This week in history: March 21-28

20 March 2022

25 years ago: Mass suicide at Heaven's Gate cult

On March 26, 1997, some 39 adherents of the Heaven's Gate cult committed mass suicide at their compound near San Diego, California, in one of the largest-ever such actions in the United States.

The victims came from a wide range of social backgrounds: the son of a telephone company CEO, the daughter of a federal judge, the brother of former television star Nichelle Nichols, the teenaged son of an English professor, a middle-aged Iowa housewife and grandmother, a postal supervisor who left behind five children, and a real estate investor and former Republican congressional candidate who left behind a wife and six children.

Many of the individuals involved had encountered some kind of serious personal crisis—the death of a loved one, divorce, job setbacks, financial difficulties—shortly before they dropped out and became followers of Marshall Applewhite and Bonnie Lu Nettles. Others were young people at loose ends after finishing high school or college.

The tragic waste of life had a broader significance than simply the account of "brainwashing" by two cult leaders that was promoted in the media. It raised troubling questions about social forces which affect broad layers of the American population.

Shortly after Applewhite and Nettles began to set up their cult in the mid-1970s, they received intense and sensationalized media coverage, with articles in *The New York Times* magazine (1975), *Time* (1975 and 1979), and *Newsweek* (1979). NBC prepared and broadcast a series pilot called *The Mysterious Two*, about an extraterrestrial couple roaming the earth, the original title called *Follow Me If You Dare* .

The ideology of Heaven's Gate was an eclectic mix of elements which were widely available in American culture, and which required only final assembly by the group's leaders. Applewhite, a minister's son who attended Union Theological Seminary, spent much of his adult life working in Houston, the headquarters of NASA, and developed a world view which combined the Bible's Book of Revelations with speculations about aliens and space travel.

Those who died in the Heaven's Gate suicides were the victims of a society which produces among millions of people a sense that they lack any future. The pessimism expressed in the self-destruction of 39 people had a material source in the absence of a significant movement for social change in the United States.

50 years ago: Britain ends home rule in Northern Ireland

On March 24, 1972, the British Tory government of Prime Minister Edward Heath imposed direct rule over Northern Ireland. The semi-autonomous Parliament of Northern Ireland was suspended, and the Northern Irish Prime Minister Brian Faulkner was removed from office and replaced by William Whitelaw, named to the newly created office of Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

The decision was essentially a declaration of martial law in Northern Ireland and the formal removal of all pretenses of "home rule" promised for the north after the 1921 partition of Ireland. Alongside the removal of the Northern Irish government, Heath sent an additional 4,000 British soldiers to Northern Ireland, bringing the occupation force to 18,500 troops.

In a speech before the British parliament, Heath said the transfer of all power to London was "an indispensable condition for progress in finding a political solution in Northern Ireland." He also announced that the extrajudicial internment of thousands of Irish Catholics suspected of supporting the Irish Republican Army would continue saying, "We must retain the power to arrest and intern those who there is good reason to believe are actively involved in terrorism and violence."

Heath had nothing to say about the "Bloody Sunday" massacre of January 30, 1972, less than two months previous, where British soldiers shot 26 unarmed civilians, killing 14 mostly young protestors, or the internment terror campaign. The decision to end home rule was a declaration from Heath that the repression in Northern Ireland would continue and be expanded. The move was welcomed by the vast majority of the British political establishment. Opposition leader Harold Wilson offered his full support to the Tories in enforcing the decision, saying the Labour Party would "give every facility for getting this legislation through."

As a result of the declaration, and in the absence of a genuine revolutionary leadership in the working class, support for the far-right Ulster nationalist parties grew. These groups called for a semi-independence of "Ulster" (Northern Ireland), as a Protestant-ruled enclave opposed to the Catholic-majority the Republic of Ireland to the south. However, apart from the occasional calls for independence, they almost always acted in the interests of British imperialism and whipped up nationalist fervor aimed at suppressing the Catholic minority.

