

This week in history: July 31-August 6

30 July 2023

25 years ago: Emergency rule declared in Sri Lanka

On August 4, 1998, Sri Lanka's People's Alliance government imposed emergency rule throughout the island, then postponed provincial council elections that were slated to be held in five of Sri Lanka's eight provinces on August 28.

The emergency had been lifted in the south of Sri Lanka in July 1997. But the military demanded greater powers of internal repression, as part of its full-scale war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the north. The top brass had become increasingly politically prominent, but its insistence that the council elections be postponed because the war was "in a decisive stage" represented an unprecedented intervention in political decisions.

For several weeks, opposition spokesmen had been predicting that the PA regime would declare an emergency, so as to provide itself with a pretext to postpone the elections and avoid an electoral debacle. Popular support for the four-year-old PA regime had plummeted as a result of its massive cuts in social spending and prosecution of the 15-year-long war against Sri Lanka's Tamil minority.

Sri Lanka's military claimed that to redeploy personnel from the north and east of the island, where they were pitted against the Tamil secessionists, to police the polls in the five southern provinces would allow the LTTE to regroup. The military command used the political crisis to press for greater repressive powers and to insert itself in the process of political decision-making.

For decades, the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie used Sinhala chauvinism to split the working class and deflect acute social tensions that were rooted in mass poverty and unemployment. Ever-worsening discrimination by the state in employment and educational opportunities and a 1983 government-incited anti-Tamil pogrom led to a mass uprising of Tamil youth. Fifteen years later, the fighting continued.

At the cost of a great number of military and civilian casualties, the PA regime scored a major military victory over the LTTE in late 1995 when it recaptured Jaffna, the largest city in the Tamil-speaking north. Since then, its efforts to end the war were stymied. An offensive aimed at securing the highway to Jaffna was bogged down for months. To counteract the impact of mounting casualty figures, the government banned the publication of all but government reports on the fighting.

103-year-old Grand Central Hotel collapses in New York City, killing four people

On August 3, 1973, New York City's Grand Central Hotel collapsed, totally destroying the century-old structure which contained over 400 rooms and the six theaters of the Mercer Arts Center. While most of the more than 300 residents were able to evacuate the building, four people were trapped inside and killed as the building caved in on them.

When it was first opened in 1870, the Grand Central was the largest

hotel in the United States. It instantly became a cultural hub, home to restaurants and elegant event spaces. It was frequented by many of the social elite and wealthy, as well as many actors and performers. The hotel would have its name changed twice during its life, first in 1892 to the Broadway Central Hotel and then to the University Hotel in 1969.

Famous events that occurred at the hotel include the murder of the financier and swindler Jim Fisk who was shot and killed on the steps of the hotel by his former business partner Edward Stokes in 1872. In 1876 the original eight professional baseball teams would meet at the Grand Central and found the National League.

Over the years the hotel was ill maintained, fell into disrepair, and lost its reputation for being a place of luxury. In the 1960s the hotel was transitioned into a residence for welfare recipients with many residents living in the building full-time, rather than as temporary guests.

In 1971, the first two floors of the hotel were converted into a space for various performing arts that became the Mercer Arts Center. Shows performed there included music, dancing, and plays such as *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and Shakespeare.

In the months leading up to the collapse, residents had reported to the city government that massive cracks had formed throughout the building and that structural walls were showing signs of bowing. No action was taken to investigate and evacuate the building when these signs were reported.

Throughout the day on August 3, residents reported hearing loud sounds from the building's walls as the structural integrity began to fail. By the late afternoon plaster was falling from the walls and ceiling making it apparent that a collapse was imminent. Most of the residents had taken it upon themselves to flee the building but there was no systematic effort by the building management or officials to order an evacuation.

At around 5:00 p.m., the building's supports gave way and the entire wall facing the road broke off and fell into a pile of rubble that spilled out onto Broadway. Four residents were still inside and were crushed by the falling debris. After the four bodies were found, the rest of what remained of the Grand Central Hotel was demolished.

75 years ago: At HUAC hearings, Whittaker Chambers alleges Stalinist penetration of US government

At a hearing of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) on August 3, 1948, Whittaker Chambers alleged for the first time that secret members of the Communist Party were working in high echelons of the US government. The claim helped touch off a years-long campaign of allegations of spying activities and would contribute to the frenzied McCarthyite witch-hunt in Cold War America.

Chambers had joined the Communist Party in 1925, when it was already on the road to becoming a Stalinist organization. In the 1930s, he had worked in clandestine Soviet espionage circles in the US. By the late 1930s, Chambers exited this milieu, fearful that he may be subjected to the Soviet bureaucracy's purges. He returned to Christianity, became an

anti-communist, and began collaborating with the US Federal Bureau of Investigation.

