This week in history: August 16-22

15 August 2021

25 years ago: Australian workers storm Parliament

On August 19, 1996, thousands of Australian workers stormed Parliament House and clashed with police in the capital city of Canberra.

The confrontation erupted when police blocked the path of a contingent of 2,000 Aboriginal people and construction workers arriving at a rally sponsored by the ACTU that was being held on the other side of the Parliament building.

When the cops began manhandling the Aboriginal workers, thousands of demonstrators—including miners, metal and construction workers—defended them, breaking through barricades and driving the police back to the front doors of the Parliament. The situation rapidly escalated when police reinforcements armed with riot shields and batons attacked Aboriginal people and clubbed the workers who came to their defense.

The glass doors to the Parliament were broken in the fighting, and more than 100 workers streamed into the building.

The siege lasted for over two hours. While the Australian media only reported injuries to the police, dozens of demonstrators were severely beaten, and many workers were seen leaving the area with blood streaming from head and facial wounds caused by police night sticks. More than 40 workers were arrested. Several thousand workers were involved. More did not join in the confrontation because speakers at the official rally kept silent about the police attack taking place on the other side of the building.

Leaders of the Labor Party and the trade union bureaucracy joined with the right-wing Liberal Party government, the media and police in vilifying the demonstrators as a tiny minority of "extremists" and "thugs." Some union heads assisted police in identifying workers, who were involved so they could be criminally charged. The ACTU wrote to the Australian Federal Police Association pledging full cooperation with the police.

The confrontation expressed the anger and frustration felt by millions of working people over the ongoing devastation of jobs, living standards and social conditions. While the John Howard government was the immediate target of the demonstration, the spontaneous eruption against the budget had far wider implications. Behind Howard stood the banks, big business and the capitalist media, all of which had been demanding an intensification of the onslaught against the working class.

50 years ago: US-backed coup installs dictator in Bolivia

On August 19, 1971, operations began that would overthrow the Bolivian government of Juan José Torres. The uprising was a US-backed, right-wing military coup led by Army Colonel Hugo Banzer Suárez. The coup established a military dictatorship under Banzer that lasted until the 1980s.

The main objective of the coup was to establish a regime that was friendly to US capital interests and would not hesitate to violently suppress the massive strike wave that was rocking Bolivian industry in 1970-71. The crisis in Bolivia was so intense that the regime under Torres had only lasted for 10 months.

Torres, the supposedly "left-wing general," himself came into the presidency as a result of earlier coups. In October 1970 another right-wing coup was launched that forced the previous president, Alfredo Ovando, to flee the country. In the crisis, Torres, who was second in command under Ovando, managed to defeat the right-wing insurgents and establish himself as head of the military government.

As president, Torres hoped to position himself as a sort of left populist figure. In a 1970 speech he declared he was attempting to build an "alliance of the armed forces with the people and build nationality on four pillars: workers, academics, peasants and the military." Torres set up a Popular Assembly that consisted mostly of leaders in the trade unions. Its purpose was to function as a semi-official parliament. However, all power fundamentally remained in the presidential dictatorship.

Regardless of his rhetoric, Torres was not able to mediate the intense class divisions in Bolivia. While he was president a militant strike wave ran through Bolivia with major revolutionary implications. The Bolivian capitalist class and US imperialism demanded an aggressive anti-worker state that was capable of sweeping aside the unions and socialist parties that had grown in recent years and crushing the working class. To accomplish this, they turned to the Bolivian military and the CIA to oust Torres and establish Banzer's dictatorship. Significant financial and military support was provided to Banzer by the Nixon administration to prepare and carry out the coup.

While Torres was himself a military man, he had little support within the ranks of the army officer corps, which was dominated by far-right anti-communist elements. Within two days of the coup Torres was forced to flee Bolivia and was latter assassinated in Argentina in 1976.

