

This week in history: March 28-April 3

27 March 2022

25 years ago: PLO assists Israeli siege against Palestinians

On March 30, 1997, police forces deployed by Yasser Arafat's Palestinian National Authority (PNA) used clubs and gunfire to drive back demonstrators in the West Bank cities of Nablus and Hebron. Thousands took to the streets to mark Land Day, the anniversary of the 1976 Israeli massacre of Palestinians who had protested Zionist expropriations of Arab land. The 1997 anniversary fell amid growing unrest sparked by the Israeli government's initiation of a huge new housing project on the outskirts of Arab East Jerusalem.

The project was aimed at completing a cordon of Zionist settlements, sealing off Jerusalem from the West Bank. Its effect would be the *de facto* resolution of Jerusalem's fate, aimed at transforming it into a specifically Jewish city. The issue was ostensibly to have been negotiated in the permanent status talks called for in the US-mediated accord between the PLO and the Israeli state. The Israeli government claimed sovereignty over all of Jerusalem, which it had occupied in the 1967 war. The Palestinians had insisted that East Jerusalem, with the largest Palestinian population of any city, must become the capital of the Palestinian state.

The talks, which were scheduled to begin on March 17, were indefinitely postponed as a result of the Israeli provocation. In addition to Jerusalem, the talks were to deal with the future of Zionist settlement in the occupied territories and the status of a Palestinian state.

In the Land Day demonstrations, the PNA's forces served as a buffer, beating back Palestinian crowds attempting to confront heavily armed Israeli units. Palestinian commanders remained in continuous communication with the Israeli military units throughout the action. The PNA justified its actions in the name of preserving the so-called peace process.

When the Oslo Agreement was signed in September 1993, Washington proclaimed it the dawn of peace between Arabs and Israelis and the first step in creating an independent Palestinian state. For the masses of Palestinians, however, the settlement and the Palestinian nationalist project itself proved to be a cruel hoax. Unemployment remained at nearly 80 percent. Israeli troops continued to kill Palestinians. The West Bank and Gaza remained cut off from one another, and travel between towns in the West Bank was highly restricted by the Israeli military.

50 years ago: Vietnamese forces launch "Easter Offensive"

On March 30, 1972, the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN), the regular army of North Vietnam, launched a massive offensive against the US-backed puppet regime in South Vietnam (ARVN). Known as the "Easter Offensive" in the US and the "red fiery summer" in Vietnam, it was the largest mobilization since the Tet Offensive in 1968. The attack, involving around 30,000 soldiers, surprised the US, which had considered it unlikely that the North would mount a large conventional operation.

The invasion forced ARVN forces to retreat. But counteroffensives—with heavy US ground support, air strikes and bombings raids—caused a stalemate that stretched on for months. In one operation the PAVN surrounded and cut off the ARVN and US forces holding the town of An L?c, a strategically important city near Saigon. Only by a massive aerial resupply campaign and almost nonstop bombing by the US Air Force was the regime of Nguyen Van Thieu able to hold the city.

By the end of the summer the PAVN had been forced to retreat and surrender much of the ground gained during the initial wave of the offensive in March and April. It suffered an estimated 100,000 casualties in the assault, and much of its arsenal of tanks and armored vehicles were destroyed. However, it held onto several areas that would serve as staging grounds for later efforts. The operation also reconnected supply lines to the National Liberation Front in the south, significantly improving the operations of the guerrillas.

The number of South Vietnamese casualties is disputed, with the North claiming that the offensive killed and wounded over 200,000, while the US and South claim 32,000 South Vietnamese casualties. In all of 1972, only 759 US soldiers were killed, as direct involvement of US combat troops had largely ended. Estimates also indicate that about 1 million civilians became refugees due to the battles of the Easter Offensive.

In launching the invasion, Hanoi calculated that heavy US-South Vietnamese losses would strengthen anti-war sentiment in the US in the context of an approaching election year. This, in turn, would pressure the Nixon administration to grant concessions at the ongoing Paris peace negotiations. In other words, the Stalinist leadership did not envision a military victory over the puppet government but created more favorable conditions for a negotiated settlement with US imperialism.

