

This week in history: May 22-28

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.

21 May 2023

25 years ago: Pakistan detonates nuclear device

On May 28, 1998, Pakistan detonated a nuclear device. South Asia had been brought to the brink of a fourth Indo-Pakistani war, as India had also run nuclear weapons testing in the previous weeks. In justifying its staging of a nuclear test, Pakistan charged that India was about to launch an air strike on its nuclear test site. India vigorously denied this charge, but in the days preceding the Pakistani test, leading Indian government officials repeatedly warned that Indian troops might soon cross into Pakistani-occupied Kashmir.

Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif employed apocalyptic language in his May 28 televised address announcing the nuclear tests. "Today, we have settled the score with India," he declared. "Today the nuclear flames of the nuclear fire are all over. I am thankful to God that ... we have jumped into these flames...." Subsequently, Pakistan raised the ante by announcing that its Gauri missiles would soon be armed with nuclear warheads.

Fearing a run on the banks, the Sharif government ordered them closed Friday, May 29, then announced an indefinite freeze on withdrawing foreign currency from foreign denomination accounts. As Pakistan had only \$1 billion in foreign exchange reserves, equal to about six weeks' worth of imports, there were fears that Pakistan would default on \$800 million in interest payments the next month.

Both India's Hindu-supremacist BJP government and Sharif's Islamist regime used the threat of war to attack democratic rights. Within hours of the nuclear test announcement, Pakistani President Rafiq Tarar declared a state of emergency, suspending the constitution and civil rights. For its part, the BJP government in India labeled all opponents of its aggressive stance against Pakistan as "disloyal."

The more the ruling cliques in New Delhi and Islamabad exchanged threats, brandished nuclear devices, missiles and other weapons of mass destruction, and made appeals for "national unity," the more apparent it became that they were on a common trajectory. The national bourgeoisie of each country used chauvinism and militarism to divert attention from their own reactionary socioeconomic policies and to channel mounting social anxiety and frustration in a reactionary direction.

50 years ago: Attempting to save face, Nixon admits to Watergate

cover-up

On May 22, 1973, United States President Richard Nixon conceded for the first time that high ranking members of his administration had taken part in the Watergate break-ins of the Democratic National Convention and the office of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist. The admission came one week after the public US Senate investigation began making details of the scandal public.

In a written White House statement delivered to the press by White House press secretary Ronald Ziegler, Nixon admitted that "it is clear that unethical, as well as illegal, activities took place" and that there was an attempt to cover-up the Watergate spying plot. Nixon also admitted that his administration had put into action covert spying operations against American citizens, claiming "national security" threats. He also admitted that in the aftermath of Ellsberg's release of the Pentagon Papers the White House had created the secret intelligence group "the plumbers" to stop other government secrets from being exposed.

The admission was a sharp turn from previous statements that acknowledged no wrongdoing on behalf of the White House. Yet Nixon still maintained that he had no knowledge of the illegal actions. "It now appears that there were persons who may have gone beyond my directives and sought to expand on my efforts to protect the national security operations in order to cover up any involvement they or certain others might have had in Watergate," the president claimed. Making clear he had no intention of resigning Nixon added in an additional statement that, "I will not abandon my responsibilities. I will continue to do the job I was elected to do."

The Nixon administration had claimed the legally dubious right to "executive privilege" which was preventing most of the top figures in his administration from testifying. Still, the testimony that had been provided so far by lower level officials was painting a damning picture.

The same day that Nixon admitted to the cover-up, John J. Caulfield, a official in the Bureau of Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives, testified that John W. Dean, former White House Counsel, and John W. Ehrlichman, former White House Domestic Affairs Advisor, had ordered him to offer James McCord, one of the Watergate burglars, a pardon if he stayed silent and refused to give evidence implicating other White House officials in the crime.

With these revelations now made public, Nixon was forced to admit

as much as the testimonies revealed. However, he was careful to say no more than that and remained vague on the details involving his own role in the plot. To that point, none of the testimony had directly implicated Nixon in the conspiracy. Caulfield, for example, told the Senate that he had “no knowledge of my own” that Nixon had approved or known about the pardon offer to McCord.

75 years ago: GM agrees to wage increase and cost-of-living allowance

On May 25, 1948, General Motors (GM) announced that it had struck a new contract with the United Auto Workers (UAW) union, providing for an eleven cent an hour wage increase. The deal, hailed by the UAW officialdom as a victory, was made under threat of a strike that would have involved 225,000 autoworkers.

