This week in history: March 27-April 2

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.

26 March 2023

25 years ago: Federal judge dismisses Paula Jones' lawsuit against US President Bill Clinton

On April 1, 1998, Federal Judge Susan Webber Wright dismissed Paula Jones' lawsuit against US President Bill Clinton. The judge rejected outright all of Jones' claims that she suffered sexual harassment and emotional distress in an encounter with Clinton in 1991, when he was governor of Arkansas and she was a state employee.

In the decision granting Clinton's motion for summary judgment, Wright ruled that even if one assumed that Jones told the truth—that then-Governor Clinton made a lewd proposition in a Little Rock, Arkansas hotel room seven years prior—there was no evidence that she suffered subsequent discrimination on the job or psychological injury.

The civil suit was the anchor for Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr's inquisition into Clinton's sexual activities. The allegations of perjury and obstruction of justice were based on Clinton's deposition in the Jones suit and the affidavit filed in the case by Monica Lewinsky. The dismissal of the Jones suit underscored the fact that the judicial assault on the White House, carried out in tandem by Jones' lawyers and Starr's team of prosecutors, was a massive political provocation, aimed at humiliating, destabilizing and ultimately bringing down the Clinton administration.

Jones first came to public attention in an article in the right-wing *American Spectator* magazine, which did not name her but described the alleged interaction with Clinton. She first brought her lawsuit in 1994. It reached the Supreme Court in 1997, which ruled that Clinton was not immune from a civil suit because of his position as president.

Both the Jones suit and the Whitewater investigation were under the direction of right-wing Republicans with close ties to Christian fundamentalist and other extreme-right groups, whose fanatical hostility to Clinton was not assuaged by his administration's alliance with congressional Republicans to slash domestic social programs and eliminate welfare or by his authorization of imperialist violence in Iraq. The revelation of the Lewinsky affair in January 1998 marked a coming together of the two cases in a way which enabled Starr to broaden the scope of the investigation far beyond Whitewater, the Clintons' failed real estate deal in Arkansas.

In the aftermath of the dismissal, Starr told reporters he intended to continue his perjury investigation of Clinton, insisting the collapse of the civil action had no bearing on his criminal probe. His grand jury proceedings in Washington and Little Rock became dragnets, corralling scores of individuals and subjecting them to media harassment and massive legal bills.

50 years ago: Unions surrender to Nixon on wages and strikes

On March 30, 1973, the United Steel Workers of America (USWA) agreed to a concessionary contract with ten of the major steel producing companies in line with the demands of "Phase III" of President Richard Nixon's wage-cutting economic plan. Days earlier, the United Auto Workers (UAW) held a special convention in Detroit to agree on a new collective bargaining plan for the new contract to be negotiated that fall. The convention closed without any commitment from the UAW to fight for wage increases amid soaring inflation.

In the USWA contract, the head of the union bureaucracy, President I.W. Abel, agreed to a "no-strike" pledge that would bar workers from mounting a national strike against the steel corporations until 1977. Additionally, the USWA agreed to keep annual wage increases in line with Nixon's demands. This translated to an annual increase at a rate of just 3 percent, an effective wage cut at a time when annual inflation was at about 6 percent.

In a joint press conference with representatives of the steel companies after the agreement was struck, Abel called the plan "an unprecedented experiment that we think will prove there is a better way for labor and management to negotiate contracts." R. Heath Larry, the vice chairman of the United States Steel Corporation, agreed saying, "This should work for the benefit of the employees, the company, its customers and the nation."

Abel claimed that by increasing corporate profits the agreement would discourage companies from importing steel from outside the US, and thereby stem layoffs. The union, embracing economic nationalism, had attempted to sell the idea that the recent increase in imported steel was the cause of the loss of 150,000 steel industry jobs.

However, the terms of the agreement signed by the USWA in no way barred the companies from carrying out additional layoffs. Worse, workers' ability to combat layoffs and improve working conditions were foreclosed by the no-strike pledge, which gave companies a free hand to impose their dictates on the workers.

Similarly, at the UAW convention, the union apparatus accepted the demands of Nixon and the auto companies. UAW President Leonard Woodcock told the convention that negotiations with the corporations had to be approached on a "sensible basis and with due regard to the well-being of our two nations."

For Woodcock, Abel, and the union apparatus, operating "sensibly" meant the subordination of workers' interests to the demands of American and Canadian capital, which were looking to offset their own financial crisis at the expense of the gains made by workers in earlier periods of struggle.