75 years ago: Uprising in Madagascar against French colonial rule

On March 29, 1947, the Malagasy, the native people of Madagascar, launched a rebellion against French colonial rule over the island off the southeast coast of Africa. The uprising, which drew in hundreds of thousands, was met with years of brutal repression.

France had seized Madagascar at the end of the 19th century, overthrowing the native Kingdom of Imerina. Over the following decades, opposition to colonial rule repeatedly burst to the surface.

During World War II, the island, like France as a whole, came under the control of the Vichy regime, which collaborated with Nazi Germany. Its grip on the African island ended in 1942, with a successful British invasion. At the conclusion of the war, with Nazi Germany's defeat in 1945, the French authorities asked Britain for the return of the island, which was granted.

In the period immediately following the war, the discredited French bourgeoisie, with the aid of the Stalinist Communist Party, sought to restabilize capitalist rule and prevent socialist revolution. It claimed to be ushering in a new period of democracy, and together with the other Allied imperialist powers, made gestures towards decolonization.

In the first months of 1947, Madagascan representatives to the French National Assembly, Joseph Raseta and Joseph Ravoahangy, introduced a bill for independence of the island. The three were from families that had been prominent in the Imerina Kingdom. With Jacques Rabemananjara they had established the *Mouvement Démocratique de la Rénovation Malgache*, a nationalist political party, based on a pacifist and bourgeois program. The mild request for independence was met with intense hostility from French Socialist Party leader Paul Ramadier.

Within Madagascar, more radical secret societies began preparations for an uprising. On March 29, they launched a series of surprise attacks on large French-owned businesses, as well as the key headquarters of the colonial administration. The rebels were largely armed with spears. In the first weeks of April, the uprising, which began in the east, spread to the south, the central highlands and the capital of Antananarivo. As many as 1 million were estimated to have taken up the fight.

The Ramadier administration responded by tripling the French military presence from 6,000 to 18,000. They began a brutal campaign of terror that lasted for the next two years, including mass executions, torture and the destruction of entire villages. The death toll remains unknown, with estimates spanning from a low of 11,000 up to 100,000 or more.

100 years ago: North American coal miners strike

On March 31, 1922 at midnight, over 600,000 American and Canadian coal miners walked off the job to demand higher wages and improved working conditions. It ranks as the largest strike in North American history. Those walking off the job included 150,000 anthracite (hard coal) miners in northeastern Pennsylvania, and 446,545 bituminous (soft coal) miners in the US and Canada. They were joined by 186,000 non-union miners. The

strike affected over 10,000 coal mines.

The bituminous miners were fighting to maintain their wage scale against a cut of 20-40 percent threatened by the coal operators, as well as a six-hour day, five-day week, and a dues check-off, which employers were proposing to abolish. Anthracite miners were demanding a 20 percent wage increase, as opposed to the employers, who were demanding wage reductions.

The strike immediately followed the bitter coal wars in West Virginia and Kentucky, including the famous Battle of Blair Mountain, in which armed miners confronted state police and gun thugs hired by the coal operators, and eventually federal troops. An increasingly militant mood was developing in the mines, which began to take on political demands. In February 1922, UMW delegates convened in a special session to discuss wage demands, and by a large majority supported nationalization of the coal mines and the creation of a labor party.

In some areas of the country, the strike developed into near civil war conditions. In the town of Herrin in southern Illinois, when a mine owner attempted to open a mine closed by the strike, hundreds of armed miners laid siege to the mine. Two strikers and 21 strikebreakers were killed.

The strike caused a major political crisis for the administration of Republican President Warren G. Harding, particularly after a national rail strike began in July, involving 400,000 workers. The Harding administration threatened to send troops to the mines, but UMW President John L. Lewis called his bluff. Harding never acted on the threat but instead persuaded employers to negotiate with the UMW.

Lewis ended the strike in August with some wage increases overseen by a federal bureaucracy, the National Coal Commission. Lewis abandoned not only the miners' demands for nationalization of the industry but also the railway workers who were defying a draconian back-to-work injunction, as well as tens of thousands of non-union coal miners who held out for months but were eventually forced back to work. Lewis' modest victory proved short-lived. The industry as a whole began a process of retrenchment—closing mines, reducing hours and laying off miners—which would last through the 1920s and 1930s.



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