

This week in history: January 10-16

9 January 2022

25 years ago: Turkey threatens Cyprus over missiles

On January 11, 1997, Turkey threatened military action against the Republic of Cyprus over a deal to purchase surface-to-air S-300 missiles from Russia, sparking tensions that lasted through the following year.

The \$426 million missile deal was reached January 4, though Cyprus claimed that the missiles would not be deployed for another 16 months. In response, the Turkish Armed Forces then purchased surface-to-air missiles from Israel and also threatened to take Varosha, a highly disputed area that had been sealed off since the 1974 Turkish invasion. The Cypriot Armed Forces were placed on the highest alert amid preparations for mobilization.

The Greek Cypriot government said that the weapons were only for defense, but Turkey, which had occupied the northern section of the island since 1974, saw it as a direct threat to the established military “balance” in the region.

Turkey maintained 35,000 troops in Cyprus. Of the island’s 730,000 population, 78 percent were Greek Cypriot, and about 18 percent were Turkish, most of whom were concentrated in the northern part of the island. The Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus had declared independence in 1983 but was not recognized by any other government besides Turkey.

Yiannakis Cassoulides, a spokesman for the Greek Cypriot government, told the press that the missile buildup was “proportional” to that of its Turkish counterpart. “None of these arms purchases will be used against anyone, unless attacked,” he said.

The United States and United Nations intervened to attempt to persuade Cyprus to get rid of the missiles, which would have been a major concession to Turkey, and failed. Instead, Cyprus ended up storing the missiles in the Greek island of Crete.

50 years ago: South Africa moves against strike wave in occupied Namibia

On January 12, 1972, the South African government flew in extra police reinforcements to Namibia (called South West Africa by the South African government) to suppress a strike

by 13,000 miners in the Ovamboland region.

The strike had begun at the end of December and was quickly spreading into a mass movement of all Namibian workers against the South West African apartheid regime. It paralyzed the mining industry. Ten key mines that produced mostly copper and nickel were entirely shut down.

The territory of South West Africa had originally been a German colony whose ownership was transferred to South Africa by the League of Nations following World War I. In 1966 the United Nations terminated the League of Nations’ decision and voted to directly govern the country itself until it could transition to independence, also officially changing its name from South West Africa to Namibia in 1968. However, South Africa refused to recognize the UN ruling and maintained effective control over Namibia until 1990, when independence would finally be established.

The Ovambo and other native Namibian workers labored in virtual slavery under a contract labor system controlled by the South African puppet government. All able-bodied men would be rounded up by agents from the mining companies, taken away from their homes, and forced into work contracts for periods of nine months to a year at a time, being paid on average 50 cents per day.

The strikers demanded the ending of the contract system, free choice in location of employment, wages equal to those of white workers, the right to leave employment, the removal of police from worksites, and the ability to bring their families to live with them at the worksite villages.

The decision to mobilize extra police forces came as the Ovambo workers began expanding their strike to other areas of Namibia. The police used brutal methods, including arrests of workers’ leaders and violent attacks on picket lines. At one workers’ meeting in late January, police killed 10 Ovambo strikers.

Despite the attempt to intimidate the workers, the strike would grow into a general strike throughout the entire country. Fearing that it threatened revolution, at the end of January the South African government agreed to make some changes to the contract labor system. Workers, however, were not satisfied as their conditions remained essentially the same. Strikes would continue up to April even as more intense police state measures were imposed, including banning all meetings of more than five people in Ovamboland.

75 years ago: Truman introduces militarist budget

On January 10, 1947, Democratic president of the United States, Harry Truman, introduced a budget to Congress which provided for continuing massive outlays to the military and a fiscal surplus to be achieved through the limiting of social spending. The budget, the second since the end of World War II, reflected the determination of American imperialism to cement itself as the dominant imperialist power.

Truman, who was overseeing the first stages of the “Cold War,” declared: “Although we expect the United Nations to move successfully toward world security, any cut in the present estimate would immediately weaken our international position.” One contemporaneous media report noted: “Defence, interest, and tax refunds together with \$3,500 million for international affairs and finance and \$7,400 million for servicemen’s benefits, account for four-fifths of the total budget.”

A front-page article in *The Militant*, then the newspaper of the American Trotskyist movement, calculated that the budget allocated “six times as much money for war as for the needs of the people.” Of the \$37.5 billion budget, \$11.5 billion was directly allocated to military expenditure. But even this was an underestimation, *The Militant* noted, with \$444 million for atomic weapons development listed under “natural resources not primarily agriculture,” and \$645 million for the rule of occupied lands, dubbed “foreign relief.”

The Militant pointed to several “contrasts.” Total outlay on the preparation for nuclear war, at \$530 million, compared with \$17 million earmarked for public health. Chemical warfare research was over \$6 million to just \$1.3 million for cancer research. Army ordnance research spending would be \$40 million, as against just \$78,950 for studies into mental health.

Truman rejected tax cuts, despite Republican demands, on the grounds that this would weaken the US budgetary position under conditions in which American imperialism had major tasks at home and abroad. While escalating a conflict with Soviet Union and seeking to shore up US dominance in Europe and elsewhere, the Truman administration was confronting the largest movement of the American working class in history, with millions engaging in strikes directed against stagnant wages, amid a soaring cost of living.

100 years ago: Second trial of Fatty Arbuckle begins

On January 11, 1922, film comedy star Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle’s second trial for manslaughter began in San Francisco. Arbuckle was accused of killing actress Virginia Rappe at the St. Francis Hotel in September 1921 after sexually

assaulting her. The San Francisco District Attorney, Matthew Brady, alleged that Arbuckle had burst Rappe’s bladder after lying on top of her.

A previous trial had ended in a hung jury in December despite a lurid campaign of slander by the national newspaper chain of William Randolph Hearst. After five days of deliberation, the jury in the second trial also failed to arrive at a decision, and another mistrial was declared.

Arbuckle was tried a third time, and on April 12, after deliberating for six minutes, the jury acquitted him. In an unusual step, the jury issued an apology, which was handed to Arbuckle personally by the foreman. Jurors then walked up to Arbuckle one by one and shook his hand.

But Arbuckle’s film career was ruined. Will H. Hays, president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (and father of Hollywood’s infamous, self-censoring “production code” of 1930), banned Arbuckle from working in film again, claiming he was an example of poor morals. After a year, Hays withdrew the ban under public pressure, but Arbuckle could not find work as an actor. Theaters refused to show his films.

The trial had all the elements of future American cultural and political censorship, including the McCarthy period, which heavily impacted Hollywood in the late 1940s and 1950s, and the #MeToo victimizations nearly a century later: presumption of guilt in the media before legal findings, an ambitious prosecutor and a public campaign supported by self-proclaimed moral purists—in Arbuckle’s case, the interfaith Women’s Vigilant Committee of San Francisco.

Arbuckle was a comic actor of tremendous talent, noted for his close professional relationships with Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton. While he was later able to work as a director under a pseudonym, many of his films have not been preserved because of neglect brought on by the witch-hunt against him.



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