

This week in history: April 26-May 2

25 April 2021

25 years ago: Indian general election sweeps Congress Party from office

Indian general elections, held from April 27 to May 2, 1996, replaced the Congress Party as the largest party in parliament with the Hindu-chauvinist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The election resulted in a hung parliament with voters eventually returning to the polls in 1998. However, the right-wing alliance between two Hindu-chauvinist parties—the BJP and Shiv Sena—gained the highest number of seats in the Lok Sabha (the lower house of parliament) and the leaders of this grouping were asked to form the government.

On May 16, as outgoing Congress Party Prime Minister Narasimha Rao looked on, BJP leader Atal Behari Vajpayee was sworn in as new prime minister. The BJP held the largest number of parliamentary seats of any party, but the victory was short-lived. The United Front, a grouping of regional parties backed by the Congress Party, put forward H. D. Deve Gowda as prime minister after securing a majority. He was later replaced by I. K. Gujral.

The election was a historic defeat of the Congress Party and marked a significant turning point in class relations in India and internationally. The political authority of Congress, the party which had ruled India almost continuously since Britain granted it formal independence in 1947, crumbled like never before. Congress' share of the vote—under 30 percent—fell below even that recorded in the electoral debacle of 1977, when the Indian electorate had retaliated against former prime minister Indira Gandhi's imposition of emergency rule.

For more than 110 years, the Congress Party was the main instrument through which the masses were controlled and manipulated by the national capitalist class in India. Under Rao, the first Congress leader not to have been drawn from the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty, the party experienced many splits and defections, mainly by regionally based bourgeois leaders from particular religious and ethnic communities.

The party's decline was symptomatic of the break-up of post-World War II economic and political relations on a global scale. Over the previous five years, Rao opened up the Indian economy to foreign investment and privatized state-owned industry. As a result, different regions of India and rival sections of the ruling class were in increasingly bitter competition for funds and foreign investment.

Within that context, the right-wing BJP and fascistic Shiv Sena were able to whip up support for their Hindu chauvinist campaign against Muslims, with Congress itself resorting to communalist politics to divide its opponents. The party experienced a great loss of Muslim voters, previously one of its main constituents, despite the Hindu chauvinism of the BJP.

50 years ago: Nixon orders mass arrest of May Day anti-war protesters

Beginning on May 1, 1971, tens of thousands of anti-war protesters gathered in Washington D.C. to call for an end to the Vietnam War. The demonstrations would last for several days and included marches, sit-ins, and rallies outside government buildings. The protest was heavily suppressed by President Richard Nixon who mobilized nearly 20,000 police and federal troops to attack and arrest the demonstrators.

The demonstration was organized by a collaboration of anti-war groups including the People's Coalition for Peace and Justice, the War Resisters League, and the Youth International Party. Individual leaders of the protest included Rennie Davis, David Dellinger, John Froines and Abbie Hoffman, all members of the Chicago Seven who had been charged with inciting a riot at the 1968 Democratic National Convention and whose convictions were currently in the process of being appealed.

The protest organizers were not oriented to the working class, which was then mounting a major strike wave against Nixon. They instead plotted a theatrical approach designed to pressure a section of the ruling class that was increasingly skeptical of the murderous American war against Vietnam, which was clearly failing. Thus, the organizers planned to block major roadways and bridges in Washington under the slogan "If the government won't stop the war, we'll stop the government."

This played directly into Nixon's hands, who responded by transforming the US capital into a police state in a trial run for the imposition of a full-scale dictatorship. Nixon deployed thousands of soldiers and police, including the Marines and Army Airborne Division, to guard virtually every public park, monument, and intersection in the city. The police swept through the city deploying an immense amount of teargas and

arresting anyone who was suspected of being a protester.

In five days of protest over 12,500 people were arrested, making Nixon's crackdown the largest mass arrest in US history. So many were arrested that the city's jails exceeded capacity and makeshift detention facilities were built in D.C.'s sports arenas. After being herded into cramped facilities protesters pressed up against the fencing attempting to push it over. Police fired tear gas and other chemical agents that caused difficulty breathing and induced vomiting. No food, water, or other basic needs were provided to those arrested.

Nixon defended the crackdown on the demonstration saying that he would "not be intimidated" and that "in this country policy is not made by protest." His Justice Department charged the leaders of the protest with conspiracy. Eventually the charges were dismissed in federal court owing to violations of basic constitutional rights and the blatantly illegal methods of the police.

75 years ago: First May Day celebrations since end of World War II

On May 1, 1946, millions rallied on the day of international working class solidarity for the first time since the catastrophes of the Second World War, which had ended with the Allied victory the previous year.

Massive protests were held in the major European capitals, including those that had been occupied by the Nazis. Huge mobilizations were held in Paris, where a *New York Times* correspondent reported that everything "except the subways and basic utilities was shut down," as well as in Berlin and Vienna.

In Japan, which was then under American occupation, and had been hit by the first use of atomic weapons less than a year before, an estimated two million people marched. This included more than 500,000 in the national capital Tokyo. Demonstrators reportedly carried placards demanding a minimum wage, the regulation of food prices and condemning "inflation caused by the capitalists."

May Day coincided with a wave of working class struggles around the world, as workers sought to resist a return to depression-era conditions and to express their hostility to war. On May 1, for instance, almost 800 Aboriginal pastoral workers in the Pilbara region of Western Australia launched a strike that would span three years. Hundreds of thousands of workers in the United States were also on strike in the first half of 1946, to demand improved conditions and pay.

The Fourth International, the leadership of the world Trotskyist movement, noted the powerful response evoked by May Day. It was, however, "the grimmest 'peacetime' May Day in Europe's history." The statement continued:

"There is scarcely a city that is not indelibly scarred by the second imperialist war. Countless workers march amid debris and ruins that must still be cleared away. In Germany, in Austria, in Hungary, in Poland, in the Balkans and other occupied areas, the workers celebrate their holiday of action and solidarity under the bayonets of the 'democratic' imperialists on the one hand, and the Kremlin's military detachments, on the other. Within the Soviet Union the Stalinist betrayers of Bolshevism once more stage their hollow and cynical ceremonial parades, suspended during the war years."

100 years ago: Jaffa riots begin in Palestine

On May 1, 1921, the Socialist Workers Party, a forerunner of the Palestine Communist Party, planned a May Day march from Jaffa to Tel Aviv in British-controlled Palestine. The party, which was predominately Jewish, distributed leaflets in Arabic, Hebrew and Yiddish calling for the replacement of the British colonial maditate with a Soviet Palestine.

On the route, the marchers clashed with a demonstration of the semi-official Zionist labor organization Ahdut HaAvoda ("Labor Unity") headed by David Ben-Gurion. While the Socialist Workers Party supported the Arab national struggle against British imperialism, the Ahdut HaVoda advocated the formation of a separate Jewish economy.

Police attempted to separate the two demonstrations, but a melee ensued, and rumors began to circulate the Jews were attacking Arabs. The clash turned into a general riot with attacks by Arabs against the Jewish population by 1:00 p.m. By 3:00 p.m. British troops arrived.

Over the next few days, the British declared martial law and the Special High Commissioner of Egypt, Edmund Allenby, sent destroyers to the coast of Palestine. The dead included 47 Jews and 48 Arabs. Most of the Jews were killed by Arab rioters and most of the Arabs were killed by British troops.



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