

This week in history: April 10-16

9 April 2023

25 years ago: Good Friday agreement concluded

On April 10, 1998, so-called Good Friday Agreement, for new political arrangements in Northern Ireland, was concluded between the British and Irish governments. Negotiations began the previous summer by the British Labour Party government of Prime Minister Tony Blair.

The Agreement was predicated on ensuring the interests of big business at the direct expense of the democratic rights of working people, patched together by the United States, Britain and Ireland as a means of creating a more stable economic environment for corporate investment in the North. Irish workers were excluded from any real say-so over the future course of events.

The chairman of the talks, former US Senator George Mitchell, imposed a deadline which was extended as last-minute changes in the draft document were pushed through by the two governments, with all parties keen to get an agreement after months of horse-trading. An early morning phone call from US President Clinton to John Hume, the leader of the nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party of Northern Ireland, set the seal on the final package.

The agreement was made up of three “strands.” Strand one was a proposal for a new Northern Ireland Assembly, with members elected by proportional representation. Strand two was for a North-South Council of Ministers to be set up, as well as for cross-border bodies to be established in areas such as trade and tourism. Strand three contained proposals for a so-called Council of the Isles made up of representatives from both Westminster and Dublin, as well as the Scottish and Welsh assemblies.

Despite its cross-party support, the new agreement did not lay the basis for ending the sectarian conflicts that were cultivated by British imperialism for centuries. Instead, it upheld the conception that the fundamental divisions in Ireland were those of religion and national identity. A series of constitutional measures were to be enacted based on the division of Northern Ireland into unionist and Irish nationalist “communities.”

The Irish Republic was to abandon its claim to their northern six counties in return for limited influence on their governance and referendums every seven years on possible unification. Cross-border bodies headed by a North/South Ministerial Council were set to codetermine areas of common interest.

Following decades of bloody civil conflict, the Agreement set out terms for the establishment of devolved government by a Northern Ireland Assembly. One of its central goals was to co-opt the republican nationalists of Sinn Fein, the political wing of the IRA, into the structures of government as a means of bringing economically damaging sectarian conflict under control while preserving British rule over the six counties. At the same time, it continued to foster religious divisions in the working class that were essential in sustaining capitalist rule in Ireland by preventing any unified political movement against big business concerns.

Thousands of Chilean copper miners go on strike

On April 15, 1973, thousands of miners in Chile who worked at El Teniente, the largest underground copper mine in the world, went on strike demanding an increase in wages that would keep up with the country’s immense inflationary crisis. The strike would last 70 days, when it was eventually suppressed by the Allende government’s use of the police and military against the workers.

El Teniente was formerly owned by the US-based Kennecott Copper Corporation but in 1971 was nationalized (with compensation) by the Socialist Party-led government of Salvador Allende. The strike took on an explicitly political character as this meant the miners were on strike against Allende’s supposedly pro-worker government, which had pledged to international finance that there would be no improvements granted to the miners, in order to make Chile’s debt payments.

After barely surviving the congressional elections in March 1973, Allende’s “Popular Unity” coalition, consisting of the Socialist Party, the Stalinist Communist Party of Chile, and Christian Democrats, was in the midst of a deep political crisis. Allende’s government was under pressure from foreign capital and their right-wing and fascist allies in the Chilean military to suppress any and all wage demands coming from the working class.

These right-wing factions maintained close communication with US President Richard Nixon’s administration through the CIA. and were already plotting the coup that would overthrow Allende in September 1973.

The Chilean government had taken on an enormous amount of foreign debt. By the start of 1973 the total cost of the foreign debt had exceeded \$4 billion, the equivalent of over \$27 billion when adjusted for inflation in 2023. Paying the interest on this debt alone was costing Chile nearly \$300 million per year.

Copper was the most valuable resource in the country, making up 80 percent of all Chile’s exports, primarily going to the United States and Western Europe. El Teniente was responsible for one third of all the copper produced in Chile. This made the copper miners a critically important section of the Chilean working class.

In the face of the debt crisis and in total capitulation to the right-wing elements in his government, Allende’s only solution was to demand an increase in copper production from the state-owned mines while keeping wages low to maximize the profit from its sale overseas. In essence, he sought to increase the exploitation of miners to satisfy the demands of the imperialist financiers. This program was fully backed by the Stalinists, who demanded police repressions against the strikers.

The miners’ strike, which was accompanied by factory occupations and the formation of workers’ militias in other parts of the country, demonstrated the political bravery of the Chilean working class. At the same time, it made clear the bankruptcy of the Popular Unity government and the need for a truly revolutionary leadership.

Despite the strike ending in a defeat for the miners, the right-wing would not be satisfied until the workers movement was totally crushed. Immediately following the end of the strike in June the Second Armored Regiment would launch a coup against Allende.

