This week in history: October 24-30

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.

23 October 2022

25 years ago: US-China summit

On October 26, 1997, the US-China summit began, demonstrating the falsity of two of the most time-worn myths of the twentieth century: that the American ruling class stood for democracy, and that the Chinese Stalinist regime had anything to do with socialism.

President Jiang Zemin was the first Chinese leader to visit the United States since the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. Jiang headed one of the world's most brutal and repressive regimes. Accordingly, he received public lectures on human rights at a joint press conference with US President Clinton and a breakfast meeting with congressional Republicans and Democrats.

But these exchanges were only a fig leaf for the real business of his visit: deepening Beijing's economic ties with corporate America. Congressmen and journalists politely asked him whether his government harvested the organs of political prisoners after shooting them, and then corporate CEOs queued up to sign lucrative contracts, cashing in on the low-wage exploitation of the Chinese working class.

In New York, Jiang Zemin rang the bell to begin trading on the New York Stock Exchange, visited the headquarters of IBM where Chairman Louis V. Gerstner greeted him in Mandarin, then hosted a dinner at the Waldorf Astoria for a guest list of 200 corporate executives. In Los Angeles, he was toasted by California Governor Pete Wilson, Mayor Richard Riordan, and an array of West Coast capitalists.

In the balance of American ruling class politics, the torrent of corporate money easily outweighed all the hypocritical rhetoric about human rights. Jiang Zemin announced $3 billion in orders for Boeing, the biggest US exporter, and agreed to cut tariffs on another $1.8 billion in US exports of computer and telecommunications equipment.

The Chinese government also announced that it would end nuclear cooperation with Iran, a diplomatic gesture which allowed the Clinton administration to lift a ban on commercial nuclear power contracts with China, which had been in effect since 1985. American companies like Westinghouse, General Electric and Combustion Engineering stood to benefit the most as they placed bids on an estimated $60 billion in Chinese contracts.

Jiang Zemin's enthusiasm as he toured citadels of capitalism like the New York Stock Exchange was not just a diplomatic display. One of the principal subjects of discussion at the White House was Beijing's efforts to stave off a collapse of the Hong Kong stock market, for which it was then directly responsible after the handover of control of the former British colony the previous July.

50 years ago: Yemen peace treaty and unification pact signed in Cairo

On October 28, 1972, representatives from the Yemen Arab Republic, known as North Yemen, and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, South Yemen, met in Cairo to sign a treaty to end a border war between the two countries that had broken out three weeks earlier. The treaty would bring about an unsteady ceasefire, while also stating an intent to work towards reunification.

Tensions between the two Yemens had been ongoing since the British seized the southern portion around Aden from the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century. In 1962, coinciding with the wave of Arab nationalist revolutions throughout the Middle East, civil war erupted in North Yemen between monarchists backed by Saudi Arabia, Britain and other imperialist countries, and Arab nationalists backed by Egypt and the Soviet Union. Simultaneously, an Arab nationalist formation in the British-controlled south, the National Liberation Front, began a guerilla struggle against the colonial government. In 1967 the British Army withdrew and the NLF assumed power, forming the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen in the south.

The North Yemen war, meanwhile, spiraled into a drawn-out proxy war between Egypt, armed with warplanes from the Soviet Union, and Saudi Arabia, which received major arms and funds from Britain and the US. The Egyptian army withdrew its troops from Yemen in 1967 after brokering an agreement with Saudi Arabia to end its support of the monarchist faction. The war ended with the victory of the Arab nationalists and the establishment of the Yemen Arab Republic.

In Yemen, as was proven time and again throughout the Arab world, nationalism offered no solution to the basic democratic task of uniting the Arab masses over the boundaries imposed by colonialism. In September 1972 the new government in north Yemen, the Yemen Arab Republic, backed by imperialism, launched an attack on the South, People's Democratic Republic of Yemen. The South, using Soviet-built weaponry, repelled the invasion.

