Vietminh forces were based. It begged Truman to compel the French to respect the charters adopted by the imperialist powers at the end of the war, nominally upholding the right to self-government for peoples who had been occupied.

Ho’s appeal was not answered by Truman. Two weeks later, on March 6, Ho signed an accord with the French. It recognized his Vietminh government as a “free state” in an Indochinese federation controlled by the French Union. The French agreed to a limit of no more than 15,000 troops north of the country’s 16th parallel and a referendum on unifying the country but had no intention of honoring either pledge.

Ho would seek to justify his accommodation with the French, and his overtures to the US, by invoking the danger posed by the Chinese Kuomintang, which also had a large troop presence in the north.

Joyce novel

On February 24, 1921, Margaret Anderson, the publisher of the *Little Review*, said that her journal would continue to publish excerpts from Irish author James Joyce’s novel *Ulysses* despite a finding by the New York Court of Special Sessions that the material was obscene.

The passage in question, a section in the chapter of the book usually known as the “Nausicaa episode,” depicts the sexual thoughts of the novel’s main character, Leopold Bloom, as he watches three girls by the shore.

Anderson told the press: “Anything may be written about if it is expressed by an artist. A nude statue cannot be obscene and art at the same time.”

Anderson and *Little Review* editor Jane Heap had been brought to court by the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice and the case was tried by three judges under the notorious Comstock Laws, a series of federal acts that prohibited material that was deemed obscene to be circulated by the United States Postal Service.

The trial began on February 14. One of the judges did not want the offending passage to be read in front of Anderson because she was a woman. When someone pointed out that she had probably read the passage because she had published it, the judge said, “she didn’t know the significance of what she was publishing.” The trial was postponed for a week since the judges had difficulty understanding the “incomprehensible cubist work of art,” as the *New York Tribune* put it.

When the trial resumed, the judges ruled that the material was obscene. Anderson and Heap were then fingerprinted and fined \$50 each. Despite her best intentions, Anderson was forced to stop publication of *Ulysses*. She and Heap removed the motto “Making No Compromise with the Public Taste” from the journal’s masthead.

Sylvia Beach’s Shakespeare and Co. published the entire *Ulysses* the next year in Paris. Copies caught entering the United States were burned by the Post Office. The book was published in 1929 by an American publisher but copies were seized and destroyed by the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice in a raid on the publisher’s offices. The novel was the subject of a second trial in the US in 1933, when a judge ruled that it was not obscene. *Ulysses* was banned in Britain until 1936 and not available in Ireland until the 1960s.



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100 years ago: Publisher repudiates obscenity ruling on James