

This week in history: October 11-17

10 October 2021

25 years ago: Apartheid killers acquitted

On October 11, 1996, a South African court acquitted former Defense Minister Magnus Malan together with 15 co-defendants charged with atrocities against the black population during the waning days of the apartheid regime.

Malan, three former generals, and several other security officials were charged with deploying a secret assassination squad which massacred 13 people, most of them women and children, in 1987. The attack was part of a terror campaign designed to strengthen the Inkatha Freedom Party and suppress supporters of the African National Congress in the black “homeland” of KwaZulu. The campaign claimed 14,000 lives in the course of a decade.

The case was one of the few attempts to criminally prosecute former officials for the crimes carried out over 40 years by the racist regime. In most cases, the ANC-led government had granted amnesties to former military and police killers, while relegating the investigation of atrocities to a “truth commission.”

When the ANC was brought into government in 1994, classified information on other atrocities carried out against the population—including on South Africa’s biological warfare program, developed with the assistance of US and British intelligence services—had been passed over from outgoing National Party leader and president F. W. De Klerk, to the incoming Mandela administration.

One of the last major trials, in April 2002, relating to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, ended in a failure to prosecute Dr. Wouter Basson, known as “Dr. Death,” a chemical weapons expert and head of germ warfare programs in the South African army during the apartheid era. Malan was present in the courtroom for Basson’s acquittal.

The prosecutor who tried the Malan case was, together with much of the judiciary, a holdover from the apartheid regime, who had previously expressed disbelief that government-run hit squads even existed. The government of President Nelson Mandela had maintained the legal system handed down from Apartheid, which featured the absence of jury trials. All verdicts were reached by judges. The Mandela administration called on South Africans to respect the Malan verdict.

50 years ago: AFL-CIO president joins Nixon’s wage freeze board

On October 12, 1971, AFL-CIO president George Meany issued a statement signaling the cooperation of the labor federation in President Richard Nixon’s program of wage freezes being carried out under the guise of fighting inflation. At the time of the statement, the Nixon administration was enforcing a 90-day wage freeze set to expire November 13.

In addition to offering Nixon support, Meany announced that members of the AFL-CIO bureaucracy would serve on the “Pay Board.” The Pay Board was one of a handful of committees Nixon had established to oversee the management of the pay freeze program. The other major committees involved in the “anti-inflation” efforts were the Cost-of-Living Council and the Price Commission.

Just one week earlier, Meany was posturing as an opponent to the Pay Board and promising that the AFL-CIO would not join. This made the October 12 announcement somewhat of an about-face. Fearful that his assent would be seen by workers for what it was—tacit union backing for a national program of pay-cutting—Meany said the decision to join came only after “personal assurances we have received this morning from the President of the United States, that the Pay Board will be completely autonomous and that the Cost-of-Living Council will not have veto power over its decisions.”

Leaders of other major unions outside the AFL-CIO, including United Auto Workers President Leonard Woodcock and International Brotherhood of Teamsters President Frank Fitzsimmons, also indicated their support for Nixon’s plans.

After the union press conference, President Nixon issued his own statement praising the announcement, saying the union bureaucrats, “have acted in the best interest of their own members and of the country.” Then at a White House press conference, Secretary of Labor James D. Hodgson outlined “Phase Two” of the inflation program. Hodgson explained that the Pay Board would be tasked with ensuring that workers’ wages stay within a level determined by the White House to be acceptable. While the Price Commission would be tasked with surveying changes in the prices of goods. The Cost of Living Council would oversee the work of the two committees and direct their work.

Both the White House and Meany were careful to declare that

the Cost of Living Council would not be able to overrule the Pay Board. While the unions attempted to frame their entry into the Nixon administration as gaining a position of leverage, in reality it was a fateful step in the transformation of the unions from organizations of the working class into tools of the state that could be reliably called upon when needed to suppress wages and quash militancy.

75 years ago: Truman ends price controls amid US “meat famine”

On October 14, 1946, US President Harry Truman announced that his Democratic Party administration was ending price controls on meat products, in a move that was dictated by the major businesses controlling the sector. The move resulted in a doubling of meat prices, leading to a devastating rise in the cost of living for the working class.

Throughout US involvement in World War II, the population was subject to meat rationing. At the conclusion of the conflict, in 1945, demand and profiteering saw prices skyrocket by 70 percent. Truman reluctantly imposed price caps, as the soaring cost of goods, combined with stagnant or declining real wages, provoked a growing movement of the working class. The 1945-1946 strike wave was the largest in American history, involving more than 5 million workers.

The introduction of the price controls was met with indignation by major farming and meat processing corporations. Producers withheld stock, leading to a “meat famine,” with much of the working population unable to purchase meat, especially beef.

An article in the October 12 edition of *The Militant*, then the Trotskyist publication in the US, noted mounting protests by workers and housewives, demanding access to meat supplies.

In one example cited by the paper, “Toledo housewives, organized in the Housewives Emergency League... have demanded that the Mayor and City Hall wire Truman urging the government nationalize the meat industry to be operated under union control. They have demanded the right to conduct a housewives’ inspection of packinghouses, refrigerated warehouses, food lockers and all other places where meat is being hoarded to push up prices.”

The following issue of *The Militant*, reporting Truman’s abolition of the price controls, stated: “It has been sometime since the American people got such a bare-faced demonstration of the government’s subservience to the capitalists.” Truman had mildly criticized the meat trusts, but refused to take action against them, instead capitulating to their demands. At the same time, he blamed his Republican opponents for his about face.

100 years ago: Upper Silesia divided between Germany and Poland

On October 11, 1921, the League of Nations divided the mineral-rich region of Upper Silesia, which lay on Germany’s eastern and Poland’s western borders.

Poland, whose territory had been divided for more than a century among Germany, Tsarist Russia, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, was reestablished in the aftermath of World War I. Most of the Upper Silesian region had been a part of the German Empire with a majority of German-speakers, but with a large Polish-speaking minority. After the defeat of German imperialism in 1918, British, French, and Italian troops occupied the area.

The Allied imperialists sponsored a plebiscite to determine whether the area would belong to Poland or Germany. In the run-up to the vote in 1919, Polish nationalists staged an uprising in response to a massacre of Polish miners by German border guards. Polish workers staged a general strike. The German military intervened and suppressed the uprising with great brutality. An influx of British and French troops temporarily stabilized the region. There was also a significant autonomy movement that sought eventual independence of Upper Silesia from both Germany and Poland.

The region voted on March 20, 1920, by margins of 60 percent to stay with Germany and 40 percent to stay with Poland. A second Polish uprising occurred that year in August after a false report that the Red Army had taken Warsaw inspired an anti-Polish pogrom by Germans. A third uprising occurred in the spring and summer of 1921 after Polish nationalists heard rumors that a settlement of the dispute would favor Germany.

The League of Nations awarded to Poland most parts of Upper Silesia that had voted in favor of unification with Poland—and which had for the most part come under the control of the forces of the Polish nationalists. These included the critical Upper Silesian mining areas with a heavy industrial infrastructure. Poland obtained almost half of the Upper Silesia’s 2,073,663 inhabitants, though it received only about a third of the total territory.

The German government of Joseph Wirth at first threatened to resign over the decision but then changed course. German capitalism’s interests were temporarily appeased by an agreement with Poland to supply coal, but the “loss” of Upper Silesia served as a tool for mobilizing the incipient German fascist movement.



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