# This week in history: July 19–25

**18 July 2021**

**25 years ago: LTTE train bombing kills dozens of workers in Sri Lanka**

On July 24, 1996, a bombing carried out by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) at the Dehiwala train station outside of Colombo killed 64 commuters. A further 400 people were wounded. The LTTE operatives placed suitcase bombs containing over 200 pounds of explosives in four carriages at the height of rush hour. The act was deliberately aimed at workers commuting to the suburban areas of Sri Lanka's capital city. The train, scheduled to leave the Colombo Fort railway station after 5 p.m., was to carry city workers home after the day shift. The train was known as the "office train" and was extraordinarily packed. Over 2,000 people were on board the day of the attack.

The Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), Sri Lankan section of the International Committee and forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party, issued a statement condemning the LTTE's brutal anti-working-class attack, while explaining that the incident was the direct outcome of the racist war against the Tamil people, intensified by the Sri Lankan government.

The "Peoples Alliance" of President Chandrika Kumaratunga consisted of her own Sri Lanka Freedom Party, one of the two major bourgeois parties in Sri Lanka, together with the Lanka Sama Samaja Party, which broke from Trotskyism in 1963–64, and the Stalinist Communist Party of Sri Lanka, along with several minor bourgeois-populist parties. While using populist language, the Peoples Alliance pursued a chauvinist policy towards the Tamil minority, which fueled support for the LTTE, and carried out vicious attacks on workers and poor farmers.

The connection between the war and attacks on the conditions of the working class was illustrated on the same day as the bombing when Kumaratunga addressed a meeting of small-holder tea planters. She stated the determination of her government to remove economic subsidies and threatened to fire workers fighting for wage increases. "The lethargic public servants and teachers who continue their old wars without being perceptive to the need of the hour and changes in society will face tough penalties including dismissal," she said.

The RCL urged workers not to be drawn into the racist anti-Tamil campaign that was whipped up in the aftermath of the bombing by the ruling class. The party called for workers to establish their own independent defense committees to organize the security of workers and their families. It urged them to oppose the government's racist war and increasing militarization of the government.

The bombing, a previous bombing against Central Bank workers, and the continuous harassment of Sinhalese peasants in the Tamil-populated northern and eastern provinces demonstrated the LTTE's opposition to the unity of the Sinhala and Tamil masses. The LTTE was seeking to prevent the development of a movement of workers and oppressed against the Sri Lankan regime.

**50 years ago: Failed coup by Communist Party in Sudan**

On July 19, 1971, the Sudanese Communist Party (SCP) attempted a coup d'état against the government of the Democratic Republic of Sudan and removed the country's leader, Jaafar Nimeiry, from power. The coup was short-lived, lasting less than one week. By July 23 Nimeiry would be freed and returned to power.

Leading up to the coup were years of immense political crisis in Sudan. Following a 1969 coup by the Free Officers Movement, Nimeiry ruled the North African country as the Chairman of the National Revolutionary Command Council (RCC), the ruling junta where all political power was consolidated.

Initially the SCP had given some support to the RCC government after the 1969 coup. However, fearing the development of a revolutionary movement among the Sudanese workers, the RCC began an anti-communist crackdown in March 1971. Nimeiry had announced the creation of a state-controlled political party called the Sudan Socialist Union, which would essentially dissolve all existing parties, including the SCP, into one tightly directed organization. The RCC also forcibly assumed control of the trade unions, where the SCP drew most of their support.

Many SCP leaders went into hiding, with most of the party's operations being driven underground during the spring and early summer of 1971. Under these conditions the SCP began preparing for the July 19 coup. Under the direction of the Stalinist bureaucracy in Moscow, the SCP oriented themselves not to the working class, but to their supporters from within the Sudanese military officer core. The most significant of this layer was Major Hashem al-Atta who would lead the coup and briefly hold the position of Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces after he surrounded the Presidential Palace with tanks and arrested Nimeiry.

The SCP was the largest Communist Party in the Arab world, but its coup faced hostility, not only from the RCC within Sudan, but from all the surrounding nations. Both Egypt's Anwar Sadat and Libya's Muammar Gaddafi opposed the SCP coup and provided support to Nimeiry and his return to power. These bourgeois nationalists, who were balancing between the Soviet Union and the imperialist powers, feared that the establishment of a Stalinist-led government in the region would destabilize their own fragile regimes.

Outside the members of the SCP itself, which had been substantially broken up by the Nimeiry repressions, the coup had little popular support. Atta was unable to bring the military under his control, with the vast majority of generals and other officers continuing to support the RCC.

