

This week in history: October 10–16

This column profiles important historical events which took place during this week, 25 years ago, 50 years ago, 75 years ago and 100 years ago.

9 October 2022

25 years ago: Clinton shills for US corporations in Latin America

On October 12, 1997, US President Bill Clinton began a tour of Latin America, the first president in 25 years to make such a trip. The junket's purpose was to promote US big business interests and to reassert American capitalism's hegemony in a region which it had long considered its "backyard," but where it was facing increasingly aggressive competition from its European rivals.

The trip included stops in Venezuela, Brazil and Argentina. In Brazil, the US president made a brief visit to a school serving students from Rio de Janeiro's favelas, only to stage a crude promotion for Xerox Corporation, which had contributed money to the institution. Afterwards he went to Argentina, where he declared the right-wing and corruption-plagued Peronist party regime of Carlos Saul Menem a strategic ally of the US. The gesture was made at least in part to offset Argentine concern over the recent US sale of F-16 jet fighters to neighboring Chile. Following violent confrontations between riot police and demonstrators in Buenos Aires, the Clintons flew to Patagonia in southern Argentina to spend two days in what had become one of the favored retreats of the world's super-rich.

For the previous four decades, US policy toward Latin America was driven by anti-communism and opposition to any social reforms that threatened US corporate interests. Throughout the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, Washington installed and supported a series of military dictatorships to realize these aims, claiming that only through such bloody methods could it combat Soviet-backed subversion.

In the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, US Latin American policy had drifted. Washington concentrated its efforts on forging its NAFTA trade pact with Mexico and Canada, an arrangement which the ruling classes of much of the rest of the hemisphere viewed as detrimental.

In the course of the tour, Clinton promoted the expansion of NAFTA into a Free Trade Area of the Americas, which would encompass "Tierra del Fuego to Alaska." Clinton's reception in Brazil was less than warm, expressing the increasingly independent aspirations of the Brazilian national bourgeoisie.

Brazil signaled its indifference toward Clinton's attempt to pass a "fast-track" provision for signing new trade deals on the continent. Clinton was reminded that Latin America had already embarked on its own free trade zone, Mercosur, and was in no hurry to subordinate itself to US interests.

The Mercosur pact, which included Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay, with the participation of Chile and Bolivia, had already negotiated a free trade agreement with the European Union.

50 years ago: Chilean business strike against Allende

On October 12, 1972, a state of emergency was declared in Chile in response to a capital strike by right-wing business owners opposed to the government of Salvador Allende. Capitalists in several industries, including trucking, retail, construction and copper mining, had locked out workers to block Allende's nationalization plans for several major industries.

The Braden Kennecott Corporation threatened to use "all means necessary" to "assert its rights over the copper of the El Teniente mine," which had recently been nationalized. It suspended copper shipments to France, a major Chilean trade partner.

In a speech announcing an emergency order against right-wing protesters who had attacked truck drivers and damaged storefronts, Allende warned that the country was on the brink of civil war. But he refused to mobilize the working class, specifically warning against counterstrikes and factory occupations. Allende instead appealed to the military, and to Chilean nationalism. Allende said that he wished to prevent a "confrontation between Chileans. I am asking you, with a clear conscience, to think of the Fatherland, of Chile."

Allende feared above all else the independent action of the working class, which could lead to revolution. He reasoned, as well, that working class action would antagonize the army, which was greatly influenced by right-wing elements and the United States intelligence agencies. Up to this point in his presidency, the military had not acted against Allende and had carried out his

orders, but the truce remained uneasy. Despite Allende's efforts to suppress the movement of the working class, including using the Army against a rail strike and protests among the poor peasants, the Chilean bourgeoisie and US imperialism demanded harsher actions.

The lockouts served as a prelude for the US-backed coup of Augusto Pinochet that would come to Chile just eleven months later.

75 years ago: US Air Force conducts world's first hypersonic flight

On October 14, 1947, the United States Air Force conducted the fastest flight to that point in human history, with an experimental aircraft reaching supersonic speeds (faster than the speed of sound). The technological achievement was conducted under a veil of secrecy and was not even made public for eight months, amid a feverish arms buildup associated with the Cold War.

The record-breaking flight occurred just two months after the formal establishment of the US Air Force, which had previously been a section of the Army. The development of a unique air department came out of the National Security Act, which provided for a vast growth of the military and the intelligence agencies.

The October 14 flight was one of a series of tests conducted by the Air Force in secluded parts of California around Rogers Dry Lake in the Mojave Desert. It was piloted by 24-year-old Chuck Yeager, who was selected after more experienced pilots demanded additional compensation for the risks involved.

Yeager's Bell X1 aircraft had a number of new design features. These included a straight, thin wing, a tail aimed at maximizing speed, a bullet-shaped fuselage and substantial power. The aim was to ensure the greatest movement, without the pilot losing control or the craft burning up. The Bell X1 was partially modeled on the Miles 52, a British airplane designed in the latter stages of World War II with the aim of traveling at 1,000 miles per hour.

The focus on the development of a high-tech air force came after aerial combat played a substantial role in World War II, far in excess of its limited value in World War I.

In 1947, moreover, the Democratic Party administration of President Harry Truman was rapidly escalating a confrontation with the Soviet Union, aimed at asserting the hegemony of American imperialism throughout Europe and internationally. This entailed a frenzied military build-up, including extensive testing of atomic and other high-powered bombs in the Pacific, and a race for the development of new military technologies.

100 years ago: Communists call demonstration against ultra-right nationalists in Berlin

On October 15, 1922, thousands of workers called out by the

German Communist Party (KPD) protested in Berlin against a meeting of ultra-nationalist organizations at the Circus Busch on Unter-den-Linden. Police officials had declared that the far-right organizations had a right to assemble and had sent large numbers of officers, including mounted and bicycle units, to protect them.

When workers began to stone nationalist students as they arrived—many of them in paramilitary uniforms—the police intervened and fired on the workers. Two communist workers were killed and, in the melee that followed, two policemen also died. At least 25 civilians were injured in what was the most serious street fighting since the failure of the Kapp Putsch by right-wing militias and elements of the army in March 1920.

The goal of the nationalist meeting, organized by the League for Freedom and Order, was to form new paramilitary organizations—for the purpose of attacking communist and socialist workers—which had been banned since the Kapp Putsch. In October 1922, Germany was still reeling from the murder in June of Walter Rathenau, the German foreign minister, by members of a secret far-right and anti-Semitic organization. Rathenau was not only hated by the right for being Jewish but for organizing the Treaty of Rapallo in April with the Soviet Republic.

The KPD at that time was a revolutionary and working class party with a membership of over 250,000, by one estimate, in October 1922. As one historian notes, "In this period the KPD was a party of workers and particularly young workers ... the overwhelming majority were men of the generation of the end and the immediate aftermath of the war, in other words, that of the Russian Revolution [1917] and the November Revolution [1918]."

Communist influence in the working-class had been growing since March 1921, when the KPD had temporarily lost much of its authority among workers after it led a series of premature actions of a semi-insurrectionary character. With the guidance of the Communist International, still under the political leadership of Lenin and Trotsky, it had reoriented its activity to win the masses and seek closer collaboration with workers in the Social-Democratic Party, which remained the largest working-class party in Germany.

Germany was entering a period of hyperinflation and social unrest, which, combined with sharp changes in the international situation, would provoke a revolutionary situation in less than a year.



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