

This week in history: July 18-24

17 July 2022

25 years ago: International campaign frees jailed Sri Lankan Trotskyist

On July 20, 1997, Selliah Rajkumar, a member of the Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka, was released from a concentration camp at Bindunuwewa in Bandarawela district, after an international campaign for his freedom compelled the Sri Lankan authorities to release him.

Rajkumar was arrested by police at Anuradhapura and held at Aralaganwila police station in a remote eastern province since the previous July. The police and other authorities failed to give any valid reason for his arrest. Police detained him for more than a year despite legal challenges by the SEP through a habeas corpus case in the Supreme Court of Sri Lanka. After many months in a cell, Rajkumar was transferred to a concentration camp set up for those detained under the Prevention of Terrorism Act.

Well aware of the political campaign waged by the International Committee of the Fourth International and its Sri Lankan section, the Peoples Alliance regime did not allow SEP members to visit the camp or meet with Rajkumar. Such repressive measures, however, did not break Rajkumar's morale. Defying the ban, the SEP had taken steps to make sure that Rajkumar was aware of the campaign by the ICFI.

Two SEP members met Rajkumar at the concentration camp upon his release. At a reception at the SEP branch office, Rajkumar thanked the SEP and ICFI for its struggle to secure his freedom. The following evening, he visited the central office in Colombo and was welcomed the next day in his home village by a gathering of over 200 people who heard of his release through SEP members.

"The struggle for the emancipation of mankind is not over," he said in his address. "Although I am at home, I am still not free to travel in the country in which I was born. The racist war and emergency laws continue to crush the masses under capitalist rule. That is the plight that you too face. That is the problem you have to overcome by building revolutionary leadership."

50 years ago: Egyptian president orders removal of Soviet troops

On July 18, 1972, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat ordered the immediate withdrawal of all Soviet military forces from the country and the transfer of control of all Soviet military bases to

Egyptian administration. Thousands of military advisers from the Soviet Union had been in Egypt to train its soldiers and provide support against Israel, the central proxy of American imperialism in the Middle East.

The announcement was a major shift in policy for Egypt, which had relied on the Soviet-supplied weapons and aircraft since the 1967 Six Day War with Israel that left the Egyptian Air Force entirely destroyed. In May 1971, Sadat had initiated a "Corrective Revolution" aimed at reversing the policies of his predecessor Gamal Abdel Nasser, who had died in office in September 1970, purging the former president's supporters from their offices.

In his speech to the Central Committee of the Arab Socialist Union, Egypt's ruling party, Sadat said that the order to remove the Soviets was the beginning of a "new stage" in the relationship between the two nations. He added that he had become frustrated with conditions that Moscow had placed on the use of its weaponry, saying that Soviet officials had refused to provide the weapons and support needed to launch an attack against Israel to retake the Sinai Peninsula and the Suez Canal. Sadat's government refused, he said, "to place any restrictions on the use of arms, whatever their kind, based on Egypt's principles that any political decision must be made in Egypt—by its political leadership without having to seek permission from any quarter, whatsoever its status."

In the wake of US President Richard Nixon's visit to Moscow earlier in the year, the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union hoped to avoid any conflict that might draw the USSR into a new proxy war. Given the opportunity to cut deals with American imperialism, Moscow was more than willing to limit its support of the anti-colonial struggles in the Middle East.

Sadat's predicament exposed the fatal weakness of Arab bourgeois nationalism. Mortally afraid of the development of a revolutionary movement in the working class, Sadat and other Arab leaders were totally dependent on support from the Soviet Union to prop up their governments against the threat from Israel. When that support dried up, Sadat was left without a leg to stand on. Looking to compensate, over the course of the next several years he would initiate a number of disastrous initiatives including the Yom Kippur War against Israel in 1973 and the Infitah economic reforms in 1974 that opened up Egypt to foreign capital investment and began breaking up the nationalized industries.