Days before the official announcement on ending home rule, William Craig of the right-wing Ulster Vanguard Party declared at a large demonstration, "We must build up the dossiers on the men

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and women who are a menace to this country, because one day, ladies and gentlemen, if the politicians fail, it may be our job to liquidate the enemy."

75 years ago: Centralia mine disaster kills 111 workers in Illinois

On March 25, 1947, 111 workers at the Number 5 coal mine in the Illinois town of Centralia were killed in a major explosion. The disaster was one of a series of tragedies that highlighted the brutal conditions in the mines and the subordination of safety to production and profit by the barons who owned them.

The blast occurred suddenly. Its ferocity was fueled by a buildup of dangerous levels of coal dust in the mine. The source of ignition was never precisely determined. A total of 142 workers were in the mine. Of these 65 were killed directly by burns and other fire-related injuries. Another 46 perished from the effects of afterdamp, the toxic mixture of gasses left behind in the wake of the explosion. Just 31 miners escaped. Most of these found their own way out. Only eight being rescued by others, one of whom later died from afterdamp.

Beginning in 1942, Illinois State Mine Inspector Driscoll O. Scanlan had issued a series of reports to federal authorities, warning of the dangerous conditions in the Number 5 mine, including the large build-up of coal dust. Nothing was done to alleviate the dangers.

In the aftermath of the explosion, several inquiries were held by state and federal authorities. No charges were issued against the owners of the mine, the Bell & Zoller Coal & Mining Company, or its management. National safety standards were not altered, paving the way for future tragedies, including the 1951 West Frankfort, Illinois mine disaster that claimed 119 lives.

John L. Lewis, the head of the United Mine Workers of America union, denounced the Democratic Party administration of Harry Truman over the Centralia disaster. He declared that Secretary of the Interior Julius Krug was directly responsible for failing to enforce basic safety measures in mines across the country. Lewis, however, like the other major union leaders, sought to prevent a major strike wave at the time from developing into a unified movement of the working class against the Truman administration and the capitalist system.

The Centralia explosion was the worst mine disaster since 1928, but, as *The Militant*, then the American publication of the Trotskyist movement, put it, "death is an everyday affair in the coal industry under capitalist operation." It noted that 20 miners per week had been killed over the previous year. "For the mines to be converted into secure places of labor, the ruthless incentive for private profit arising from capitalist control over the mines must first be removed," the editorial explained.

100 years ago: Communist Party of Brazil founded

On March 25, 1922, nine delegates of several groups sympathetic with the Communist International met in the city of Niterói, in the state of Rio de Janeiro and formed the Communist Party of Brazil.

Although the Brazilian working class had been largely dominated by anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist organizations and politics, workers were sympathetic to the Russian Revolution of 1917. The period from 1917-1920 had seen mass strikes by the Brazilian working class particularly because of wartime inflation, including a general strike in São Paulo in the summer of 1917. In 1918, some anarchist organizations had sought to set up soviets and to win over soldiers to the working class. May 1, 1919, saw large demonstrations in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo in support of the Russian Revolution and the Hungarian and German Revolutions of that year. In São Paulo, the May Day demonstration sparked a general strike.

The delegates to the March 25 congress were primarily workers who had been active in anarchist organizations and trade unions. They included two tailors, a broom-maker, a printer, a barber, a construction worker, an electrician, and two intellectuals. They represented a combined membership of 73 people. The congress approved party statutes, which were based largely on those of the Communist Party of Argentina and accepted the 21 Conditions for entrance into the Communist International. The congress elected Abílio de Nequete as the party's general secretary.

The official name of the party was Partido Comunista – Seção Brasileira da Internacional Comunista (Communist Party, Brazilian section of the Communist International).

This was the period of Brazilian history known as the Old Republic, between the overthrow of the Brazilian Empire in 1889, and the military revolt of 1930 which installed populist Getulio Vargas. The country was still largely agricultural, and the central government was dominated by agribusiness interests, particularly the coffee barons of Sao Paulo state.

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