

This week in history: November 28-December 4

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.

27 November 2022

25 years ago: Strikes sweep Africa

On December 3, 1997, major strikes began breaking out in six countries in sub-Saharan Africa, as air traffic controllers, teachers, nurses, telephone workers, and other public service workers took action to defend their living standards and jobs.

In west Africa, telecommunications workers staged a 48-hour strike December 11-12 in the Ivory Coast over wage demands, while teachers and civil service workers struck in Benin December 3-5 over a state budget for 1998 which denied increases in wages and family allowances. In Senegal, air traffic controllers staged a 48-hour strike December 10-11 to demand pay increases, forcing the cancellation of all flights from Dakar international airport. Teachers in Niger ended a three-day strike December 10 after the government began paying back salaries due from September and October.

In Kenya, in east Africa, nurses began scattered strikes in late November which escalated December 3 into a full-scale national walkout involving thousands of medical workers, forcing a halt in admissions of new patients. Nurses staged demonstrations in Nairobi and many provincial towns, chanting slogans against the government of President Daniel arap Moi.

The most significant class confrontation took place in Zimbabwe, where the government of President Robert Mugabe was compelled to withdraw a tax bill on December 10 after a one-day general strike which paralyzed economic life. The tax bill, introduced to finance benefits for veterans of the guerrilla war that ended in 1980, would have sharply raised fuel and electricity costs for the working class.

Finance minister Herbert Murerwa told parliament that the government would scrap the proposed 10 percent surcharge on electricity bills as well as the 4.1 percent rise in fuel prices imposed December 10 and would phase out the 2.5 percent rise in the sales tax. The retreat was compelled, not only by the one-day strike called by the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), but by a rebellion in the ranks of Mugabe's own ZANU party.

Two days after the strike, the chairman of the ZCTU, Morgan

Tsvangirai, was assaulted by a gang of thugs who broke into his office. The union federation accused the Mugabe regime of responsibility, declaring, "The government and other interested parties were frustrated by the labor movement's success in organizing the mass protest, hence raising suspicion of a possible attempt on Tsvangirai's life."

50 years ago: Australian Labor Party wins federal election

On December 2, 1972, the Labor Party won a majority of seats in the Australian House of Representatives, making it the ruling party of government. The election was the first time in 23 years that the Liberal-Country coalition had lost control of government.

Labor leader Gough Whitlam became Prime Minister. Whitlam had campaigned on a platform of significant social reforms and changes to Australia's foreign policy. He pledged to end Australian participation in the Vietnam war, end military conscription, free imprisoned draft resisters, and recognize the government of China. He also pledged to expand Australia's social welfare programs like the Medibank universal health care system, free university education, and increased pensions and state incomes for single mothers.

Whitlam was, by career and personal inclination, conservative. But chastened by global events of the 1960s—massive anti-war protests, major strikes, and anti-colonial struggles—Whitlam saw that Labor's role was to contain threats to the ruling class by offering social reforms and pacifist rhetoric. His perspective was based on the belief that the economic boom of post-war capitalism, which provided the material basis for his reform promises, would be never-ending. But the objective contradictions of the capitalist system soon proved otherwise.

Already upon taking office Whitlam confronted the global inflationary crisis that was sparked by the end of the Bretton-Woods system in 1971. His attempt to pass price control legislation in December 1973 was viciously opposed, and

ultimately thwarted, by Australia's financial interests. But spurred on by inflation, workers won in 1974 some of the largest wage increases in Australian history. This was the final straw for the ruling classes in Australia and the United States.

In 1975, through a CIA-backed coup plot, Whitlam was removed from office by the Australian governor-general, the representative of the British monarchy in the government. Rather than fight to oppose the anti-democratic coup, Whitlam accepted his removal, fearing that any organized opposition could quickly turn into a revolutionary situation.

75 years ago: French troops perpetrate M? Tr?ch massacre in Vietnam

On November 29, 1947, French troops carried out a horrific massacre in a small Vietnamese village, going from house to house and killing hundreds of inhabitants. The onslaught took place in the context of a brutal "counter-insurgency" war aimed at restoring colonial rule over the oppressed southeast Asian country.

The assault occurred in M? Tr?ch, a rural area in the L? Th?y District of Quang Binh Province of north-central Vietnam. At approximately midday, French forces launched the attack. They went from house to house, forcing the occupants out and marching them to the M? Tr?ch bridge close to what was then the area's main railway station.

The villagers were lined up and shot by machine-gun fire. The exact casualty figure is unknown, but more than three hundred were killed. They included some 170 women and more than 150 children. Whole families were wiped out in the killings. The village was also razed, with over 300 houses burning down and reports of French troops raping women and perpetrating other war crimes.

The massacre was carried out as part of a French strategy of terrorizing the civilian population, to make it difficult for the Vi?t Minh resistance forces to conduct guerrilla warfare against the neo-colonial occupation of the country.

Fighting had broken out late the previous year, after complex geopolitical horse-trading over the fate of Vietnam and Indochina following the end of World War II. In November 1946, the French had conducted a naval bombardment of the port city of Haiphong, killing more than 6,000 of its residents. After a Vi?t Minh counteroffensive was defeated there, much of its leadership and cadre retreated to remote rural areas, where they began guerrilla operations.

On October 7, 1947, France launched Operation Léa, an attempt to decapitate the Vi?t Minh leadership and its military command. Centering on northern areas of the country, where the Vi?t Minh was largely based, having been driven out of the cities, the operation involved three columns and an airborne force. Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap were almost captured but managed to evade French forces. The French would claim that more than 9,000 Vi?t Minh soldiers were killed in action during the offensive.

The M? Tr?ch massacre was carried out just weeks after

Operation Léa had been called off on November 7, having failed in its overriding objective of taking out the Vi?t Minh leadership and ending its resistance.

100 years ago: Irish Republican Army issues order to shoot on sight members of Irish parliament

On November 30, 1922, Liam Lynch, the Chief of Staff of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), which opposed the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 and the government of the Irish Free State that sought to implement it, ordered its members to shoot on sight any member of the Dáil Éireann (nationalist parliament) who had voted for the Public Safety Bill or what Lynch called the "Murder Bill" of October 17, that gave the government permission to execute anyone who aided or abetted attacks on state forces, or illegally possessed arms or ammunition or explosives.

The Irish Civil War of 1922-23 was fought between the armed forces of the Free State, which sought to implement the Anglo-Irish Treaty and the IRA, which opposed it, particularly because it allowed the British to keep control of the six northern, predominantly Protestant, counties while allowing the southern 26, predominantly Catholic, counties little say in foreign policy, although they were otherwise politically independent.

The Free State had executed four captured members of the IRA on November 17 and another three two days later. On November 24, the government had Erskine Childers executed by firing squad. Childers, a well-known Republican writer and novelist, had been a secretary to the 1920-21 negotiations with the British. On November 30, the Free State executed three more anti-Treaty prisoners.

Lynch's order stated:

"All members of the Provisional 'Parliament' who were present and voted for the Murder Bill will be shot at sight. Houses of members ... who are known to support Murder Bill will be destroyed. Free State army officers who approve of Murder Bill will be shot at sight; also all ex-British army officers and men who joined the Free State army since 6 December 1921."

Although some historians have cast doubt on the authenticity of the order, nevertheless, on December 7, IRA forces ambushed two members of parliament, killing one and seriously wounding the other.

The next day, the government retaliated by killing four leading IRA members who had been in prison since the first days of the Civil War. The executions were illegal, since the four had been in custody before the Public Safety bill had been passed.



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