This week in history: March 20-26

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.

19 March 2023

25 years ago: Clinton tours Africa

On March 23, 1998, US President Bill Clinton launched a 12-day, six-nation tour of Africa as part of a "new economic partnership" and demonstration of Washington's support for "progressive" new leaders who were bringing about an "African renaissance." Clinton was the first sitting president to visit Ghana, Uganda, Botswana and Senegal. He also visited Rwanda and South Africa.

Clinton's domestic political critics dismissed the trip as a flight from the relentless and humiliating attacks of the special prosecutor and the media over alleged sexual scandals, a subject which continued to dog him even as he made his way around the African continent.

Definite economic and political interests were behind this tour. It was part of an attempt to exert US hegemony over the African continent and to turn it into a new source of profits for US-based multinationals. The initiative was directed against the continuing influence of the old colonial powers of Europe, in particular France, and was pursued at the expense of Africa's impoverished masses.

The centerpiece of the shift in US policy was the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act, passed by the US House of Representatives. Clinton declared that the legislation would inaugurate "a dynamic new Africa... making dramatic strides toward democracy and prosperity." Vernon Jordan, the president's adviser and frequent envoy to Africa, declared before a trade conference in Ethiopia that as a result of Clinton's plan, the world would witness the birth of "African economic lions," comparable to the Asian "tigers."

Washington promoted its initiative as a "partnership of equals," declaring it a break with a previous policy of aid, portrayed as paternalistic and inclined to breed dependence. That claim ignored the fact that the US had already slashed its aid to Africa by more than 25 percent before the new trade act was proposed. The few new aid programs announced by Clinton in the course of his tour were strictly for show, representing a drop in the bucket compared to what was already cut.

As for the conception that a deal struck between the US and the countries of sub-Saharan Africa would constitute an agreement between "equals," the real aim of the pact was to break down all barriers to US investment and the export of US goods and services to the continent. In spite of its aims, the US economic position in Africa continued to erode, a process that has continued to the present.

50 years ago: First major battle in Vietnam after Paris Peace Accords

On March 25, 1973, the Battle of Tong Le Chon began in Vietnam between North Vietnam's People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN), and the army of the US-backed regime in the South, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). The battle was the first major outbreak of fighting since the Paris Peace Accords were signed on January 27, 1973.

The accords' major achievement had been the withdrawal of most US troops. Those remaining were intelligence agents and military advisors, who stayed on to direct the ARVN—a similar function to the "military advisers" who, under the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations, had preceded the enormous expansion of the American war against Vietnam in the mid-1960s.

US President Richard Nixon had promised South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu to return US forces to active fighting if the PAVN launched a major offensive against the South. Knowing that the removal of US forces meant the eventual end of his rule as the head of the US puppet state in the south, Thieu ordered the ARVN to stage provocations to goad the PAVN into launching an attack that would breach the agreement and trigger the return of US forces.

One of these was the bolstering of defenses at the Tong Le Chon military base outside the city of An Loc, the site of the April 1972 Easter Offensive. During that battle, the PAVN nearly overran the ARVN, which would have put the PAVN in position to prepare a siege of Saigon. The PAVN advance was only stopped by a massive bombing effort by the US Air Force. The Tong Le Chon base was an important military strategic point that allowed the ARVN to monitor PAVN movements and disrupt their supply lines. Its capture was considered necessary by the northern leadership to prepare an offensive that could take the southern capital.

When the PAVN advanced on Tong Le Chon they quickly surrounded the base, cutting off its access by land to ARVN supply lines. But unable to break through the base's heavy defenses, the battle turned into an extended siege. The ARVN could only supply the base by airdrop. However, most of these fell off target and were recovered by the PAVN, creating desperate conditions inside the base. After being bombarded by PAVN artillery for over a year and supplies becoming increasingly scarce, the ARVN commander finally ordered his men to retreat from the base on April 12, 1974, defying an order to

© World Socialist Web Site

fight to the last man.

Thieu's desperate wager that Nixon would return US forces backfired. Under conditions where the war had grown massively unpopular with the American public and where the Watergate scandal was throwing his administration into crisis, Nixon was unable to follow through on his promise. Additionally, with US forces gone and unlikely to return, the North had little reason to grant any concessions to the South, whose government was seen as totally illegitimate by the vast majority of the Vietnamese population and was rapidly crumbling.