While this attempt failed, it set the stage for the successful coup that would overthrow Allende and bring the military dictatorship of Augusto

Pinochet to power later that year. Allende would use the June coup as an excuse to crack down on and disarm the workers' militias and factory councils, leaving them defenseless against Pinochet and his fascist thugs.

75 years ago: Nazi death squad convicted of crimes against humanity

On April 10, 1948, a US military trial of leaders of the German Einsatzgruppen concluded, with all of the defendants found guilty of gross crimes against humanity and 14 of the 24 sentenced to death. During World War II, the Einsatzgruppen had been mobile death squads of the SS, the paramilitary wing of the Nazi Party.

The bulk of the defendants were the top commanders of various Einsatzgruppen divisions, along with several deputy chiefs and adjutants. Their trial was one of those subsequent to the Nuremberg Trial, held not by an international tribunal, but by an American military court on location in Germany.

Collectively, the defendants were accused of having directly overseen the murder of more than a million people. More recent scholarship places the Einsatzgruppen death tally higher, at some two million, including 1.3 million Jews, 250,000 Romani and half a million others, including partisans, the disabled and other ethnic minorities.

The primary charge against the defendants was "Crimes against humanity through persecutions on political, racial, and religious grounds, murder, extermination, imprisonment, and other inhumane acts committed against civilian populations, including German nationals and nationals of other countries, as part of an organized scheme of genocide." On the same grounds, they were charged with war crimes, and with being members of a criminal organization, namely the SS and its various subdivisions.

The Einsatzgruppen officials had overseen not only the murder machines of concentration camps, but also mass pogroms and other horrors claiming huge numbers of lives. In a stark sentencing statement, the judges wrote that the accused were guilty of "crimes of such unprecedented brutality and of such inconceivable savagery that the mind rebels against its own thought image and the imagination staggers in the contemplation of a human degradation beyond the power of language to adequately portray."

The judges warned against viewing the million deaths as an "abstract number." They wrote: "It is only when this grotesque total is broken down into units capable of mental assimilation that one can understand the monstrousness of the things we are in this trial contemplating. One must visualize not one million people but only ten persons—men, women, and children, perhaps all of one family—falling before the executioner's guns. If one million is divided by ten, this scene must happen one hundred thousand times..."

Of the 14 sentenced to death, only four were actually hanged. The rest had their sentences commuted. Together with the others who were not sentenced to be killed, a number of them would be beneficiaries of lenient treatment by the US-backed West German authorities, who reduced terms of Nazi imprisonment during the 1950s as part of their Cold War confrontation with the Soviet Union. One of the mass murderers, for instance, though initially condemned to death, had his sentence commuted to ten years, was released in 1951 and lived a free man until 1987.

100 years ago: Japanese crown prince visits Taiwan

On April 12, 1923, Japanese Crown Prince Hirohito began a two-week-

long visit to Taiwan as a part of military maneuvers. The island, also known as Formosa at the time, had been a colony of Japan since the end of the Sino-Japanese War in 1895. Hirohito had become the Japanese regent two years earlier when his father, the Emperor Taishō, was deemed unfit to perform the day-to-day duties of office because of mental illness.

This was Hirohito's first visit to Taiwan. He had made state visits to Europe in 1921 to remind the other imperialist powers of the diplomatic and military prowess of the Japanese Empire. Japan had fought on the side of the Allies in World War I and demanded its share of colonial spoils from Germany. It had also concluded a major naval agreement with France, the United States and Britain to set a new military status quo in the Western Pacific. The Japanese had been forced to withdraw from Soviet Siberia in 1922.

The purpose of Hirohito's visit to Taiwan was to assure the Japanese population—the ruling class in particular—that he was in control of the country's overseas possessions, which also included Korea, and, effectively, parts of China. Hirohito's first act on landing in Taiwan was to visit the shrine of a relative, Prince Kita Shirakawa, who had died with the first Japanese expeditionary force in 1895.

But Hirohito also attempted to persuade the local Chinese ruling class that he himself and Japanese rule in general was a model of moderation and morality. He visited Japanese-built schools and reduced the sentences of imprisoned Chinese nationalists.

The stakes for Japanese rule were high: Japan had undertaken an enormous modernization program since it had occupied the island and built railways as well as plantations for the production of sugar cane and other cash crops for export to Japan.

The Japanese authorities at the time had to deal with the development of national movements, not only in China, Korea, but in Taiwan as well, and had somewhat moderated their policies on the island. In 1919, the Japanese had appointed a civilian governor (as opposed to direct military rule). At this time, as one historian noted, "Japan was painstaking in its efforts to eradicate Taiwanese culture and to create an island of dutiful, second-class Japanese citizens."



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