

# This week in history: June 6-12

5 June 2022

## 25 years ago: Geronimo Pratt murder conviction vacated

On June 10, 1997, former Black Panther leader Geronimo Pratt was finally granted a new trial in one of the most notorious frame-up cases arising from the FBI's Counter-Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO). He had been convicted 25 years earlier on murder charges in southern California, and was now 49 years old, having spent more than half his life in prison.

Pratt had been a spokesman for the black radical group in Los Angeles when he was arrested and charged with the 1968 murder of Caroline Olsen, a teacher who was attacked along with her husband on a tennis court in Santa Monica in the course of a robbery.

The case was based almost entirely on testimony from Julius Butler, who had been an informer for both the FBI and the Los Angeles Police Department within the Panthers. Butler was expelled from the Panther organization because he advocated violence. At the direction of the FBI and LAPD, Butler testified that Pratt had confessed to killing Caroline Olsen. The FBI closed its file on Butler during the trial so that he could deny that he was an informer when asked.

Pratt's conviction was part of a campaign in which the authorities attacked the Panthers through a combination of spying, harassment, provocations, and outright murder. Pratt had steadfastly denied his guilt throughout the entire ordeal, stating that he was in San Francisco 400 miles away at the time of the killing. Police wiretaps confirmed Pratt had been speaking at a meeting in northern California, but this evidence was withheld from the defense and the jury.

The case received widespread attention, but four appeals of his conviction were turned down, along with 16 separate applications for parole. Only 25 years later did Orange County Superior Court Judge Everett Dickey, a conservative Republican, rule that Pratt's 1972 conviction on murder and kidnapping charges should be overturned because of misconduct by the Los Angeles district attorney's office, which concealed from the defense and the jury that the key witness against Pratt was a paid police informant.

Los Angeles District Attorney Gil Garcetti appealed this

decision, and in February 1999 the 2nd District Circuit Court of Appeal issued a 3-0 ruling upholding Judge Dickey and reaffirming his order that Pratt receive a new trial. Garcetti then announced that Los Angeles authorities were dropping all charges against Pratt, because most witnesses in the case had died and Pratt had already served 25 years in prison at the time of his release.

## 50 years ago: 427 killed in mine disaster in Rhodesia

On June 6, 1972, a massive explosion destroyed the No. 2 shaft of the Wankie Colliery in Rhodesia (today Zimbabwe). The explosion was the eighth deadliest mine disaster in world history, killing 427 workers. The force of the explosion was so great that workers both inside the mine and on the surface died from the blast.

There were only eight survivors. Rescue operations were thwarted by massive quantities of poisonous gas. Mine experts reported that most of those who survived the initial explosion would have quickly suffocated.

The Wankie Colliery was Rhodesia's only coal mine, supplying fuel for trains that carried the country's natural resources to the coast for export. The mine had a huge output, producing on average 4 million tons of coal per year.

The immediate cause of the blast has never been determined but it is suspected to have been set off by the ignition of coal dust and explosive gasses when workers attempted to dynamite one area of the mine. Whatever the immediate cause, central responsibility rest with the mine owners and operators, who repeatedly ignored warnings that a disaster of this kind was likely.

According to the report of a Commission of Inquiry into the disaster published in 1973, there had been several warning signs in the years leading up to the explosion. Both in 1960 and in 1970 there had been smaller explosions in the mine that led to serious burn injuries. In addition, the report found that over the course of many years the mine had repeatedly been tested and showed signs of flammable gas buildups. Yet no steps were taken to alleviate these dangers.

The report concluded, "Management failed to realize the danger of coal-dust in the Mine; it failed, also, to remove the danger by applying stone-dust. Because of this a coal-dust explosion took place." Despite these findings, the Rhodesian

apartheid government took no action against the mine owners.

On June 11 a mass funeral attended by over 5,000 was held for the workers, many of whose bodies were never recovered.

### **75 years ago: Greek Trotskyists rounded up by reactionary monarchist government**

On July 7, 1947, the *Militant*, newspaper of the American Socialist Workers Party, reported that thirteen Greek Trotskyists had been arrested over the previous weeks. The roundup was part of a wave of political persecution directed against the working class and peasantry, as the monarchist government waged a brutal civil war against anti-fascist partisans.

Those arrested were members of the Internationalist Communist Party, the Greek section of the Fourth International. *The Militant* stated that according to information relayed from Paris, three of those detained, “including one woman, face court martial in Saloniki and a possible death sentence. Five were arrested in Athens and accused of breaking the ‘public order’ measures decreed by the reactionary Maximos-Tsaldaris cabinet.

“The remaining five were condemned to two months imprisonment in the notorious dungeons maintained by the Glucksberg dynasty. The ‘crime’ for which they were condemned was distributing a leaflet.”

*The Militant* explained that the attack on the Trotskyists coincided with a major military mobilization, aimed at quashing resistance in the mountainous north of the country, as well as a crackdown on basic civil liberties in the urban centers. Significantly, the arrests occurred shortly after the US administration of President Harry Truman passed through Congress a \$400 million package to support the Greek and Turkish regimes, directly financing the counterinsurgency war in Greece.

The US funding marked the beginning of the Truman Doctrine, a program of aggressive intervention on a global scale, aimed at shoring-up the hegemony of American imperialism, including through confrontation with the Soviet Union.

The partisan uprising in Greece was led by the Stalinist Communist Party. It began during World War II, when it was directed against the Nazi occupiers and their Greek collaborators. At the conclusion of the war, many of these same collaborationist forces assumed power with British and US backing, and civil war resumed. The Stalinist bureaucracy, in line with its pact with the imperialist powers in the latter stages of World War II, was hostile to the continued partisan struggle, and over the following years would openly call for its conclusion.

### **100 years ago: Documentary film *Nanook of the***

### ***North* released**

On June 11, 1922, Robert Flaherty’s pioneering documentary silent film, *Nanook of the North* was released to theaters in the United States. The film depicts the traditional lifestyles and struggles of a group of Inuit people, featuring the Inuk man Nanook (whose real name was Allakariallak) as he hunts, trades, and builds shelter with his family on the Ungava Peninsula of Nunavik, Quebec, in the Canadian Arctic.

Flaherty shot his initial footage in 1910-1916, while he was working as a prospector, but this was destroyed in a fire, and he returned to the Arctic from 1920 to 1921 and shot the sequences that now are a part of the film. While some scenes were apparently staged, the film for the most part is an authentic record of how human beings lived in one of the harshest environments on the planet. Flaherty worked closely with the people he was filming. Even his camera operators were Inuit.

As film historian Andrew Sarris noted, “One of the most beautiful moments in the history of the cinema was recorded when Nanook smilingly acknowledged the presence of Flaherty’s camera in his igloo. The director was not spying on Nanook or attempting to capture his life in the raw. He was collaborating with Nanook on a representation rather than a simulation of existence.”

The film is deeply humanizing and appeared at a time when film was bringing disparate cultures and social views to an international audience, creating the foundations of a genuinely world culture.

*Nanook of the North* is best known as the first documentary film and the first ethnographic film. Its success in theaters guaranteed studio support for both Flaherty’s work and for the documentary genre in general.



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