A statement on the steel contract by the Workers League, forerunner to

the Socialist Equality Party in the US, stated, “Abel is handing back to the steel companies the very rights for which steel workers fought and died for in the 1930s.” It continued, “The bureaucrats will not fight Nixon because this would require political action against the government by the working class—something these men totally oppose.”

75 years ago: US occupation forces repress mass strike in Japan

On March 29, 1948, the occupation forces of the US government, headed by General Douglas MacArthur, announced that they had outlawed a major general strike movement that was emerging in Japan. The previous day, the *New York Times* had written anxiously about the fact that more than 50,000 workers had walked out. They were set to be joined by over 1 million more.

The stoppages were part of a broader upsurge of the class struggle in the wake of World War II. The situation in Japan, following the defeat of its imperial forces in that conflict, was particularly explosive. Workers confronted major food shortages and inflation, under conditions where US bombardments had destroyed much of the critical infrastructure. The full impacts of the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the US, a blatant war crime at the conclusion of the conflict, intended as a warning to the Soviet Union, were still only emerging.

There was significant anger over the persistently high prices for basic goods and the difficulties of sheer survival. In 1946 and 1947, major strikes were held, including one general strike.

Preparations for a new struggle were centered among government employees. They were among the most organized and politically aware of Japan’s working class. The US occupation, moreover, depended upon the Japanese public sector.

Some 50,000 government staff had walked out on March 30. In total, as many as 1.5 million were to join them on March 31, demanding improvements to prices, higher salaries and greater political freedoms.

The Associated Press reported: “General MacArthur’s headquarters today announced officially that it had ordered the Japanese government to prevent the general strike of nearly one and a half million communication workers and other government employees. The government was told General MacArthur reiterated his statement of January 31, 1947, in which he said: ‘I will not permit the use of so deadly a social weapon in the present impoverished condition of Japan.’”

MacArthur, a lifelong militarist and defender of American imperialism, was effectively ruling Japan with an iron fist. His administration, while prosecuting some Japanese war criminals, also rehabilitated key elements of the old imperial regime, including the emperor, to entrench reactionary rule against widespread social opposition. As part of the outlawing of the strike, Communist Party leaders involved in its preparation were arrested and threatened with imprisonment.

100 years ago: Masses of mourners attend funeral procession of actress Sarah Bernhardt in Paris

On March 29, 1923, hundreds of thousands, or, according to the *New York Times*, millions, attended the funeral procession of world-renowned French actress Sarah Bernhardt in Paris. Bernhardt had died three days earlier of complications from kidney disease at the age of 79.

Crowds had assembled in the morning at her home and followed her body as it was brought to the church of Saint-François-de-Sales, where the crowd of mourners grew so large that the police had to call for reinforcements. “All approaching thoroughfares were black with people,” the *Times* remarked. The funeral service was attended by various government dignitaries. Bernhardt’s family, accompanied by leading artists, led the procession to the cemetery.

Bernhardt, born Henriette-Rosine Bernard, was the daughter of a Dutch-Jewish courtesan and an attorney from Le Havre, whose family paid for her education. She was raised in a convent. By the time she was 10, her mother had become close to the court of the Second Empire. Her mother’s friend, Charles de Morny, the half-brother of Emperor Napoleon III and President of the French legislature, introduced her to the theater. Morny arranged for her to study at the Paris Conservatory, the famous theatrical school. She debuted at the Théâtre Français in 1862 in the title role of Racine’s *Iphigénie*. While the show was not a success, Bernhardt became, over the years, the leading stage actress in Europe.

Most of her contemporaries believed her to be an artist of great brilliance. In 1884 Sigmund Freud, the Viennese founder of psychoanalysis, saw her perform and commented, “I believed immediately everything that she said. … Her incredible positions, the manner in which she keeps silent, but each of her limbs and each of her movements play the role for her!”

Mark Twain remarked, “There are five kinds of actresses. Bad actresses, fair actresses, good actresses, great actresses, and then there is Sarah Bernhardt.”

Artistically, she took on many risky roles. She acted in 1887 in a stage version of the novel by Emile Zola, *Thérèse Raquin.* The book had been attacked for its frank content. When asked why decided to act in the stage version, she said, “My true country is the free air, and my vocation is art without constraints.” In 1899, she played Hamlet in a prose translation of Shakespeare’s play.

Later in life she toured the world and appeared in some of the first silent films, including *Les Amours de la reine Élisabeth* (The Loves of Queen Elizabeth) in 1912, a major success.