

This week in history: July 5–11

4 July 2021

25 years ago: RCL member imprisoned and tortured by police

The first week of July 1996, Selliah Rajkumar, a member of the Revolutionary Communist League (forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party), was imprisoned and tortured by the Sri Lankan regime after being falsely charged as a suspected terrorist.

The Tamil worker was held incommunicado at Aralaganwila Police Station in the eastern district of Polonaruwa. He was arrested while traveling from his home in Udappuwa in the Chilaw area to visit relatives in the northern town of Vavunia.

Like many Tamils he was forced to flee south because of the government's communalist war against the Tamil population in the north. He was residing legally in the south under the Sri Lankan government's internal travel restrictions.

While the People's Alliance government claimed that there was no repression against Tamils in Sri Lanka, Rajkumar's arrest and torture as a suspected terrorist were indicative of the dangers facing all Tamil workers and youth.

Rajkumar told police he was not a member of the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam), the petty-bourgeois nationalist organization that sought to redirect Tamil anger against the government toward the creation of a separate Tamil state in the north. The RCL reported him missing and discovered his arrest only after he was able to get a letter from jail to his relatives. The Sri Lankan Trotskyists then submitted legal documents substantiating that he was a member of the RCL, not any other organization, and established the nature of his trip.

The local police called in the Criminal Investigation Division—the equivalent of the FBI—and Rajkumar was once again beaten and tortured. He suffered severe wounds to his back and stomach from the interrogators. The authorities claimed Rajkumar would be released or in court by July 15, but he was held prisoner without charges beyond that date.

Rajkumar was imprisoned and tortured not for any terrorist act, but because of the repressive PA government's hostility and fear of the socialist program fought for by the RCL. The Sri Lankan Trotskyists were the only movement waging a struggle against the government's racist war while simultaneously opposing the bourgeois separatist program of the LTTE, fighting for the unification of Sinhala and Tamil workers and oppressed.

Rajkumar was held in prison for over a year, until July 1997, without any charges ever filed against him. He was arrested again in June 1998 on similar bogus charges, that he had been hiding weapons for the LTTE. He was released after a day due to the support mobilized by the Sri Lankan Trotskyist movement.

50 years ago: Ceaușescu launches cult of personality in Romania

On July 6, 1971, Nicolae Ceaușescu, president of Romania, delivered a speech announcing that the impoverished nation—among Europe's poorest—would embark on a great increase in “patriotic work.” This would entail a massive nationalist state-backed propaganda campaign centered on the creation of a cult of personality around Ceaușescu himself, enforced by the secret police.

Ceaușescu's “July Theses,” as the speech was pretentiously named, was directly inspired by the ultra-Stalinist regimes in China and North Korea. Earlier in 1971 Ceaușescu had visited these countries, where he adoringly witnessed their bloody “cultural revolutions.” The end goal of the Romanian “cultural revolution,” like its Chinese and North Korean counterparts, was to root out all rivals in the bureaucracy and to suppress the resistance of the working class.

In the following years, official Romanian public life would become almost entirely dedicated to ceremonies honoring Ceaușescu. Academic and artistic works were heavily censored, with essentially only state-sponsored historical falsifications and adoring artworks depicting Ceaușescu being published.

Ceaușescu's program gave the lie to claims that Stalinist regimes might reform themselves into democratic workers states. Such illusions had been encouraged in 1965 by Romania's removal of the name and image of Stalin from public spaces, monuments and iconography; and in 1968 by the fact that Romania, alone among the Warsaw Pact countries, had not contributed forces to the crushing of the Czechoslovakian “Prague Spring” in 1968.

As it turned out, this “de-Stalinization” of 1965 only cleared the way for Ceaușescu to create a grotesque cult of personality surrounding himself that rivaled that of Stalin. The Romanian bureaucracy drew the lesson of the Prague events that it could maintain its rule only by what became the most savage police repression of any of Europe's Stalinist regimes. In fact, the propaganda and pompous patriotic displays constituted Romania's desperate attempt to cover its deepening reliance on the police-state apparatus and international capital. Starting in 1969, Ceaușescu forged a closer relationship to US President Richard Nixon, opening the country to foreign investment, including loans from the IMF and World Bank.