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75 years ago: First India-Pakistan war begins over control of Kashmir

On October 27, 1947, the newly established Indian state airlifted troops to the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, sending them into battle against forces aligned with Pakistan. The move initiated the first of four India-Pakistan wars, under conditions of the mass devastation caused by the partition of the Indian subcontinent.

Only months before, in August 1947, the Indian and Pakistani states had been formed. They emerged out of the formal decolonization of the subcontinent by British imperialism. The British authorities ensured that India remained within the framework of global imperialism. They promoted the communalism of the native ruling elite, in a bid to divide the masses along ethnic and religious lines and to ensure the stability of capitalist rule.

The partition immediately resulted in widespread displacement and violence. In Jammu and Kashmir, uprisings and guerilla warfare rapidly developed against the state government. While its population was majority-Muslim, it was ruled by a Hindu monarchical regime, creating conditions for communal conflict.

Maharaja Hari Singh initially declared that his state would remain independent of India and Pakistan. Islamic forces launched a rebellion in the Poonch area, which Singh's forces would quickly lose control of. Those involved in the fighting included Pakistani Army servicemen on leave, rebellious state troops and tribal bands.

Singh issued a request to the Indian state for military assistance. It responded by insisting that this was contingent on the transfer of Kashmir to direct Indian control. Singh complied and troops were dispatched.

The war would rage over the following 14 months, with a series of offensives and counter-offensives. The regular Pakistani army would increasingly become involved in the conflict on the side of the rebel forces fighting the Indian divisions.

The conflict would claim an estimated 20,000 military casualties. That included the deaths of 1,103 Indian troops and almost 2,000 local forces loyal to Singh. Pakistani deaths are estimated at 6,000, with some 12,000 injuries. More broadly, it set the pattern for decades of ongoing hostilities between the Pakistani and Indian states, which have erupted in three subsequent wars and eventually became a potential flashpoint for nuclear conflict.

100 years ago: Fascists seize power in Italy

On October 30, 1922, over 30,000 members of fascist squadristi fighting groups entered the Italian capital of Rome in a triumphant march as their leader, Benito Mussolini, assumed the powers of state.

The fascists had massed outside of the city on October 28 after Mussolini had declared at the fascist congress in Naples on October 24, "Our program is simple: we want to rule Italy." Mussolini had already made several public declarations that he would attempt to seize power. The international press had been broadcasting these threats for weeks.

The acting Prime Minister, Luigi Facta, had declared a state of siege, but the King, Victor Emmanuel III, had refused to sign the order that would have mobilized troops. On October 29, the King asked Mussolini to form a government. In the coming months, Mussolini would brutally suppress democratic rights and drive working class organizations underground. In December, fascists would massacre as many as 24 left-wing workers in Turin. Mussolini would prepare Italian imperialism for a bloody intervention in Ethiopia and ultimately in the Second World War on the side of German imperialism.

The ascension of the fascists to power in their notorious "March on Rome" was a defeat for the working class, not only in Italy, but internationally. The revolutionary momentum that had been built up in the working class in the "two red years" of 1919-20, when workers seized factories and formed self-defense militias, had been dissipated by the trade unions and the Socialist Party, handing over the initiative to the fascists.

In his speech of October 20, 1922, to the Moscow Organization of the Russian Communist Party, Leon Trotsky made the following analysis:

> In September 1920 the working class of Italy had, in effect, gained control of the state, of society, of factories, plants and enterprises. What was lacking? A trifle was lacking—a party was lacking, which would, resting upon the insurrectionary working class, have engaged in an open struggle with the bourgeoisie for those remnants of material forces still in the latter's hands, destroying these forces, seizing power and thus consummating the victory of the working class. In essence the working class had already conquered or virtually conquered, but there was no organization capable of definitively consolidating this victory and so the working class found itself hurled back. The party split into segments, the proletariat was smashed; and since then, throughout 1921 and 1922 we have been witnessing the most frightful political retreat of the working class in Italy under the blows of consolidated bourgeois and petty-bourgeois gangs, known as the Fascists.

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