This week in history: June 20-26

19 June 2022

25 years ago: Pol Pot captured by opponents within Khmer Rouge

On June 21, 1997, it was reported that Cambodian leader Pol Pot had been captured by his opponents within the Khmer Rouge. This prompted diplomatic moves, spearheaded by the United States, for his extradition and trial on charges of genocide.

Following Pol Pot's capture, reports emerged of the breakup of the Khmer Rouge leadership in its remaining stronghold at Anlong Veng on the Thai border. A faction headed by Khieu Samphan apparently came into conflict with Pol Pot over plans to lay down its weapons and form an alliance with the Royalist FUNCINPEC party, one of the two parties in Cambodia's unstable coalition government.

According to FUNCINPEC leader Norodom Ranariddh, son of the late Prince Norodom Sihanouk, Pol Pot ordered the execution of Son Sen and other key Khmer Rouge leaders and then fled into the jungle with his followers. He was then captured by his opponents. The breakup of the Khmer Rouge was connected to an increasingly bitter struggle between Cambodia's coalition partners, FUNCINPEC and the Cambodian People's Party led by Hun Sen.

As head of the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia between 1975 and 1978, Pol Pot was responsible for the deaths of between 1 million and 2 million Cambodians, either by execution or through a combination of disease, hunger and overwork.

For Washington to demand the trial of their former ally on the charge of crimes against humanity reeked of hypocrisy. In the 1960s and 1970s, successive US administrations waged a protracted imperialist war throughout Indochina which cost the lives of millions, destroyed industry and agriculture, and set back the economic development of the region by decades.

Furthermore, the US was directly responsible for the emergence of the Khmer Rouge as a popular political force in Cambodia. Pol Pot only began to win wider political support after the Nixon administration ousted the government headed by Norodom Sihanouk in 1970 and US forces invaded Cambodia. In the bloody civil war following the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge by Vietnamese forces, the US, China and European powers threw their support behind the Khmer Rouge as a counterweight to the influence of Vietnam in the region.

The genocide in Cambodia was the outcome of a complex historical development in which the pernicious ideological influence of Stalinism came together with the military bloodbath carried out by American imperialism against the people of Indochina. Pol Pot's death in April the following year brought an end to one of the bloodiest chapters of the twentieth century.

50 years ago: US unions hold "Labor for Peace" conference

On June 23-24, 1972, major labor unions in the United States held a conference in St. Louis calling for an end to the war in Vietnam. The conference saw 985 delegates from 35 international unions in 32 states. Among the unions represented were the United Auto Workers (UAW), the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU), and American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), among others.

The fact that such a conference was called reflected the massive opposition to the war within the American working class, which put pressure on the union leaders to come out against the Nixon administration's continued attempts to decimate and subjugate the population of Vietnam. However, the discussion at the conference itself made clear that the union leaders would make no attempt to politically organize the working class to stop the war.

The forerunner to the Socialist Equality Party (US), the Workers League, intervened at the conference and spoke to workers and delegates about the need for a break with the Democratic Party and for the formation of a labor party. This was the policy advocated by the Trotskyist movement in that period, when the unions still had mass support in the working class and conducted a limited defense of the jobs and living standards of workers.

The demand for a labor party, to establish the political independence of the working class from the capitalist two-party system, had gained significant support among rank-and-file workers. So much so that several of the union locals represented at the conference had recently adopted resolutions to campaign for and build a labor party.

Despite attempts from the trade union leaders to suppress the discussion of a labor party it became the central point of debate at the conference. One AFSCME delegate from Minneapolis, a supporter of the Workers League, spoke at the conference and called for the delegates to pass a resolution that would, "immediately call for a Congress of Labor for the purpose of launching and independent labor party for the 1972 election."

The conference organizers instantly jumped into action to prevent any democratic discussion on the issue from taking place. The conference chairman Emil Mazey (UAW Secretary-Treasurer) interrupted the proposal and ruled it out of order saying only discussion on the pre-determined resolution would be permitted and demanded the AFSCME delegate be seated without a vote being taken on his proposal.