Once in power Banzer banned all left-wing parties, closed the universities and either suppressed or assumed control of the unions. The new regime based itself on a policy of terrorism. Left-wing opponents were kidnapped, tortured and executed without trial. Banzer would retain the levers of power in Bolivia until 2001.

75 years ago: Thousands killed during communal clashes in India

On August 16, 1946, communal clashes broke out across India, killing an estimated 5,000-6,000 people, rendering tens of thousands more homeless and foreshadowing the subsequent partition of the country along religious lines.

The trigger for the clashes was the conflict between the Hindu and Muslim elites over power-sharing arrangements as Britain prepared to grant nominal independence to India, amid mass anti-colonial struggles throughout Asia and internationally. In March, a British cabinet mission arrived in India to prepare a proposal for the transfer. The aim was to prevent revolutionary upheavals and to ensure that whatever entity was created would remain within the British Commonwealth and imperialist framework.

The cabinet mission proposed a three-tier system of government, involving a central administration responsible for defense, foreign affairs, communications and currency, and substantial provincial governmental authority. Provinces were to be divided into three groups largely divided along communal Hindu and Muslim lines, in keeping with British promotion of sectarian divisions.

Muhammad Ali Jinnah, leader of the All-India Muslim League, initially indicated support for the proposal. Over the following months, however, he claimed that the Hindu elite and the Congress Party were intent on undermining the relative autonomy the plan would grant to the mainly Muslim provincial groupings. In July, he called for a "direct action day" the following month, declaring that his aim was "either a divided India or a destroyed India."

With Hindu chauvinists also whipping up communalism, the August 16 gathering inevitably resulted in violent clashes, led by rival Muslim and Hindu nationalist groupings. As many as 4,000 people lost their lives and some 100,000 were made homeless in Calcutta, the center of the fighting. Smaller scale rioting occurred in a host of other towns and cities.

The stepped up promotion of communalism by the Indian ruling class, Hindu and Muslim, was directed against the prospect of a unified movement of the entire working class that would threaten capitalist rule. In February, sailors of all religious backgrounds had mutinied against the British Navy in Karachi and Bombay, and had raised a series of radical political demands, including for the immediate removal of all British forces from India. The struggle provoked massive strikes by workers and protests by students which were brutally repressed by British troops. The crackdown was supported enthusiastically by both the Muslim League and Congress.

100 years ago: British cabinet reassesses commitment to Jewish state in Palestine

On August 18, 1921, a secret meeting of the British Cabinet of Prime Minister David Lloyd George discussed whether British imperialism should continue to support the aims that were announced in the Balfour Declaration of November 1917 at the height of the First World War. The declaration was the first public pronouncement of any great power that it would support the foundation of a "national home" for the Jewish people in Palestine, which, at the time was a province of the Ottoman Empire.

Even before the war was over, British and French imperialism had divided up the Ottoman territories in the Middle East in the infamous Sykes Picot agreement of 1917, which was first made public by the young Soviet government in 1918. Britain was to receive the territories that now constitute the states of Iraq and Palestine and France the areas that are now Lebanon and Syria.

In 1919 the newly formed League of Nations granted mandates to Britain and France for these territories. What neither power had counted on was the surge of nationalist sentiment and the desire for national independence among the Arab masses. Egypt, under British control, was shaken by a revolution in 1919. By 1920 the French were confronted with the formation of a nationalist state called the Arab Kingdom of Syria, which they suppressed militarily, and the British by armed conflict between Jews and Arabs in Palestine.

Delegations of Muslim and Christian Arabs from Palestine had come to England in 1921 to petition the British government to end its support for Jewish immigration.

The Cabinet, with Colonial Secretary Winston Churchill present, discussed two courses of action: withdraw the declaration, slow down the settlement of Jews, and set up an Arab national government, or proceed to support the declaration forcefully, including arming the Zionists and drawing down British forces in Palestine. No decisions were taken at the meeting, but most of the arguments favored staying the course, out of concern for the appearance of British prestige, and to placate South Africa and Canada, which were chafing at British rule but whose governments were pro-Zionist.