While Chambers first began speaking to the American government in the early 1940s, it was not until 1948, amid the US Cold War confrontation with the Soviet Union, that his assertions were publicly picked up. Called on to testify at HUAC hearings into the Communist Party and possible Soviet spying in America, Chambers testified that Alger Hiss, a top US State Department official, was a secret member of the Communist Party.

At the first hearings, Chambers did not accuse Hiss of working for Soviet espionage. But amid denials from the State Department official, Chambers pressed his case, asserting that Hiss had functioned as a Soviet spy, along with up to a dozen other US government representatives. The claims would be the subject of defamation actions by Hiss against Chambers, and repeated government hearings. Eventually Chambers would produce documents which tended to indicate that Hiss had indeed been passing on classified information to Communist Party controllers who were working with Soviet intelligence.

The existence of this milieu within the US government was connected to prior political developments. Throughout much of the 1930s, in keeping with their counter-revolutionary program of Popular Frontism, the Stalinists had supported the Democratic Party administration of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. There was a brief interruption after 1939, when the Stalinist Soviet bureaucracy signed a nonaggression pact with Nazi Germany. For entirely opportunist reasons bound up with this alignment, the Communist Party revived its posture of opposition to American imperialism.

But with the disintegration of the pact, the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union and the Stalinist bureaucracy's new alliance with the imperialist "democracies," the CP again conducted a 180-degree turn. Throughout the remainder of the war, they functioned as enforcers of the Democratic Party administration and its war effort. This included policing a no-strike agreement throughout the war and supporting the prosecution of the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party, which opposed the war and American imperialism from the standpoint of socialist internationalism.

The next shift was not a consequence of a change in policy of the Communist Party, but of American imperialism. In the post-war years it repudiated its de facto alliance with the Stalinist bureaucracy and initiated the Cold War, aimed at establishing global US dominance, especially in Europe. As part of this, a reactionary anti-communist witch-hunt was launched in Washington. Activities that may have been tolerated in an earlier period, or were not looked for all that carefully, came under intense scrutiny.

While it would go on to aggressively target Soviet agents and their informants who had spied on the American government, the US authorities showed minimal interest in investigating Stalinist agents who had been involved in the assassination of Leon Trotsky and spying on the SWP. They were only pursued to the extent that they had transitioned from anti-Trotskyist activities to atomic espionage and other spying on the US government.

100 years ago: Calvin Coolidge sworn in as US president

On August 3, 1923, Vice President Calvin Coolidge was inaugurated as the 30th president of the United States after the death of Warren G. Harding from illness the previous day. The former governor of Massachusetts, like Harding a Republican, was visiting his family homestead in Vermont when he was informed by messenger (the house had no electricity or telephone) of Harding's death. He was sworn into

office by his father, a notary and justice of the peace, in front of a small audience that included Coolidge's wife, Grace, as well as a Vermont congressman and a single reporter.

He was sworn in a second time, secretly, on August 21, after he had returned to Washington D.C., by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, because there was some doubt as to whether a state official could swear in a president.

Harding had died unexpectedly from what was likely a cardiac arrest while on a national tour. He had been ailing for the previous days, complaining of a stomachache. Harding had followed Woodrow Wilson in office and was notorious for advancing the interests of big business and American imperialism. His administration oversaw numerous interventions in Latin America and adopted a foreign policy that was independent of, and sometimes opposed to, the European-dominated League of Nations. He is remembered for his vast expansion of American naval power at the expense of Britain.

While Harding commuted the prison sentence of Eugene V. Debs, who had served 36 months in a federal penitentiary for his socialist opposition to World War I (and ran against Harding from prison in the 1920 election), Harding's government persecuted the Communist Party and oversaw raids, arrests and trials of its members and leaders.

Coolidge, who had worked his way through public office in Massachusetts, came to national attention for his role in breaking the Boston police strike in 1919 by mobilizing the National Guard and taking personal control of the Boston police. His response to American Federation of Labor President Samuel Gompers's halfhearted defense of the strikers was highlighted by newspapers around the country: "There is no right to strike against the public safety by anyone, anywhere, any time."

As president, his administration in 1924 infused millions of dollars into the German economy under the Dawes Plan to stabilize the Weimar Republic, negotiated the withdrawal of French troops from the Ruhr Valley and put German banks under Allied supervision.

Coolidge continued the anti-worker and anti-communist policies of the Harding administration and is remembered as the man who signed the reactionary Immigration Act of 1924, and, after winning election in his own right, allowed the Ku Klux Klan to march down Pennsylvania Avenue in 1925, and permitted the judicial murder of the framed-up anarchist workers, Sacco and Vanzetti, in 1927.



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