This week in history: June 28-July 4

27 June 2021

25 years ago: Yeltsin claims reelection as president of Russia

On July 3, 1996, Boris Yeltsin won the Russian Federation's presidential runoff election in a vote widely viewed by the population as fraudulent. The election set the stage for future social upheavals and political crises in the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Western interests as well as the Stalinist bureaucrats-turned-capitalists proclaimed the defeat of Russian Federation Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov to be a mandate for accelerating the program of capitalist restoration. Across the world, governments and the media hailed Yeltsin's victory as a triumph for democracy. In reality, the vote revealed massive opposition among working people to the destruction of social benefits, jobs and living standards, which were being carried out in the interests of Western big business and the emerging class of Russian capitalists.

Yeltsin's campaign was directly bankrolled by the Russian government, which was awarded a $10.2 billion loan the previous February by the International Monetary Fund to provide it with sufficient resources. The oligarchs, former Stalinists turned millionaires and billionaires through their criminal seizure of privatized industries, likewise diverted large amounts of cash into his election funds. This new ruling elite constituted Yeltsin's most important constituency. They feared that any change in regime could call into question their ability to continue enriching themselves through the outright theft of the former Soviet Union's resources.

Another element of the situation was the impact of repeated shake-ups within the Yeltsin regime leading up to the election. Internal purges, often carried out for short-term political advantage, combined with Yeltsin's poor health, created an atmosphere of instability. The previous January he fired his Deputy Prime Minister Anatoly Chubais, who was in charge of privatization, scapegoating him for pervasive corruption and social devastation. Months later, Chubais reemerged as a leading figure in the election campaign.

Alexander Lebed had also been coopted into the Yeltsin government. A retired general, Russian chauvinist and anti-Semite who publicly praised fascist dictator Augusto Pinochet, he was appointed security chief with the full support of the US government. Lebed was entrusted with key repressive military operations under Yeltsin and former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and called for a military crackdown in the name of eliminating crime and corruption.

The economic program that the Yeltsin government carried out under the dictates of the IMF meant the shutdown of large factories, the wholesale destruction of jobs, further inroads on workers' income and the dismantling of social benefits.

50 years ago: American West rocked by copper, longshoremen strikes

As part of a continuing strike wave in the US, workers in two major industries, copper and shipping, went out on strike starting July 1 and 2, 1971. The copper strike brought that industry to a virtual standstill, with production falling by as much as 80 percent. Likewise, the strike by longshoremen shut down virtually every port on the West Coast.

The copper strike saw over 35,000 workers organized in the United Steel Workers (USW) walk off the job in 11 states. It hit the biggest copper concerns—Kennecott, Phelps Dodge, Anaconda, and American Smelting—in several Western states, including Arizona, Utah and Colorado. The copper workers had two main demands: a nationwide increase in pay of $2 per hour and a cost-of-living "escalator clause" written into the contract so that wages automatically would rise with the rate of inflation. The average pay of the copper workers at the time was from $3.80 to $4.38 per hour.

President Richard Nixon came out strongly against the strikers and for the copper companies. The president, who was simultaneously directing the imperialist mass slaughter in Vietnam, made statements saying that workers must adopt an "economic patriotism" and that it was workers' responsibility to "improve the competitive position" of the copper and steel industries. He added that it would be in the "national interest" for workers to accept a concessions contract from the companies.

The copper strike lasted for one month until an agreement was reached that brought workers a raise of nearly $1 an hour and the removal of a "productivity agreement" that would have been used to push through speedup. The strike cost the companies millions of dollars. Just one of the employers, Kennecott Copper, saw its income fall from $42,471,485 to $7,038,150 during the financial quarter that included the strike.

For the longshoremen who walked off the docks the same day as the copper workers, organized in the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), the key issue was also wages. In an interview with the *Bulletin*, US forerunner of the WSWS, a Los Angeles longshoremen said other issues included "employer harassment, crew size, and working conditions." The longshore strike would last until October, when Nixon would invoke the Taft-Hartley Act to break the strike and order a "cooling off period" that lasted until January. The workers went out on strike again until an agreement was reached February 7, 1972.

The simultaneous strikes exhibited the great industrial power of the American working class. But they clearly posed the necessity to break free of the constraints imposed by the union bureaucracy, which blocked any linking up of the two strikes into a broader political struggle against capitalism.

