

# This week in history: June 27-July 3

26 June 2022

## 25 years ago: Britain returns Hong Kong to Chinese rule

On July 1, 1997, the British colony of Hong Kong was transferred back to China. The event revealed a great deal about the class character of the Chinese Stalinist regime, its intimate collaboration with imperialism, and the importance for world capitalism of Hong Kong as a gateway for exploiting the vast reserves of cheap labor and huge markets within China.

Shortly after midnight on June 30, Chinese-appointed chief executive Tung Chee-hwa was sworn in to replace the outgoing British governor. The essential social and economic relations set in place during 156 years of British colonial rule were not touched.

Under the Sino-British Joint Declaration signed in 1984, Beijing guaranteed the protection of private property, business ownership, and foreign investment for at least 50 years. Hong Kong would retain its border with China and would be governed as a Special Administrative Region, with its own laws, passports, and international treaties. Unlike China, Hong Kong would have a fully convertible currency tied to the US dollar.

The new Hong Kong administrators were drawn from the wealthiest layers of society—business tycoons, their advisers and political associates, as well as a number of top officials from the ranks of the previous colonial administration.

The continued existence of Hong Kong as a British colonial outpost was an historic expression of the long and ruthless oppression of the Chinese people by the imperialist powers. Hong Kong was seized by Britain during the first Opium Wars of 1839-42 and developed as a base of operations for the plundering of China.

Beijing's claims that its takeover represented a progressive end of colonial domination made a mockery of the genuinely revolutionary struggles of the Hong Kong and Chinese proletariat, in the 1920s in particular. These were crushed by the combined forces of imperialism and the capitalist class in China.

The Chinese regime headed by Mao Zedong never seriously challenged British control of Hong Kong. Beijing permitted Britain to maintain Hong Kong as a colonial enclave in order to provide a means for engaging in trade and building up scarce foreign reserves during the period when the United States was actively blocking trade and investment in "Red" China.

The British first reconsidered the future of Hong Kong after talks between US President Nixon and Mao in 1972. The eventual US recognition of "One China" resulted in a fundamental shift in imperialist policy in Asia and undercut the continued independent existence of Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan. When Britain resumed diplomatic ties with China in 1972, the Tory government

headed by Prime Minister Edward Heath also gave the first informal guarantees of Hong Kong's eventual return to China. Further talks occurred in 1979 under the Thatcher government, culminating in the 1984 agreement which ensured that Hong Kong would become the stepping stone for investment and trade into the entire mainland China.

## 50 years ago: US Supreme Court ruling places moratorium on executions

In *Furman v. Georgia*, a decision issued June 29, 1972, the United States Supreme Court ruled 5-4 that in states where the death penalty was legal, death sentences were imposed in a totally arbitrary manner that was unconstitutional. The court ordered that all current death penalty convictions be immediately reduced to life in prison, stopping over 630 scheduled executions.

The Court found that the manner executions were being conducted violated the 8th Amendment to the Constitution, which prohibits cruel and unusual punishment. It also noted that decisions to execute convicted felons violated the 14th Amendment and were clearly motivated by racism against African Americans.

The ruling was contentious, with each of the five judges who ruled in favor of Furman writing their own separate opinions, an unusual event that left the case without an official signed opinion of the Supreme Court majority. The scattered opinions were thus a weak blow against the practice of state-sanctioned killings.

Three of the justices voting in favor of Furman, Potter Stewart, Byron White, and William O. Douglas, argued that the death penalty itself was not cruel or unusual, only that its current seemingly random application was. Stewart wrote, "These death sentences are cruel and unusual in the same way that being struck by lightning is cruel and unusual." Stewart, White, and Douglas all also noted that the only unconstitutional aspect death sentences was the "constitutionally impermissible basis of race."

Only William J. Brennan and Thurgood Marshall argued that killing those found guilty of crimes was an inherently cruel and thus unconstitutional punishment. Marshall went further, explaining that the existence of the death penalty always carries the danger of a wrongful conviction, since there was no way to exonerate an individual should new evidence emerge proving their innocence. He wrote, "No matter how careful courts are, the possibility of perjured testimony, mistaken honest testimony and human error remain too real. We have no way of judging how many innocent persons have been executed, but we can be certain that there were some."

The four dissenting justices, all nominated by Richard Nixon, argued that even if one was personally opposed to the death penalty, as they all claimed to be, executions did not violate the

Constitution.