Most notably, the GM contract was the first major union agreement in the United States with an automatic wage allowance based on changes to the cost-of-living (COLA, or cost of living adjustment). It provided for pay increases pegged to inflation, adjusted every three months based on figures provided by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The Socialist Workers Party (SWP), the American Trotskyist organization, noted the shift marked by the deal. For many years, the Trotskyists had called for a sliding scale of wages, linking pay to the costs faced by workers. The union bureaucrats, including in the UAW, had opposed the demand.

The UAW-GM deal, however, contained only a small real wage increase and no improvements to conditions, with an effective management dictatorship remaining in place. As the SWP noted, “the UAW leaders have accepted the sliding scale program not as a fortification of, but as a substitute for the needed increase in real basic wages, welfare benefits and grievance improvements.”

The GM contract was approved amid a series of sell-outs by the union bureaucracy, with protracted disputes ended for relatively limited wage increases. On May 21, a 67-day strike of CIO United Packinghouse Workers was called off after all but one of the major companies agreed to a nine cent an hour raise. On May 28, the UAW called off a 13-day walkout by Chrysler autoworkers, who received a thirteen cents an hour raise.

In the immediate post-war years, American capitalism had been rocked by a massive upsurge of industrial struggle. Major strikes took place in all of the key industries, as workers fought back against the consequences of wartime wage freezes and post-war cuts, amid a substantial increase to inflation. GM and the other car companies were hit by protracted stoppages. The unions, including the UAW, had done everything possible to prevent the strikes from coalescing into a political movement of the entire working class against the profit system.

By mid-1948, there were signs of a stabilization of American and world capitalism, based above all on the betrayals of the post-war upsurge by the Stalinists. The US was increasingly asserting its global hegemony, including through aggressive Cold War policies directed against the Soviet Union. GM and the other car companies would expand their operations internationally. Under these conditions, more far-sighted sections of the ruling elite considered limited concessions the necessary price to pay for industrial peace aimed at advancing the

broader interests of American imperialism.

100 years ago: Mass strikes in Germany’s Ruhr Valley

On May 26, 1923, over 300,000 workers were on strike in the French-occupied Ruhr Valley, the industrial heartland of Germany.

A strike wave in the region had begun earlier in the week with explosive force. Workers set up strike committees and councils under the influence of the Communist Party (KPD). In the city of Gelsenkirchen, strikers closed over 30 plants and factories and raided warehouses for foodstuffs. Strikers there set up their own police force. In Bochum strikers shut down pro-government newspapers.

The German authorities in the Ruhr Valley asked the French command for permission to send in special armed police. One official in Düsseldorf wrote to the French military: “I take the liberty of recalling in this connection that at the time of the Paris Commune [during the German occupation of Paris in 1871], the German Command did all it could to meet the needs of the French authorities taking repressive action.”

The French, who had held off from interfering with the strikes, obliged. Over 15 people were killed in the next few days in violence between strikers and police. By May 27, civil war conditions were developing. The *New York Times* wrote of a “bourgeois counter-revolutionary movement” emerging in Bochum, where a KPD meeting was dispersed by police and bourgeois volunteers. Strikers retaliated, however, that evening, by surrounding the Fire Department barracks where the counter-revolutionaries were quartered.

The immediate cause was hyperinflation. On May 22, the German mark crashed to an exchange rate of 57,000 to one dollar. The price of bread increased 100 percent overnight, and the government increased trolley fares by a third.

Workers had opposed both the employers and the French troops who had occupied the Ruhr Valley in January to enforce Germany’s payment of war reparations. But now a revolutionary situation was emerging there and in the rest of Germany. Dresden, in Saxony in the east of Germany, also saw mass protests. There the League of the Unemployed closed stores in hopes of putting pressure on wholesalers to reduce prices.

The historian Pierre Broué describes the temper of the times. After the assassination in Switzerland of the old Bolshevik and Soviet diplomat V.V. Vorovsky, he writes:

“On 13 May, the KPD attracted around 100,000 demonstrators in Berlin to protest against the assassination and the plans to attack Russia. On 16 May, more than 150,000 people encircled the coffin of Vorovsky, which was en route to Moscow, in a gigantic torch-lit demonstration, about which Victor Serge was later to write that it ‘marked the opening of the period of revolutionary mobilization.’”



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