

This week in history: May 24-30

23 May 2021

25 years ago: Peres ousted in Israeli general election

On May 29, 1996, the Likud Party, led by Benjamin Netanyahu, won a narrow victory in the Israeli general election, ousting Labor's Shimon Peres. The election dealt a blow to illusions that the Jewish and Arab masses could achieve peace and social progress within the framework established by imperialism in the Middle East.

The election took place under conditions of great tension, with polls indicating large swings in the popular mood in response to a series of traumatic events the previous months. Following the assassination of Peres's predecessor, Yitzhak Rabin, the previous November, and the discrediting of the Zionist extreme right wing, Labor called early elections, its overwhelming victory seemingly assured.

With the express purpose of sabotaging Peres's chances, the Palestinian Islamic group Hamas staged a campaign of terrorist suicide bombings in February which killed 59 Israelis. Hamas believed that stepped-up repression in the occupied territories by a Likud government would strengthen its support among the Palestinian masses at the expense of Yasser Arafat and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). In April, the Peres regime launched a 17-day military assault on southern Lebanon, which killed hundreds of civilians.

For the first time, Israelis cast separate ballots for parliament and prime minister. The introduction of indirect voting was intended to promote more stable governments. The change resulted, however, in deeper political fragmentation. Many voters either chose Peres or Netanyahu for prime minister while voting for parliamentary candidates from the minority parties.

In the vote for the 120-seat parliament, Labor and the Likud coalition each lost nine seats, from 44 to 35 and 40 to 31 respectively. The most powerful sections of the Israeli ruling class favored the return of Labor. A coalition of industrialists, accounting for nearly two-thirds of the country's national output, openly endorsed Peres.

Netanyahu campaigned on the basis of promises to pour Israeli troops back into the West Bank, slow down negotiations with the PLO, and reject any territorial concessions to Syria on the Golan Heights.

50 years ago: Charges against Black Panther leaders are dropped

On May 25, 1971, the frame-up charges against Black Panther leaders Bobby Seale and Ericka Huggins for murder were dropped after a New Haven jury deliberated for six days and could not reach a verdict. The New Haven trial was part of a series of frame-ups against revolutionary organizations, in particular targeting the Black Panther Party.

One week earlier, charges against 13 Panthers in New York were dropped after it was uncovered in the trial that all illegal activity had been either encouraged or conducted directly by undercover police agents. Similar questions were raised in the New Haven trial.

Seale, Huggins, and three other Panthers, George Sams, Lonnie McLucas, and Warren Kimbro, had been accused of killing Black Panther member Alex Rackley on the suspicion that Rackley

was an FBI informant. The court acquitted McLucas of the most serious charges; however, it found him guilty of conspiracy to commit murder and sentenced him to a minimum twelve years. Sams and Kimbro pled guilty to the crime in exchange for a reduced sentence of four years.

The accusations against Seale and Huggins rested solely on the testimony of Sams, who claimed that Seale, as a representative of the Panther's national leadership, and Huggins, as the head of the New Haven chapter, had directly ordered the others to kill Rackley. This was not corroborated by either Kimbro or McLucas, who maintained that only Sams was the one to insist on carrying out Rackley's killing.

George Sams was widely suspected of being the true police provocateur. The findings of the New York Panther trial and the recent exposure of the FBI's COINTELPRO program, which detailed the government's mass infiltration and disruption of revolutionary groups, provided reasonable doubt that the accused Panthers engaged in any criminal activity, but rather that the government conspired to infiltrate the Panthers and commit crimes in their name in order to discredit the organization and jail its leaders.

While officially the jury was unable to reach a final decision, eleven of the twelve voted to acquit Seale and ten voted to acquit Huggins. The judge, Harold Mulvey, announced that the charges against the two would be dropped, saying, "I find it impossible to believe that an unbiased jury could be selected without superhuman efforts—efforts which this court, the state and these defendants should not be called upon either to make or to endure."