The *Furman* decision would only temporarily stop executions, mandating only that the states amend their death penalty laws to create a consistent standard for killing convicts.

In 1976 the court would officially reinstate the death penalty, ruling 7-2 in *Gregg v. Georgia* in favor of new execution laws enacted by Georgia and other states, that supposedly corrected the unfairness in the imposition of death sentences. Since 1976, 1,547 people have been executed under death penalty laws in the United States.

### **75 years ago: Soviet Union condemns Marshall Plan as US interference in Europe**

On July 2, 1947, Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov and his delegation terminated a Paris meeting with France and Britain, convened late the previous month to discuss the implementation of the US Marshall Plan. The Soviets warned that the US program would result in foreign interference and the division of Europe.

In early June, US Secretary of State George C. Marshall had delivered a speech, outlining the new foreign policy initiative. While framed in terms of concern over the dangers of economic dislocation, the Marshall Plan was a clear bid for the US to control the economic reconstruction of Europe, with a view to establishing the dominance of American imperialism.

The Paris meeting had been convened at the instigation of the American administration of President Truman. The US had lined up Britain and France behind the Marshall Plan. They had agreed to push for Soviet acceptance of a new international body, with a powerful steering committee, that would oversee its implementation.

In his statement ending the discussion, Molotov warned this “would lead to Great Britain, France and that group of countries which follows them separating themselves from the other European states and thus dividing Europe into two groups of states and creating new difficulties in the relations between them.

“In that case American credits would serve not to facilitate the economic rehabilitation of Europe but to makes use of some European countries against other European countries in whatever way certain strong powers seeking to establish their domination should find it profitable to do so.”

Molotov said that far from lessening the dangers of war, this would create the conditions for ongoing conflicts in Europe. He expressed particular opposition to the prospect of US capital being used to undermine the Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. The Soviets also condemned the US-led program for Germany, which involved building up its industry, in defiance of agreements at the end of the war and scuttling Soviet demands for major war reparations.

The Marshall Plan, together with the recently unveiled Truman doctrine, calling for worldwide US interventionism, marked major steps in the developments of the Cold War. The alignment of the Stalinist Soviet bureaucracy with the imperialist powers was breaking down, as US imperialism sought to establish its global economic and military hegemony, including in Europe.

### **100 years ago: 400,000 American railway workers strike**

On July 1, 1922, 400,000 railway shopmen—including

boilermakers, carpenters, electricians, machinists, and sheet metal workers—struck in railyards around the United States because of a 12 percent wage cut mandated by the federal Railroad Labor Board in June. The Board had already granted railway owners wage cuts in 1921. Members of four large unions that represented engineers, firemen and conductors, did not receive wage reductions, and the labor bureaucrats in those unions refused to strike alongside the shopmen. Because of this, trains were able to run.

The railway owners actively recruited strikebreakers and set up housing and commissaries and kitchens on company property. They encouraged company guards to attack pickets. The employers also sought to divide the workers by race by actively recruiting African American strikebreakers on the grounds that some of the unions refused them membership. In addition, the employers conducted a media campaign by buying full-page anti-strike advertisements in newspapers.

Near civil-war conditions emerged as workers sought to defend themselves from the attacks of scabs and company thugs.

In some states, governors called out the National Guard. In Bloomington, a town in central Illinois, 400 National Guardsmen confronted 2,000 strikers and their supporters with fixed bayonets. Strikers later fired at the guardsmen who in return fired over 300 rounds. The citizens of the town supported the strikers: barbers would not cut the hair of the soldiers and local women would not dance with them in places of entertainment.

Company guards killed at least ten strikers and bystanders (including women and children) in separate incidents in Buffalo, New York; Clinton, Illinois; Needles, California; Port Morris, New Jersey; and Wilmington, North Carolina. One company guard was killed in Superior, Wisconsin.

A central role in attacking the strike was played by the US Attorney General in the Harding administration, Harry M. Daugherty, who sent federal marshals to assist the employers. He called the strike, “a conspiracy worthy of Lenin and Zinoviev.”

The strike ended on September 1, when a federal judge issued a wide-ranging injunction against picketing, which was, according to one scholar, “one of the most extreme pronouncements in American history violating any number of constitutional guarantees of free speech and free assembly.” The injunction effectively defeated the strike.



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