

This week in history: November 8-14

7 November 2021

25 years ago: Riot police deployed to French Guiana to put down protests

On November 14, 1996, over 500 riot police were dispatched from France to Cayenne, French Guiana, to suppress rioting in the South American colonial territory. The riots had begun on November 7 after police attacked high school students protesting against poor conditions in local schools.

The youth had widespread popular support. Workers shut down the colony's international airport for an entire day. The main labor union, the Trade Union of Education Workers of Guiana (UTG), called a one-day general strike in solidarity. Over 5,000 people participated in a demonstration in support of the strike.

French Guiana, the last full-fledged colony in South America, had an unemployment rate of over 25 percent coupled with a high cost of living. Since 1983 the population had risen by 70 percent, to 140,000. Population growth and inflation were driven, in part, by a construction boom associated with the establishment of the European Space Agency's Ariane rocket program launch site at Kourou. The colony imported \$750 million of goods in 1994 and exported only \$45 million. The French government sought to stem the deficit by cuts in social benefits and subsidies.

French government officials also sought to witch-hunt immigrant workers, mostly from Haiti, Suriname and Brazil, for the outbreak of the violence. Jean-Jacques de Peretti, minister of overseas territories, said the youth were justified in demanding improvements in the schools but blamed the problems on the influx of immigrants. He claimed that half the students starting school each year could not speak French. Prefect Pierre Dartout called the unrest "planned actions intended to de-stabilize Guiana."

50 years ago: Castro visits Allende in Chile

On November 10, 1971, then Cuban Prime Minister Fidel

Castro made his first visit to Latin America in 11 years, traveling to Chile to meet with the country's President Salvador Allende. After Allende's election the previous year, Chile had become the first country in the Western Hemisphere to open normal relations with Cuba. Originally intended to last a week, Castro extended his tour of Chile to a full month.

Castro's central aim was to lend his supposedly revolutionary credentials to Allende, who was facing an immense social crisis within his country. Chile had accumulated over \$3 billion in foreign debt that it was unable to repay. To appease the imperialist debt holders, Allende began distancing himself from his previous promises of great economic and social reforms.

As the *Bulletin*, the US forerunner of the *World Socialist Web Site*, explained, "Castro is on a rescue mission for Allende in the most concrete sense of the term—not in a struggle with the imperialists, but to bar the further advance of the Chilean workers and peasants."

At public appearances Allende welcomed Castro with military displays and parades in front of mass crowds. The full memberships of both the Communist and Socialist parties of Chile were mobilized to assist in welcoming the Cuban leader. Stops were made at places where nationalizations of copper mines or land had recently taken place. Allende said he was trying to prove that "Chile is living a revolutionary process under a revolutionary government, although different from those used in Cuba ... the end is the same however, to make Chile politically independent and economically sovereign."

Notably, Castro made no attempt to embrace the Revolutionary Left Movement (MIR), which declared itself Castroist, and which had organized peasant uprisings to forcibly appropriate land (while at the same time encouraging illusions that Allende could be pushed to the left by such actions). Castro instead used every opportunity to promote Allende's Popular Front government, comprised of Stalinists, Social Democrats and various bourgeois radicals and liberals.

Promoting the national interests of the Cuban regime, Castro hoped that the visit to Chile would be the first of many to countries where he could establish more regular

diplomatic and economic relations. Among the connections Castro made on his journey were Augusto Pinochet, who had recently been assigned by Allende to impose martial law in the Santiago province, and Juan Velasco Alvarado, the military dictator of Peru.

75 years ago: French Communist Party wins plurality of votes in national election

On November 10, 1946, a national ballot was held in France to elect the National Assembly of the Fourth Republic and thereby determine the first regular government since the end of the Second World War.

The French Communist Party (PCF) received the largest number of votes, with 28 percent of the total, far more than any other party. The result reflected widespread anti-capitalist sentiment and hostility to the French ruling class and the conservative parties, all of which were implicated in the wartime Vichy regime that had collaborated with the Nazis.

Prior to the election, the PCF had been in a provisional government with the Christian democrats of the Popular Republican Movement (MRP) and the social democrats of the French section of the Workers' International (SFIO).

The tripartite alliance had unsuccessfully campaigned for a constitution that would mandate a unicameral parliament, presenting this as a guarantee against the dominance of privileged interests. When a referendum in May was defeated, they shelved the proposal, redrafting a constitution that provided for two houses of parliament, but with primary lawmaking power invested in the National Assembly.

Compared with elections for a temporary Constituent Assembly, held in June, the November ballot registered a growth in support for the PCF. In the Constituent Assembly, the MRP had held 166 seats, the PCF 153 and the SFIO 128. In the National Assembly, the PCF secured 182 seats to the MRP's 173 and the SFIO's 102.

The PCF, in line with its Stalinist program and the needs of the Soviet bureaucracy, was hostile to any fight for socialist revolution, amid the crisis and upheaval of the postwar period. It shared the pro-capitalist perspective of the social democrats and sought to provide the stabilization of capitalist rule with a democratic and radical fig leaf.

Despite its numerical superiority, the PCF's suggestion that it head the new government was rebuffed, with SFIO former Prime Minister Léon Blum instead taking the lead in the new cabinet. The Stalinists would take up several ministerial positions, where they faithfully served the needs

of the French bourgeoisie. But in 1947, amid a strike wave and the deepening of the Cold War, the Stalinists would be ousted from the cabinet by their erstwhile allies.

100 years ago: Italian fascists create national party

On November 9, 1921, the fascist *Fasci Italiani di Combattimento* ("Italian fighting bands") under the leadership of Benito Mussolini reorganized themselves at the Third National Fascist Congress on November 7-10 as a political party, the *Partito Nazionale Fascista* (National Fascist Party, or NFP).

The armed fascist bands had terrorized working-class organizations, including elected socialist officials, trade unions and peasant organizations, since the mass factory occupations of "the two red years," 1919 and 1920, had brought Italy to the brink of revolution.

The fascist violence and defense by socialist and workers organizations had turned into a low-intensity civil war by early 1921. In August, Mussolini and other fascist leaders had signed a pact of pacification with the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) and the General Confederation of Labor (CGL). The pact, however, was ignored by many local fascist leaders who continued their assaults on the working class. Mussolini's attempt to hold back his followers in the countryside also threatened to split the urban from the rural fascist movement.

The attempts to give fascism a "left" gloss by naming the new party the Fascist Labor Party, at Mussolini's urging, failed at the congress, and the new National Fascist Party became an organization based on local action squads. Mussolini was forced to renounce the Pact of Pacification on November 15.

The NFP came to power after Mussolini's march on Rome in 1922 and was effectively the only legal party in Italy from 1925 to 1943.



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