75 years ago: Dutch imperialism launches massive attack on Indonesian Republic

On July 21, 1947, the Netherlands launched a major military offensive aimed at overturning the independent Republic of Indonesia, which had been proclaimed in August 1945. Dubbed “Operation Product,” the attack involved indiscriminate attacks on Indonesian villagers and civilians.

For months, the Netherlands had plotted a military onslaught. The Dutch bourgeoisie had never been reconciled to the loss of its former colonial possession in southeast Asia, a vast archipelago rich in resources and strategically located.

In the weeks prior to the offensive, the Dutch government asserted that the Indonesian republic had violated the terms of the Linggadjati Agreement. Signed between independence leaders and the Netherlands in March 1947, it had provided for a federal United States of Indonesia with links to Holland. The new entity was to be composed of a republic, based in Java, Sumatra and Madura, together with separate entities known as the Great Eastern State and the State of Borneo, which functioned as Dutch puppets. The resulting United States of Indonesia would not be permitted to have a foreign policy independent of the Netherlands. It would have a joint police force, its leadership stacked with Dutch loyalists.

Over the ensuing months, the compromises of the bourgeois independence leaders at Linggadjati, including Sukarno, provoked a significant backlash from more radical forces, expressing in distorted fashion the revolutionary sentiments of broad layers of workers and young people. This, combined with the terms of the agreement, which maintained Indonesia’s semi-colonial status, prompted the republic to begin developing its own foreign policy, including through relations with the Arab League, and to try and undermine the joint police force.

The highly limited actions of the independence leaders were magnified by the Dutch government to justify a long-planned intervention. The Netherlands had previously waged ruthless bombing campaigns in a bid to scuttle independence and preserve the old colonial order.

After the July 21 intervention began, Dutch troops rapidly secured large parts of Java and Sumatra. The guerilla operations of independence partisans were met with indiscriminate air strikes, combined with blockades aimed at starving the fighters and civilians alike. A ceasefire would only be declared in early 1948. The operation, the first of two by the Dutch, resulted in an untold number of deaths and injuries, with Indonesian casualties estimated to be at least 150,000.

100 years ago: League of Nations approves Palestine mandate

On July 22, 1922, the council of the League of Nations, dominated by the world’s leading imperialist powers—with the exception of the United States, which had refused to join—approved a mandate that gave the British Empire authority over Palestine, part of the former Ottoman Empire seized by the British during the First World War.

Although most of the inhabitants of Palestine were Arabs,

including Christians, Muslims and Druze, the mandate stated that British imperialism, “should be responsible for putting into effect the declaration originally made on November 2nd, 1917, by the Government of His Britannic Majesty, and adopted by the said Powers, in favor of the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people ...” The declaration the mandate refers to was the infamous Balfour Declaration of the British government, a “declaration of sympathy with Jewish Zionist aspirations.”

The mandate stated, using language taken directly from the Balfour Declaration, “nothing should be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine.” Few words in the history of imperialist diplomacy have contained more lies than these. The conduct of the Zionist movement, both during the next 30 years of Mandatory Palestine and after the declaration of the State of Israel in 1948, was the exact opposite for the Palestinian people, and remains so today—including ethnic cleansing, violence against women and children, assassination, and abrogation of civil and religious rights.

From the very beginning, the imperialist approval for the colonization of Palestine was deeply antidemocratic. None of the victors of the brutal imperialist war of 1914-18 asked the Palestinian masses what they thought of this scheme, which, Zionist nationalism notwithstanding, was in reality nothing more than a new mechanism for the imperialist division of the peoples of the Middle East.

Although the House of Lords in Britain had voted against accepting the mandate in June, the House of Commons endorsed it on July 4 by a vote of 292 to 35 after a speech in support by the Colonial Secretary, Winston Churchill. US President Warren Harding had sent his greetings to the convention of the American Zionist Organization in Philadelphia on June 25, which had called upon the British to allow Zionists to “proceed ... in the work of building the Jewish National Home” in Mandatory Palestine.



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