

This week in history: April 25-May 1

24 April 2022

25 years ago: Nike workers strike in Vietnam and Indonesia

On April 25, 1997, thousands of workers struck at Nike shoe factories in Vietnam and Indonesia in a powerful demonstration of the opposition among Asian workers to the sweatshop exploitation imposed by the multinational corporations.

In Vietnam, a three-hour work stoppage took place at the South Korean-owned Sam Yang factory, a Nike subcontractor, near Ho Chi Minh City, the former Saigon. About 3,000 workers were involved in the walkout. The strike was provoked by a contract offer from the company which provided a pay raise of only 5 percent, bringing the workers to the equivalent of \$40.32 a month. Most Nike shoes sold for well over \$100 a pair in the United States.

The Vietnamese government secured an end to the strike after Ministry of Labor officials told the workers that a government regulation limited the wage offer to a total of 10 percent over two years. Workers were also demanding presentation of contract offers at least two days before they were required to vote on them and prohibition of harassment by management.

The action by the Nike workers in Indonesia was both more extensive and more violent than the strike in Vietnam. Thousands of workers at PT Hardaya Aneka Shoe Industry, a Nike subcontractor in Tangerang, an industrial suburb north of Jakarta, fought with police and set fire to cars after a strike began over unresolved wage demands. Two women workers were hospitalized after police attacked them.

The 10,000 workers at the factory complained that they were not even being paid the legal \$2.50 a day minimum wage. Three days before the violence erupted, 13,000 workers from the Nike plant and other nearby clothing factories walked out and staged a six-mile-long protest demonstration demanding higher wages.

The rebellion by the Indonesian workers came on the eve of the opening of the official campaign for national elections to be held in May. The elections were held every five years to provide a democratic fig leaf to the Suharto dictatorship. The day after the Nike strike was settled, the military regime issued “shoot-to-kill” orders against any further disturbances during the election campaign.

50 years ago: Hutu uprising met with mass slaughter in Burundi

On April 29, 1972, militant Hutus launched an abortive uprising against Burundi’s military dictator, Michel Micombero, who belonged to the Tutsi ethnic group that dominated nearly all government positions. Micombero responded with major repression and genocidal mass killings against the Hutus.

The uprising was sparked when an exiled Hutu leader, Ntare, returned to Burundi at the end of March. Once he entered the country, he was immediately placed under house arrest by Micombero. Ntare was murdered in captivity on April 29. The same day, Micombero announced he was dissolving parliament and removed all government officials who were not loyal to his regime. Hoping to take advantage of the crisis, the Hutu militants launched their uprising later that night, overrunning government offices and armories in the country’s southern reaches, and declaring the formation of a new state, the Republic of Martyazo. It is estimated that around 1,000 Tutsis were killed.

Micombero received military support from France and Belgium, as well as from neighboring Zaire and Tanzania. By May 10, the Burundian government had retaken all rebel-controlled areas. Micombero then unleashed murderous reprisals against the Hutus. Estimates place the number of Hutus killed at between 100,000 to 300,000, with 500,000 more made refugees. The educated were particularly targeted. Perhaps 75 percent of literate Hutu men were killed.

The ethnic divisions were a longstanding tool of the imperialists, which the bourgeois nationalists of “decolonizing” Africa were incapable of overcoming. Germany first colonized Burundi and neighboring Rwanda in the 1880s, and was supplanted by Belgium after World War I. The European powers bestowed privileges, administrative, and military positions on the Tutsis, while the Hutus, who made up 85 percent of the population, were denied basic rights and lived in abject poverty.

75 years ago: Right-wing massacre at May Day demonstration in Sicily

On May 1, 1947, workers and peasants in the Sicilian municipality of Piana degli Albanesi were hit by a barrage of gunfire as they marked May Day, the holiday of international working class unity. Eleven were killed and 27 were wounded in the massacre, which provoked a general strike of the Italian working class that included 6 million workers.

In the morning, a crowd of hundreds, most of them poor peasants, had gathered several kilometers from the town of Piana degli Albanesi. They were to listen to several speeches before marching to the village of San Giuseppe Jato near Palermo. As the local Communist Party secretary began to address the crowd, it was hit by a hail of machine-gun fire. The shooting came from several neighboring hilltops and there were also reports of men on horseback opening fire.

Salvatore Giuliano, a local separatist leader, was accused of responsibility for the attack, which he admitted. Giuliano's regional separatism went hand in hand with banditry. While his followers sought to present this in Robin Hood terms, the activities of Giuliano's militia intersected with the shadowy operations of the Mafia and right-wing political forces. Giuliano would never name any other parties involved in the massacre or provide a clear motive for the massacre, but it had a definite political character.

The shooting took place on the second May Day rally after World War II and the defeat of the fascist forces that had ruled Germany and Italy. Italian society was deeply polarized, with a working class determined to settle scores with reaction ranged against the same right-wing forces that had been prominent in Benito Mussolini's fascist dictatorship.

Significantly, the massacre took place just twelve days after the results of Sicilian regional elections were announced. The so-called People's Bloc, of the Communist Party and the Socialist Party, had overwhelmingly defeated the Christian Democratic Party and other right-wing formations. This deepened a crisis of the unstable national government of Christian Democratic Prime Minister Alcide De Gasperi.

His Interior Minister Mario Scelba was among the most insistent that the shooting was "non-political" and related only to local banditry. Communist Party leader Girolamo Li Causi would accuse Scelba of direct involvement in the massacre, which he claimed was part of a broader campaign by the national government against left-wing forces.

The Communist Party had played a key role in creating the conditions for the massacre. In line with the class-collaborationist program of Stalinism, it had supported the Allied occupation of Italy at the conclusion of the war and the restabilization of capitalism. The Communist Party entered into the first "national unity" governments after the war.

The massacre occurred as the alignment between Stalinism and the British and US imperialist powers was breaking down and giving way to the Cold War, which found expression in the elevation of De Gasperi, a ferocious anti-communist.

100 years ago: Civil war in China

On April 29, 1922, civil war broke out in China between two contending factions of warlords within the northern Chinese regime known as the Beiyang government.

Both factions, the Zhili clique led by Wu Peifu and the Fengtian clique, led by Zhang Zuolin, had combined in 1920 to seize Beijing from a third faction, the Anhui clique. They ruled in an uneasy coalition that broke apart when the Fengtian clique, which had the support of Japanese imperialism, replaced the premier and cabinet and redirected funds allocated to the Zhili clique, which had the support of British and American imperialism. Wu Peifu forced the collapse of the Fengtian-led government and both factions had mobilized forces by April 25.

The struggle, known as the First Zhili-Fengtian War, began on April 29 when Zhang Zuolin led a force against Zhili headquarters at Baoding, 93 miles (150 kilometers) southwest of Beijing. The next day martial law was declared in Beijing and fighting reached the outskirts of the city.

The American legation called for the US government to send a warship to Tianjin, the coastal city 67 miles (108 kilometers) southeast of Beijing. In the next weeks the Zhili faction won several decisive victories. British missionaries then brokered a peace between the two factions and the Fengtian forces withdrew to Manchuria.

Wu Peifu took control of the government in Beijing and the Zhili clique ruled alone until 1924 when Fengtian clique, again backed by Japan, overthrew it.



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