This week in history: October 18-24

17 October 2021

25 years ago: "White March" protests in Belgium

On October 20, 1996, the "White March" was held in Brussels. It was the largest demonstration in the history of Belgium. More than 300,000 people, carrying white balloons, white roses and white lilies, joined the protest over the case of Marc Dutroux, accused of murder, abduction and child pornography. The march was called by the parents of four young girls whom Dutroux had tortured and killed.

Outrage over the case, and the widespread conviction that the top echelons of Belgian society were implicated in it, were fueled by the dismissal of Jean-Marc Connerotte, the magistrate in charge of the investigation. Connerotte had exposed and arrested Dutroux, his wife and Brussels businessman Michel Nihoul. All of them had enjoyed the protection of the judicial system for years. Connerrotte's dismissal followed press reports that he was about to indict high-ranking officials who had been identified in videotapes confiscated from the killer's home.

Virtually the entire country followed the Belgian supreme court hearing called to decide on Connerotte's dismissal. Radios were turned on in all big factories, schools, universities and offices. The court had hardly issued its verdict when workers at the Volkswagen plant in Forest and at the Opel factory in Antwerp, steelworkers from Cockerill-Sambre, dockers and railway workers laid down their tools and poured into the streets.

Thousands of workers blockaded the streets and marched to town halls and courts. Cobblestones were hurled through the windows at the Central Court in Antwerp. Hundreds of angry apprentices attempted to storm the building. In Liege, firefighters drove their engines to the court building and sprayed it with their hoses. They said they were seeking to "clean up this nest of corruption and crime."

While there was a "no politics" rule demanded of the White March demonstration by its organizers, Belgian separatists and fascists sought to use the Dutroux case for their own benefit, arguing for the dissolution of Belgium into a confederation of independent states.

Strikes and protest actions continued through to the next day. What began as a terrible crime and long-running legal scandal erupted into a wide-ranging political crisis for the entire government. The social tensions generated by the Dutroux case threatened to turn the class conflicts which had been welling up into an explosion.

50 years ago: New York City launches Knapp Commission into police corruption

On October 18, 1971, the Commission to Investigate Alleged Police Corruption opened its first hearing investigating corruption in the New York City Police Department. Known as the "Knapp Commission" after the commission's chairman, Judge Whitman Knapp, the investigation would reveal widespread systematic criminal activity throughout the entire police force.

New York Mayor John Lindsay was compelled to form the commission after two New York police officers, Frank Serpico and David Durk, went to the *New York Times* with information they had collected over several years detailing the routine corrupt and illegal activities carried out as part of normal police activity. The *Times* published the revelations on April 25, 1970. The expose caused widespread public outrage, forcing Lindsay to convene the Knapp Commission.

Among countless instances of abuse of power and bribery, Serpico and Durk found that a gambling ring was paying police officers $1,000 per month to ignore and protect their racket. Another report uncovered that heroin dealers had paid NYPD officers as much as $50,000 to destroy criminal evidence. Police collected totals of between $10 million and $30 million per year in payments from businesses to look the other way on various legal code violations. Many smaller businesses reported giving weekly or monthly payments to officers for fear of reprisals should they have refused.

Within a year of the *Times* report, Serpico was assigned to a dangerous drug bust operation, in which he was shot and gravely injured. Though he survived, the circumstances of the shooting strongly suggest that it was an effort, orchestrated by the NYPD, to kill him and silence other potential whistleblowers. There was never any investigation into the shooting.

When it was his turn to testify before the Knapp Commission, Durk relayed his experiences attempting to bring the corruption to light:

"The fact is that wherever we turned in the police department and the city we were met not with cooperation, not with appreciation or an eagerness to seek out the truth but with suspicion, hostility … we had a great fear that at any moment our efforts might be betrayed. We wanted to believe in the rule of law but those in high places everywhere from within the department, the DA's office, and City Hall were determined not to enforce the law but to turn their heads away when law and justice were being sold away on every street corner."

The final report of the Knapp Commission made a handful of

© World Socialist Web Site

recommendations to the mayor's office. These amounted to little more than an appeal for police to change their behavior.

