

# This week in history: May 2-8

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## 25 years ago: Clinton visits Mexico

On May 5, 1997, US President Bill Clinton flew to Mexico for the first time in his presidency for a three-day visit, followed by stops in Costa Rica and Barbados.

Such trips were a standard feature of Washington's relationship with Mexico going back to the days of the dictator Porfirio Diaz at the beginning of the century. They were briefly interrupted only by the revolution of 1911-1920 and then the expropriation of foreign oil facilities under President Lazaro Cardenas in 1938.

Clinton addressed only carefully selected audiences of businessmen and government officials. Both the Mexican government and his own advisers felt it necessary to seal the US president off from the workers, peasants, unemployed and impoverished people who make up the great bulk of the country's population of 90 million.

The visit occasioned the most intense security operation in Mexico City since the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre, when troops shot down student demonstrators in the center of the capital. The city was placed under a virtual state of siege with soldiers occupying the streets. Basic democratic rights were suspended during the US president's visit. Some opponents of the government were arrested on the eve of Clinton's arrival to prevent them from organizing protests. Several demonstrations were broken up. Street peddlers, homeless people and street children were rounded up in a number of areas to prevent their presence from disturbing Clinton's visit.

The extreme precautions expressed the concern that the Clinton visit could become the target of popular discontent. Ever since the outbreak of the Mexican debt crisis in 1982, the relation between US economic interests and social misery in Mexico became increasingly obvious.

In 1997, President Ernesto Zedillo's economic social policies were determined by the dictates of the International Monetary Fund and Wall Street banks. That connection became even more direct following the 1994 peso crisis and subsequent "rescue plan" put together by the Clinton administration, as well as the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

The impact of these policies was a drastic social polarization. The 1994 crisis wiped out over 1 million jobs, wages fell by 40 percent, so that by 1997 the average wage was just \$1.21 an

hour. This impoverishment served as a magnet for multinational corporations, which flocked to reap the benefits of cheap labor, turning the US-Mexico border into one of the fastest growing economic zones in the world.

## 50 years ago: Nixon launches escalation of Vietnam War

On May 4, 1972, the United States and its puppet government in South Vietnam pulled out of the Paris Peace Accords in preparation for a major escalation of the war against North Vietnam. Within days it launched "Operation Linebacker" and "Operation Pocket Money," massive bombing and mining campaigns targeting Vietnamese infrastructure.

"Linebacker" claimed to focus on military targets, but its main effect was to wipe out civilian infrastructure, devastating transportation, energy, irrigation and industrial systems. Several thousand civilians died in 20,000-30,000 American and South Vietnamese sorties over several months. "Pocket Money" mined North Vietnam's harbors. The North received 85 percent of its imports, mainly from the Soviet Union and China, through its ports. The measure had been discussed by the White House and military planners previously in the war, but it was ruled out as it came with the danger of triggering a wider war.

Nixon calculated that his "détente" strategy of normalizing relations with the Chinese and reducing tensions with the Soviets would allow the escalation without provoking a response: correctly, as it turned out. The rival Stalinist cliques in Moscow and Beijing valued the deals they cut with Nixon more than supporting the Vietnamese revolution. The mining effort forced the closure of the port of Haiphong for 300 days, while "Linebacker" annihilated road and train links with China.

"Linebacker" was a homicidal terror bombing campaign. Writing for the *Bulletin*, the US predecessor to the *World Socialist Web Site*, David North noted, "The intensified bombing of the population centers, as well as the irrigation system, will yield little military profit. However, it is clearly the intention of Nixon to intimidate the workers and peasants of Vietnam with the threat of mass murder."

This assessment was later vindicated when Nixon's presidential tapes were made public. "We're not going to go out whimpering," Nixon raged. "We're going to take out the

power plants. We're going to take out Haiphong, we're gonna level that goddamn country."

Nixon's murderous last-ditch efforts were aimed at forcing a settlement with the North that would leave the South Vietnamese puppet government in power after the US troop withdrawal. But this too proved to be a fantasy. The working masses of Vietnam were preparing to sweep Washington's stooges out alongside the remaining American forces.

### **75 years ago: New York City concludes successful mass vaccination campaign against smallpox**

On May 2, 1947, New York City authorities brought to an end a massive campaign of vaccination in response to an outbreak of the virulent and deadly smallpox disease. In the space of a month, the unprecedented public health campaign had seen the inoculation of 6,350,000 people.

The outbreak had begun in late February, when Eugene Le Bar, a rug merchant, and his wife returned to the city from a vacation in Mexico. Le Bar was hospitalized in early March, though his symptoms, including fever and a rash, were initially misdiagnosed, and he quickly died.

Two other patients at the Willard Parker Hospital, where Le Bar had been treated, one of them a 22-month-old baby girl, developed similar symptoms. When biopsies found that they had Guarnieri bodies, cellular features associated with smallpox, Le Bar's autopsy was reexamined, and he was discovered to also have indications of the disease.

Smallpox had been one of the deadliest diseases in modern history, claiming some 300 million lives in the 20th century. Its lethality among those infected had been estimated at 30 percent, with an even higher mortality rate among children. Survivors can be left with a series of debilitating conditions, including blindness, sterility and serious skin lesions.

Once the infections were identified, the city moved rapidly to identify those potentially exposed, eventually identifying 10 cases in total. On April 4, 1947, New York City Mayor William O'Dwyer and Commissioner of Health Israel Weinstein informed the public of the infection and explained the necessity for a universal vaccination campaign aimed at protecting the population and ending the outbreak.

At that point, the city only possessed some 250,000 vaccines. The authorities moved rapidly to establish arrangements for the pharmaceutical corporations to produce the required doses. A public campaign, outlining the crucial importance of inoculation, was accompanied by the establishment of vaccination centers in communities throughout the city. The successful effort was the subject of a 1950 film, *The Killer That Stalked New York*, reviewed by the WSWS earlier this year in the context of the disastrous, profit-driven response to the

COVID-19 pandemic.

### **100 years ago: Estonian government executes Communist leader**

On May 4, 1922, the government of the new Baltic state of Estonia executed Viktor Kingissepp, a leading figure in the Communist Party of Estonia. Kingissepp was arrested a day earlier by the Estonian internal security services in the aftermath of a May Day rally and sentenced to death by court martial.

Kingissepp had joined the Bolshevik faction of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party in 1906 during the 1905 Russian Revolution and organized the party in St. Petersburg and Reval (later Tallinn). After the overthrow of the tsar in March 1917, he helped to organize the Bolshevik Party and Red Guards in Estonia. After the October Revolution, he led the disbanding of the bourgeois Estonian Provincial Assembly.

He left Estonia during the German occupation of 1918 and worked in Petrograd for the Extraordinary Commission for the Suppression of Counterrevolution and Sabotage (the Cheka) and participated in the arrest of Fanny Kaplan, the woman who attempted to assassinate Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin in 1918.

Kingissepp returned to Estonia later that year and conducted underground work, primarily in Tallinn, the capital, and helped to organize the illegal Estonian Communist Party after the Tartu Peace Treaty of 1920 between the recently established bourgeois state of Estonia and the Soviet Republic. He authored dozens of leaflets and pamphlets and played a significant role in organizing the 1919 trade union congress, whose leaders were later deported or shot by the Estonian government.



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