

This week in history: March 8-15

7 March 2021

25 years ago: Tensions escalate between US and China after missile tests near Taiwan

On March 8, 1996, China began missile testing and military exercises for war games off Taiwanese coastal areas in the run-up to presidential elections on the island nation, which Beijing regarded as a renegade province. The Clinton administration responded by sailing two US carrier battle groups, backed by submarines, into the waters surrounding Taiwan.

Washington's military intervention was the latest in a series of provocations aimed at furthering the interests of US imperialism in relation to China. Over the previous two years, the US carried out sanctions and threats against China over issues ranging from trade policy to nuclear proliferation and human rights.

Within the top circles of the government and big business, there was intense debate over China policy. After the coming to power of Deng Xiaoping in 1979 and the subsequent opening of China to foreign capitalist investment, Washington tended to look upon the country as a vast untapped market and inexhaustible supply of cheap labor. Increasingly, however, it saw Beijing as a potentially powerful economic and military rival in Asia. China at this point had run up a \$35 billion annual trade surplus with the US.

The confrontation broke out as the Pentagon was facing a mounting crisis over its military bases in the Pacific. Having lost its bases in the Philippines, the US was under increasing pressure to withdraw also from Okinawa, which was Japanese territory. The conflict with China allowed the US to posture as a defender of smaller nations throughout Asia and strike new military arrangements in the region. At the same time, 1996 was also an election year in the US, and Republican candidates were critical of the Clinton administration for being "soft" on China, so the Democrats were using nuclear-armed fleets to demonstrate strength.

At the same time, there was nothing progressive about the Beijing bureaucracy's belligerent exercises in the Taiwan Strait. The Chinese bureaucracy claimed that was defending the national integrity of China against the rise of a Taiwanese separatist movement seeking official independence for Taiwan. Both major candidates in the 1996 Taiwanese elections, Lee Teng-hui of the Kuomintang and Peng Ming-min of the Democratic Progressive Party, were moving toward advocating independence. Lee's position was "deliberately vague," while Peng demanded an end to direct trade with the mainland.

The emergence of sentiment in favor of independence was a departure for Taiwan and alarmed Beijing. After the flight of Chiang Kai-Shek's defeated Kuomintang nationalists in the Chinese Civil War, the government of Taiwan maintained the fiction that it was the government-in-exile of mainland China. Beijing rejected this. But the common official position in both Beijing and Taipei was that there existed one indivisible China, including Taiwan.

50 years ago: Military coup in Turkey

On March 12, 1971, the Turkish military forced the resignation of the sitting prime minister, Süleyman Demirel. While the coup removed Demirel, who was the leader of the bourgeois Justice Party, its primary purpose was to initiate a crackdown on the movements of workers and youth that had been growing steadily through the 1960s.

The coup was directly organized and carried out by the leaders of the military brass, including Chief of the General Staff Memduh Taşmaç, General Faruk Gluier of the army, General Muhsin Batur of the air force, and Admiral Celal Eyicioğlu of the navy. The generals presented Demirel with a memorandum that was in essence an ultimatum to step down or be removed.

The military demanded "a strong and credible government, which will neutralize the current anarchical situation." The generals concluded that "anarchy, fratricidal strife, and social and economic unrest" must be put down. The coup in Turkey, which had been an important strategic ally in the NATO alliance since 1952, enjoyed the strong backing of Washington and the CIA, which established networks of aid to the coup plotters as well as the fascist "Grey Wolves" movement which carried out violent attacks on left-wing workers and youth.

Within three hours of receiving the memorandum from the military leaders, Demirel resigned as prime minister. He was allowed to maintain his seat as a member of parliament where he did little to oppose the military rule. Unwilling to openly take power in the form of a junta, the military leaders replaced Demirel with Nihat Erim as a civilian frontman for the military—and ultimately Washington.

The Nihat Erim military government began a series of repression actions against the trade unions and left-wing organizations. Opposition to the military coup was strong among the militant sections of workers. Following the issuing of the military memorandum, the Workers' Party (TİP) called for strikes against the coup. In July, the TİP was declared illegal and its leaders arrested until 1974. Union meetings and left-wing newspapers and youth organizations were banned. Meanwhile, the Gray Wolves and other far-right, anti-communist, and Islamist organizations were allowed to operate with semi-official sanction.