With no real way to pay back the loans, Ceaușescu's regime imposed cruel austerity measures on the Romanian population to the point that, by the 1980s, workers often received no pay except

for bread ration coupons. To enforce this situation and stop the development of working-class opposition, the secret police, known as the Securitate, would be deployed to arrest, torture or “disappear” hundreds of suspected opponents over the next two decades until a section of the bureaucracy intent on restoring unrestrained capitalism turned against Ceaușescu himself in a 1989 coup.

75 years ago: Allied powers move towards creation of separate West Germany

On July 11, 1946, US Secretary of State James Byrnes proposed to Britain and France that the three Allied powers merge the economies of the three German occupation zones under their control to create a unified entity. The move, which was directed against the Soviet Union, was agreed to immediately by Britain, while France would accept the proposal two years later.

Germany had been under Allied military occupation since the defeat of the Nazi regime in May 1945. At the Yalta and Potsdam conferences in 1945, the Allied leaders had agreed to a post-war carve-up of Europe, including the division of Germany into separate occupation zones. The deal was part of the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy’s commitment to the imperialist powers that it would suppress socialist revolution at the conclusion of the conflict, while seeking its own sphere of influence in eastern Europe.

Under the terms agreed at Yalta, Germany was divided, with the Soviet Union controlling what had been Prussia, the US holding Bavaria and southeastern Germany, Britain controlling northwestern German, and France holding areas in the far west on its own border. Berlin was similarly divided, with France in control of northwest Berlin, Britain the west, and the US the southwest of the city, while eastern Berlin would be administered by the Soviet Union. Throughout the first half of 1946, tensions between the US and the Soviet Union grew, with conflicts emerging over how the German division would be ended. This was connected to an increasingly aggressive US drive for post-war hegemony and the adoption of policies later associated with the Cold War.

At a Paris conference of the Allied leaders on July 10, 1946, Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov stated his government’s support for a unified Germany, but outlined several preconditions. These included reparations to the Soviet Union, which had suffered some 27 million dead at the hands of the Nazi invasion as well as massive economic destruction. Molotov suggested that a final peace treaty could be delayed for several years.

US Secretary of State Byrnes responded the next day, announcing on July 11 a proposal for the other Allied powers to ignore the Soviet demands and proceed with the merger of their three zones. The plan was immediately denounced by Soviet leaders as a step towards the permanent division of Germany, and a bid to shore up the control by the imperialist powers over the country.

100 years ago: Mongolia declares independence

On July 11, 1921, Damdin Sükhbaatar, the leader of the Mongolian People’s Party, declared the People’s Revolutionary Government in the capital of Urga, present day Ulaanbaatar, and the independence of the country from China and White Russian occupiers.

The government was set up as a constitutional monarchy, with the Bogd Khan, the third-most important figure in the Tibetan Buddhist hierarchy, at its head, although a republic was declared in 1924.

The fate of Mongolia (formally called Outer Mongolia), an impoverished country made up primarily of illiterate herdsmen and ruled by a nobility as well as by senior Buddhist lamas, was determined by the fortunes of the Russian Civil War in Siberia.

The Beiyang warlord faction of the nationalist government of China had occupied Mongolia since 1919 but was displaced in some regions by the White Russian General Baron Roman von Ungern-Sternberg, an associate of the brutal anti-communist Cossack warlord in Siberia, Grigori Semyonov. Ungern-Sternberg, an ethnic German noble from the Tsarist Baltic provinces, was notorious for his murder of Chinese and Jews.

Damdin Sükhbaatar, who may have come under the influence of Bolshevik printers in Urga after 1918, along with other Mongol revolutionaries, sought out the Red Army during the war and met with Soviet officials, who agreed to support the movement. Shortly afterward, the Mongolian People’s Party applied to the Communist International as a sympathizing section.

Sükhbaatar and other Mongol oppositionists formed the Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Army, primarily a guerrilla force. In June 1921, the Fifth Red Army, the People’s Revolutionary Army of the Far Eastern Republic, a pro-Soviet government in Siberia, and the Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Army defeated Ungern’s forces in the Baikal region and continued their advance on Urga. Ungern was captured in August and executed by the Red Army.



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