The year-long siege at Tong Le Chon demonstrated that without US support Thieu's regime was doomed, and it was only a matter of time before the southern government totally collapsed. One year after the base's surrender, on April 30, 1975, this process was completed when Saigon was taken by a final PAVN offensive that reunited Vietnam.

75 years ago: Zionist organizations resolve for Jewish state amid growing clashes

On March 23, 1948, the two largest Zionist organizations, the Jewish Agency for Palestine and the Jewish National Council, formally agreed that they would establish a provisional government when the British mandate over Palestine expired on May 16.

The declaration, coming amid a series of violent clashes between right-wing Zionists and Palestinians, marked a key step in the creation of Israel. It underscored the danger of a widespread displacement of Arab residents to establish such a state.

The British had announced in December 1947 the expiration of the mandate. A sharp decline of British imperialism was being accelerated by a wave of anti-colonial struggles after World War II. The aim of the British was to relinquish direct control of a possession that was increasingly difficult to administer, while retaining general imperialist dominance.

The confirmation of the mandate came after the newly created United Nations passed a resolution supporting the establishment of a Jewish state. That had been pushed by the US, which viewed the creation of Israel as the opportunity to establish a beachhead in the Middle East aimed at blocking Soviet influence and providing a base for conducting predatory operations throughout the region.

Various Zionist groups had campaigned for an independent state, including with a campaign of terrorist attacks against British forces and Palestinian civilians. The clashes intensified in the lead-up to the establishment of Israel, in line with its communalist character as a Jewish state.

On March 21, a car bombing ascribed to Palestinian fighters claimed the lives of 20 Jewish people. In apparent retribution, the following day Zionist groups detonated two large bombs in the Arab quarter of Haifa, killing 17 and injuring more than 150.

The same day, Palestinian fighters threw bombs into the Jewish quarter. Then the British launched an attack on Palestinian resistance groups, shelling positions they held in the mountains around Hartuv. As many as 60 were killed. That made March 22 one of the deadliest days in what had been an escalating series of bombings and mass killings.

100 years ago: Government provocateur testifies in trial of American Communist leader

On March 21, 1923, Francis Morrow, an agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, gave his third day of testimony against Communist trade union leader William Z. Foster, on trial in Michigan for violation of the state's criminal syndicalism laws. Morrow alleged that Foster had gone to Moscow and received from the Communist International plans for carrying out a Bolshevik Revolution in the United States and establishing a Soviet form of government.

The prosecution, led by Michigan Assistant Attorney General, O. L. Smith, alleged that under Foster's leadership, the Communist Party intended to "bore from within" the trade unions to turn them into Communist organizations.

The defense argued that Foster had the right to freedom of speech, and, as Foster later noted, "Our attorneys laid especial stress upon the right of revolution always inherent in every people, calling to their aid the Declaration of Independence to make the proposition clear."

Federal agents and local police had raided the second convention of the Communist Party of America, held in Bridgman, Michigan, on August 22, 1922. Although most of the delegates escaped, the authorities arrested 17 people and seized a large amount of literature. Francis Morrow had infiltrated the party and was a delegate at the convention and tipped off the authorities.

The party had been driven underground by arrests and police attacks on its public meetings. Among other issues, the convention discussed how to develop legal work inside of the working class. The convention set up a legal political party called the Workers Party of America. Both Foster, the future leader of American Stalinism, and James P. Cannon, the future founder of the Trotskyist movement, who was in Moscow at the time of the Bridgman conference, were intent on finding ways in which the communist movement could reach American workers and supported the formation of a legal party.

Foster, who had risen to national prominence for his leadership of the 1919 Steel Strike, and later joined the Communist Party, was the defendant in a lurid and widely publicized trial that marked the peak of the postwar Red Scare in the United States. A slanderous book was even produced based on the trial's transcripts.

Foster was not convicted because of a hung jury. American Communist leader Charles Ruthenberg was tried later, and convicted, but died before he could serve time.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site