The hearings' main purpose was to contain and divert anger against the police. A handful of officers would be indited for the most egregious offenses, but the Knapp Commission served to cover up the top-to-bottom criminality of the NYPD, which was—and is—inseparable from the police's main function of protecting the interests of the city's capitalist elites.

75 years ago: Britain uses Corfu Channel incident to stoke Cold War

On October 22, 1946, a flotilla of the British Royal Navy struck mines as it passed through the Corfu Channel near the coast of Albania, resulting in the deaths of 44 sailors and injuries to 42 more. The disaster was the second, and most deadly of three similar incidents. British navy ships had struck mines in a similar area in May, and would again in November.

After the May incident, Britain immediately blamed the new Albanian government, which was orienting to the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union. The Albanian regime rejected the charge that it was culpable, instead accusing Britain of trespassing in its territorial waters. The British government responded by declaring that any further incidents would be viewed as an act of war.

The October flotilla was dispatched as a deliberate provocation, with the stated intention of testing the right of passage near Albanian waters. It involved the cruisers HMS Mauritius and HMS Leander, and the destroyers HMS Saumarez and HMS Volage, whose crew were instructed to fire if attacked. The Saumarez and Volage both struck mines and sustained heavy damage, near the bay of Saranda on the Albanian coast. The Albanian navy dispatched a ship to assist in the rescue operations.

In November, another incident would occur, when Royal Navy vessels struck mines as they were carrying out sweeping operations in Albanian waters. The operation was conducted by Britain with the support of the US, but without authorization from the Albania, which had suffered under a brutal occupation by fascist Italy during World War II.

Over the following years, Britain would repeatedly use the incidents as a diplomatic and political battering ram against the Soviet-aligned Eastern European states, including by launching legal action against Albania at the International Court of Justice. The British actions in the Corfu Channel took place amid the first stages of the Cold war and coincided with similar provocations against the Soviet Union. This included the use of the British navy to instigate a major diplomatic conflict with the USSR over control of the Turkish Straits.

100 years ago: Communist University of the Toilers of the East founded

On October 21, 1921, the Communist International founded the Communist University of the Toilers of the East in Moscow. The university was designed to train revolutionary leaders from the colonial and semi-colonial countries of Asia and Africa, as well as national minorities in the Soviet Republic, in Marxist theory and working-class organization.

The university had its origins in discussion at the Second Congress of the Communist International in June 1920 when the Dutch Communist Henk Sneevliet proposed:

> "The Third International should make it possible for students from the Far East to live here for a year or so, to study courses in Communism, so that they properly understand what is taking place here and can breathe life into the theses [resolutions of the Congress], create Soviet organizations, and carry out Communist work in the colonies.... Moscow and Petrograd are the new Meccas of the East. We here in Russia must make it possible for Eastern revolutionaries to get a theoretical education, so that the Far East becomes a living part of the Communist International."

Instructors at the university included the future Vietnamese nationalist leader Ho Chi Minh, the Soviet Peoples Commissar of Education, Anatoly Lunacharsky, and the noted Soviet historian Mikhail Pokrovsky, as well as guest lectures by Trotsky, Bukharin, Krupskaya, Lozovsky, and veteran Japanese socialist leader Sen Katayama.

Alumni of the school included Liu Shaoqi, the future President of the People's Republic of China; the Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping; Jomo Kenyatta, the first president of independent Kenya; M.N. Roy, founder of the Indian Communist Party; and the Turkish poet Nâz?m Hikmet.

The university was particularly active in its first years in training Chinese youth as Marxists, including future leaders of the Communist Party of China such as Peng Shuzhi and Wang Fanxi who later played central roles in the Trotskyist movement.

At the third anniversary celebrations of the university, Trotsky underscored the significance of the institution for the world revolution:

"… the students of the Communist University for Toilers of the East will say: 'We are here. We have learnt one thing. We know not only how to translate the ideas of Marxism and Leninism into the language of China, India, Turkey and Korea; but we have also learnt how to translate the sufferings, passions, demands and the hopes of the toiling masses of the East into the language of Marxism.'"

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site