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75 years ago: US grants the Philippines independence under puppet government

On June 4, 1946, the US government formally relinquished control over the Philippines, the Southeast Asian archipelago first seized by American imperialism in 1898, displacing Spain, the previous colonial ruler. US High Commissioner Paul V. McNutt and Filipino President Manuel Roxas signed the Treaty of Manila, granting formal independence, at a public ceremony in the Philippine capital.

The US decision followed the defeat of Japan in the Second World War in August 1945. The Imperial Japanese regime had conquered the Philippines in 1942. Tokyo's rule had been met with widespread opposition, including the development of an armed partisan movement that would collaborate with the US and the other Allied powers in Japan's 1945 defeat.

In April 1946, Roxas had been elected president of the Commonwealth of the Philippines, a body under direct US control. He and several colleagues had broken away from the Nacionalista Party and established the Liberal Party. He had been captured by the Japanese in 1942 and had served as chief advisor to Tokyo's puppet President José P. Laurel but claimed to have secretly collaborated with the resistance to occupation.

Prior to the 1946 election and the granting of independence, President Sergio Osmeña, Roxas's predecessor, had signed a secret agreement for the maintenance of extensive US dominance over the Philippines in the event of independence.

Roxas fully endorsed the deal. Under the Treaty of Manila, the US retained full control over an extensive network of military bases in the Philippines. Washington was granted the power to take actions for "the mutual protection of the United States of America and of the Republic of the Philippines," essentially providing it with veto power over Filipino foreign policy and economic life.

In 1947, Roxas would formalize the secret arrangements agreed to by Osmeña by signing a US-Philippines Military Bases Agreement. Among other things, this provided the US with 99-year leases over its Filipino military bases; allowed for the Clark Air Base to be 130,000 acres and for Olongapo City to be integrated into the Subic Naval Base, with the areas around it placed under US authority; and for American troops to have access to public utilities and other facilities under the same conditions as the Philippine armed forces.

The bogus character of Filipino independence was of a piece with a series of similar "decolonization" efforts. The imperialist powers, while handing rule to servile representatives of the native bourgeoisie, retained control over the key economic, political and military levers of society.

100 years ago: Greeks withdraw from Turkish city of Izmit

On June 29, 1921, Greek forces withdrew from the Turkish city of Izmit, 86 km (53 miles) southeast of the capital of Istanbul (called Constantinople until 1923), before advancing Turkish nationalists. The evacuation of Izmit opened the road to Constantinople, which was then occupied by the British.

The withdrawal and possible exposure of Constantinople set off alarm bells in imperialist circles. The *New York Times* suggested that the move may be "calculated to involve the Allies or at least England in active war" against Turkish nationalist leader Kemal Ataturk and called the move a "Greek trick." The day after the withdrawal the French sent a diplomatic note to the British government inquiring what its plans were for the defense of Constantinople from Ataturk.

The Greek military in April and May had conducted its offensive deep into the Anatolian peninsula displaying hostility to the civilian Turkish population. One Allied commission of inquiry later noted: "There is a systematic plan of destruction of Turkish villages and extinction of the Moslem population. This plan is being carried out by Greek and Armenian bands, which appear to operate under Greek instructions and sometimes even with the assistance of detachments of regular troops."

The Greek state had territorial ambitions in Turkey, where there was a Greek minority in cities and villages along the western and northern coasts of Anatolia. The Greek military was one of the three foreign powers occupying Turkey during its War of Independence. The Turks had been the dominant ethnic group in the Ottoman Empire, which had been dissolved and divided up by British, French and Italian imperialism according to a secret plan worked out during World War I.

The withdrawal from Izmit, along with the recognition of Ataturk's regime by Soviet Russia and the professionalization of the nationalist army, was instrumental in turning imperialist opinion toward negotiation with the nationalists and the eventual withdrawal of foreign troops from Turkey.

In the aftermath of the Greek withdrawal from Smyrna in September 1922 and its subsequent burning by the Turkish nationalists, Greece and Turkey agreed to the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923. This involved a population exchange of 1.6 million people—ethnic Turks from Greece, and ethnic Greeks from Turkey—one of the largest episodes of ethnic cleansing in history up to that time.

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