The conference made it apparent that workers demanded both an end to the war and a serious political alternative to the Republican and Democratic parties. It also made clear that the trade union

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bureaucracies, far from acting as workers representatives, functioned to stifle these demands and block such a political struggle.

75 years ago: Congress overrides Truman's veto of Taft-Hartley Act

On June 23, 1947, the Republican-controlled US Congress overrode a veto issued just three days earlier by President Harry Truman, ostensibly blocking the Taft-Hartley Act. The move by Congress created the conditions for the act, which contained significant attacks on the trade unions, to come into effect the following year.

In a national address announcing his veto, Truman had declared: "The bill taken as a whole would reverse the basic direction of our national labor policy, inject the Government into private economic affairs on an unprecedented scale, and conflict with important principles of our democratic society.

"Its provisions would cause more strikes, not fewer. It would contribute neither to industrial peace nor to economic stability and progress. It would be a dangerous stride in the direction of a totally managed economy. It contains seeds of discord which would plague this Nation for years to come."

The Act sought to curtail the right to strike. It required that 80-days' notice be provided of a stoppage, while outlawing secondary strikes and boycotts that could develop into a broader movement of the working class. It provided for federal government management of contract disputes and included provisions for the National Labor Relations Board to seek injunctions against unions accused of violating the Act's statutes.

Truman's posture of opposition to the legislation was a sham. In the first instance, he knew that his veto would be overridden by Congress. His Democratic Party administration, moreover, had responded viciously to the mass strike wave that broke out at the conclusion of World War II. It had repeatedly deployed the military to break strikes, including an army takeover of the railroads in May 1946.

By condemning the legislation, Truman was seeking to curry favor with the AFL and CIO union federations in the lead-up to the 1948 presidential election. The union officialdom had condemned Taft-Hartley as a "slave labor bill." Their primary concern, however, was that the Act's abolition of the closed shop would undermine the influence and income of the union bureaucracy by reducing the number of workers paying dues.

During the 1945-46 strike wave, the unions had been compelled to call a series of major strikes. They worked to keep them isolated from one another however, and to end the disputes through the signing of separate contracts. Above all, the union bureaucracy was hostile to the perspective of transforming the industrial upsurge into a political movement of the working class directed against the Truman administration and the capitalist system.

After its passage in 1948, Truman would invoke Taft-Hartley a dozen times against workers' strikes. For their part, the AFL and CIO bureaucrats used its provisions, banning socialists from holding union offices, to carry out a sweeping anti-communist purge of their organizations.

100 years ago: US President Harding opposes Philippine independence

On June 22, 1922, in a statement to a delegation of Filipino government officials, the American president, Warren G. Harding, declared, "I must say to you that the time is not yet for independence."

The United States military had occupied the Philippine archipelago after the 1898 Spanish-American War. The US had fought a brutal war until 1902 with Filipino rebels who had declared an independent republic. Hundreds of thousands of Filipinos died in the conflict and the American military used torture and summary execution on rebels and innocent civilians, tens of thousands of whom were herded into concentration camps.

Harding was only repeating the findings of the American Wood–Forbes Mission of 1921, which had concluded that the Filipino people were not "ready" for independence. The findings' authors included General Leonard Wood, who was to rule the Philippines as Governor-General until 1927. The Wood-Forbes report provoked fierce opposition in the Philippines and a delegation of the Philippine Senate, led by its president Manual Quezon, had come to Washington to dispute the report. In 1936, Quezon would become the first national president of the Philippines when the US granted the country commonwealth status, a form of semi-colonial regime.

Harding's 1922 statement was a full-throated defense of imperialism, speaking of the ruling power "training" and "educating" the native peoples. He cited the British Empire as "reflecting the colonial benefits of larger association under one flag." Harding came closer to the truth, when he noted, "that under the Four-Power Treaty Philippine security was guaranteed so long as the islands remain under American protection."

The Four-Power Treaty signed in 1921 by Great Britain, France, the United States and Japan, was an attempt to establish an imperialist status quo in the western Pacific. It included a division of the spoils of World War I in the region, particularly German colonial possessions.

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