Huggins was able to walk free out of the courthouse after having been jailed for two years awaiting the trial. Seale however, remained in custody awaiting a new trial for charges that stemmed from the 1968 Chicago Democratic convention. While those charges would also eventually be dropped, Seale remained

imprisoned until 1972.

75 years ago: Truman threatens to deploy federal troops against striking rail workers

This week in May 1945, the Democratic Party administration of President Harry Truman escalated a crackdown against a militant wave of working-class struggles across the United States, threatening to deploy federal troops against separate strikes involving hundreds of thousands of railway workers and coal miners.

On May 24, Truman delivered a nationwide radio address. Demanding an end to a nationwide railway stoppage that had begun the day before, he threatened: “If sufficient workers to operate the trains have not returned, by 4 p.m. tomorrow, as head of our government, I have no alternative but to operate the trains by using every means within my power ... I shall ask our armed forces to furnish protection to every man who heeds the call of his country in this hour of need.”

The strike was launched after the rail corporations had refused demands for an increase to poverty-level wages and the removal of a series of punitive labor regulations. Truman, the companies and union officials had succeeded in postponing the strike for several weeks. The president had made clear that he would invoke Smith-Connally anti-strike laws, allowing the government to take over operations of the railways and break any strike, if it occurred.

Despite the threats, almost 300,000 workers took part in the stoppage. They stayed out for 48 hours, including a full day after Truman’s ultimatum.

The *Militant*, then the newspaper of the American Trotskyist movement, noted the significance of the stand taken by a section of the working class that had traditionally been regarded as conservative. It explained that the union leaders of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Brotherhood of Railway Trainmen had based their strategy on seeking to come to an agreement with Truman and the rail barons.

The result was that the officials ended the stoppage, despite widespread calls for a continuation of the strike, leading to contracts based on the demands of the rail companies for only a slight increase in wages and no improvement in conditions. Commenting on Truman’s actions, the *Militant* stated: “Never has the fusion of the capitalist government and the capitalist class been so nakedly revealed. Never has it been so clearly shown that the government is nothing but an executive committee for safeguarding the interests of the billionaire, monopolist ruling class.”

Days before the rail strike, Truman had also moved to take over the coal mines. Amid fears in the ruling elite over the prospect of a major confrontation, the coal companies granted a \$1.85 a day wage increase and established a health and welfare fund to be administered by the government and the unions.

100 years ago: Communist Party of Canada founded

On May 24, 1921, 21 Canadian and three international delegates met in a barn in Guelph, Ontario to found the Communist Party of Canada. The meeting was held secretly because of the reactionary War Measures Act, passed by Parliament in August 1914, which banned socialist organizations. The founding congress itself was infiltrated by an informant for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

The movement for a Communist Party in Canada had been inspired by the Russian Revolution. The need to form a revolutionary and internationalist workers party had become by 1919 a topic of fierce debate among socialist-minded workers, particularly in the Socialist Party of Canada. The debate was particularly sharp in Winnipeg, the largest city in Manitoba, which had experienced a general strike in 1919.

On January 1, 1921, the Socialist Party newspaper *Western Clarion* published the document, “Twenty-one Conditions for Admission to the Communist International,” and opened its pages to discussion on the question of affiliation to the Communist International. Soon, there were socialists in Ontario, Manitoba and Quebec who were working with the Communist Party of America and the Communist Labor Party (also based in the United States) which had both been founded in 1919 and were soon to unify.

In March, the Communist International sent a representative to Canada to unite these various groups and prepare the conference of May 24.

One of the main issues that concerned the party in its first months was the question of illegal and legal work, a real concern given the repression by the Canadian government. During the summer of 1921, the Third Congress of the Communist International, held in Moscow, urged the Canadian Communists to find ways of setting up legal organizations and publications.

By August, the party launched a public newspaper, *The Workers Guard*, and in February 1922 set up a legal party called the Workers Party. Many members of the Socialist Party of Canada joined the Workers Party at its foundation.



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