With the socialists and other left-wing leaders arrested, the trade unions were pacified and stacked with anti-communist representatives. In the universities, autonomy was ended and radical students and professors were driven out. Without a revolutionary leadership many left-wing elements increasingly turned to the politics of petty bourgeois nationalism and attempted to replace the construction of a socialist movement in the working class with political kidnappings and assassinations.

75 years ago: UAW ends 113-day General Motors strike

On March 13, 1946, officials of the United Auto Workers (UAW) union agreed to accept a contract offer from General Motors (GM), ending a strike that had lasted some 113 days and involved as many as 320,000 workers at 96 different plants.

The stoppage, which was the longest to that point in the history of both GM and the UAW, was part of a wave of working class struggles in the aftermath of World War II. Throughout America's participation in the war, the unions, including the UAW and its leader Walter Reuther, had enforced a no-strike pledge. This was in line with their support for the Democratic Party administration and the war aims of US imperialism.

The consequence was minimal wage rises throughout the war that did not keep pace with increases in the cost of living. When this persisted in the wake of the Allied victory, it produced a series of militant struggles aimed at substantial improvements to pay and conditions. The initial demands of the GM strike, which began on November 21, 1945, included a 30 percent increase in hourly wages, paid vacations, and improved overtime provisions—as well as a freeze on auto prices, to prevent the company from imposing the cost of any concessions on consumers.

GM was initially intransigent, declaring that it could not afford any of the demands, despite registering record profits during the war. It warned that any price controls would undermine the “very heart of management judgment and discretion,” and denounced as “socialistic” a call from Reuther that the company open its books in order to prove its inability to provide a pay rise. GM was correct, in a way, since the demand to “open the books” was first raised by Trotskyist autoworkers.

After months out, workers were forced to accept substantially less than their initial claims. The wage rise was just 18.5 cents an hour, amounting to a 17.5 percent increase, while a number of other demands, including for price controls, were also jettisoned.

Throughout the strike, Reuther, and all of the union leaders in the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), sought to prevent the dispute from developing into a broader movement of auto and other sections of the industrial working class.

The consequence of this “one-at-a-time” strategy was that the strikes would exhaust themselves and workers would be compelled to accept contracts far short of what they had gone out for. The aim of the UAW, and all of the unions, was to prevent the mass industrial struggle from transforming into a political confrontation against the Democratic Party administration of President Harry Truman and the capitalist system that it defended.

100 years ago: 10th Congress of Russian Communist Party opens

On March 8, 1921, the 10th Congress of the Russian Communist Party opened in Moscow with 694 voting and 296 non-voting delegates.

The Congress was one of the most significant since November 1917, when the revolution under the leadership of the Bolsheviks had established the Soviet state. The Civil War was drawing to a close with victories of the Red Army on four fronts. Soviet power had

established itself in Ukraine and the Caucasus and Japanese imperialism was preparing to evacuate Siberia. The parties of the Communist International had made significant developments since the founding of the International in 1919, and prospects for the extension of the socialist revolution into Europe remained bright.

At the same time, the young Soviet state face innumerable difficulties. The economy was in a state of collapse, and mass hunger was prevalent in both the cities and the countryside. Sections of the peasantry were in open rebellion and the country was being strangled by a blockade of the imperialist powers.

The 10th Congress, under the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky, took a number of decisions that would shape the Soviet state and economy for years to come.

The Congress launched the New Economic Policy, a temporary loosening of the restraints on capitalist property that aimed to encourage trade, and especially food production. Small businesses were allowed to operate, and a tax was substituted for grain requisitions in the countryside.

The party temporarily banned factions (except during pre-Congress discussion) under the impact of the peasant rebellions and imperialist encirclement. While the Congress was in session, the sailors in the naval fortress of Kronstadt outside of Petrograd rebelled, demanding a purge of Bolsheviks from the soviets and the legalization of anti-Soviet parties. The uprising was suppressed by the Red Army. Over 300 delegates volunteered to participate in the action, and several lost their lives.

Lenin summed up the situation in the following manner in his opening speech to the Congress:

In these last three years, we have learned to understand that placing our stake on the world revolution does not mean relying on a definite date, and that the accelerating pace of development may or may not lead to a revolution in the spring. Therefore, we must be able to bring our work in line with the class balance here and elsewhere, so as to be able to maintain the dictatorship of the proletariat for a long time, and, however gradually, to remedy all our numerous misfortunes and crises. This is the only correct and sober approach.



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