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After a few days the forces loyal to Nimeiry freed him from prison and arrested Atta and the other coup plotters, who were court-martialed and shot. In the aftermath, Nimeiry deepened his persecution of the SCP, arresting and executing its leaders and banning all communist-led trade unions and other organizations.

**75 years ago: Zionist Irgun group bombs King David Hotel in British Palestine**

On July 22, 1946, the Zionist organization Irgun bombed the King David Hotel in British-controlled Palestine, killing 91 people and injuring 46 more. The terrorist attack was one of a series, based on the perspective of compelling Britain, or the other major powers, to approve the establishment of a Jewish state in the area. Among those who died were 41 Arabs, 28 British citizens, 17 Jews and members of several other national groups.

The attack received widespread international coverage, not only because of the large number of victims, but also because the King David Hotel was the headquarters of the British Mandatory authorities who oversaw the occupation of Palestine. It was conceived of as retaliation for a security crackdown conducted by the British authorities against militant Zionist organizations.

The well-organized Irgun operatives planted bombs in the basement of the hotel, as well as in a café next to it and one on a street nearby. Some onlookers who gathered to view the consequences of the explosion at the latter location were hit by the subsequent detonations. While Irgun members claimed that a warning was sent to the hotel almost half an hour before the bombings, the details have been disputed and no evacuation was carried out.

The attack had apparently been discussed beforehand within the broader Zionist milieu. However, its consequences, and the international response, resulted in a breakdown of the alliance between Irgun and several other groups, including the Haganah, the military wing of the Labour Zionists, who adopted a nominally left-wing posture.

Unlike some of the other Zionist organizations, Irgun only began hostilities against the British after it was clear that the Allied powers would be victorious over Nazi Germany. Its perspective was not based on any form of anti-colonialism, but included virulent denunciations of the “Arabs,” including calls for them to be driven out of the region or subjugated.

At the time of the bombing, Irgun was led by Menachem Begin, who would subsequently serve as the sixth prime minister of Israel, from June 1977 to October 1983.

**100 years ago: Major military defeat for Spanish in occupied Morocco**

On July 22, 1921, Berber rebels (known as the Rifis after the Rif mountain range), led by Abd el-Krim, inflicted a major defeat on Spanish imperialist troops at Annual in northeast Morocco, beginning the Rif War. The Spanish, who controlled areas along the coast, including the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, sought to push inward and eastward, ignoring warnings from Abd el-Krim.

A Spanish general, Manuel Fernández Silvestre, had occupied the village of Annual in January with several thousand Spanish troops. Silvestre’s lines of communication were poor, and his army was low on ammunition by the summer. Five thousand Spanish troops skirmished with 3,000 irregular Rif fighters on July 21.

The Spanish began a retreat, which turned into a rout. Spain sent reinforcements but these too were defeated by the Rifis. Altogether Spain lost over 20,000 soldiers as well as large quantities of weapons and ammunition. Abd el-Krim is said to have remarked, “In just one night, Spain supplied us with all the equipment which we needed to carry on a big war.” Silvestre was believed to have been killed, although his remains were never definitely identified. Abd el-Krim established a Rif Republic.

The Rif War had its origins in over 20 years of aggression in North Africa by the imperialist powers, which was a source of persistent inter-imperialist conflict. At the Algeciras Conference of 1906, both France and Spain had made claims on Morocco and apportioned areas of influence. Despite attempts at modernizing its military, the sultanate of Morocco, which had ruled a unified state since the 17th century, had collapsed under the European incursions and retained control of only six cities.

Germany also had claims in Morocco, which nearly led to war between the great powers after the Agadir crisis of 1911, when a German gunboat entered a French-held port on the Atlantic coast of Morocco and raised the possibility of war. The incident sparked mass antiwar demonstrations in Europe led by Social Democratic parties. The crisis was one of a series of inter-imperialist skirmishes that led up to World War I.

In 1912 Spain established, with French and British agreement, a formal protectorate in Morocco.

After the First World War, Spain and France both renewed their colonial ambitions in Morocco, sparking the rebellion by Abd el-Krim.

The 1921 Rif War, which was joined by the French, lasted five more years. In a war of retribution for the defeat at Annual, the Spanish indiscriminately used chemical weapons against civilians. Some Berber organizations today allege that residue of these weapons is still poisoning residents of the area. The war ended ultimately with the defeat and capture of Abd el-Krim, who died in exile in Cairo in 1963.

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