

This week in history: August 21-27

20 August 2023

25 years ago: Secret documents implicate Whitlam's Labor government in East Timor crimes

On August 24, 1998, the *Sydney Morning Herald* published a report of previously suppressed documents showing that the Whitlam Labor government in Australia was closely briefed on preparations for the Indonesian invasion of East Timor in 1975, including a preliminary attack on Balibo where five Australian television newsmen were murdered by Indonesian or Indonesian-backed forces. The government then covered up its knowledge of the Balibo deaths to hide its complicity in the invasion.

The report focused on the government's detailed prior knowledge of the assault on the border village of Balibo, but the documents pointed to wider questions about the Labor government's active involvement in the invasion, and the cover-up maintained by both Liberal and Labor governments since.

Five members of the Channel 7 and Channel 9 news crews became victims of the Labor government's policy, together with the estimated 200,000 East Timorese people killed during Indonesian rule. The revelations indicated that Canberra was so intimately briefed on the Suharto dictatorship's planned takeover of the former Portuguese colony that it knew the three precise locations, including Balibo, where the offensive would begin. The seizure of Balibo was a precursor to the full-scale naval bombardment, aerial bombing and massive troop influx of December 7, 1975.

Indonesian intelligence officials gave Australian embassy officers in Jakarta final details of the Balibo attack in mid-October 1975. The embassy relayed the information in a cable to Canberra on October 13, 1975, three days before the Balibo operation. The Foreign Affairs Department knew that Australian news crews were in East Timor, but no warning was passed on to the management of the two TV stations or to the five news crew.

Prior to the revelations published in the *Herald*, it was known that the Whitlam government had encouraged the Indonesian invasion. As early as 1974, Whitlam had personally told General Suharto during a meeting in Jakarta that the Australian government supported the incorporation of East Timor into Indonesia. It was also known that Whitlam had held a further meeting with Suharto to discuss the Timor issue in the northern Australian city of Townsville in April 1975. However, in a book published in 1997, Whitlam maintained his government's public line that it had no advance knowledge of the invasion. "We did not know of the incursion across the border at Balibo," Whitlam wrote in his volume *Abiding Interests*.

The material presented by the newspaper's foreign editor Hamish McDonald demonstrated that from late 1974, following the first Suharto-Whitlam meeting, Indonesian officials regularly supplied the Australian embassy with information relating to Indonesia's intention to seize the territory by force.

50 years ago: Canadian railway workers begin national strike

On August 23, 1973, Canadian railway workers walked off the job and began a nationwide strike against 11 railroad companies, the largest of them Canadian National Railways and Canadian Pacific Railway. The strike froze the Canadian economy, bringing virtually all transport of industrial and agricultural goods to an immediate halt. It was part of a massive strike wave of workers across North America and the world, driven by inflation.

The rail workers demanded a raise of 21.6 percent over the life of the two-year contract to keep up with record-setting inflation. The inflation rate from 1973 to 1975 averaged over 10 per cent per year. The rail companies had refused to grant an above-inflation pay raise, offering only about 14 per cent over the two-year contract.

The strike's impact reached far beyond just the railway companies. Automakers General Motors and Ford were forced to stop production at plants in Ste. Therese, Oshawa, and Oakville.

The 56,000 striking rail workers, mostly porters and rail yard workers, were only one section of the total Canadian rail workforce. An additional 100,000 workers organized in different operations of the rail industry refused to cross the picket lines, creating an atmosphere of a general strike. The acts of solidarity throughout the Canadian working class ensured that absolutely no goods were moved on the rails while the strike was on.

As was the case in the two previous national strikes by Canadian rail workers, in 1950 and 1966, the Canadian government quickly moved to pass strikebreaking legislation that would force an agreement on the workers. The Canadian Parliament convened on August 30 in a special session to pass a strike ban.

They were met by mass demonstrations of furious rail workers who traveled to Ottawa from throughout Canada to protest the imposition of a concessions contract by the government. Signs carried by some workers read "MPs Shouldn't Strike Break" and called for the removal of Liberal Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau.

The demonstration included many young militant workers who had been inspired by the May 1968 general strike in France and other major working class offensives throughout the world. At one point the rail workers broke through the line of Mounties guarding the parliament and entered the building. Some fighting ensued that included the smashing of some of the parliament building's windows before police eventually removed the workers.

While the rail workers demonstrated immense bravery and solidarity during the strike, the heads of the seven unions involved, of which the Brotherhood of Railway and Airline Clerks (BRAC) was the largest, took no issue with the government intervening to pass strikebreaking legislation. "If there is a worthwhile settlement in the legislation, there won't be any problems in getting them back," said Richard Smith, the chairman of the union bargaining committee.

After nine days of the strike, the parliament on September 1 passed the strikebreaking law, offering a wage increase just 4 cents an hour higher than the company's initial offer. The union leaders offered no resistance to the strikebreaking law and ordered workers back on the job.

75 years ago: Israeli army launches crackdown on “draft dodgers”

On August 22, 1948, Israeli armed forces launched a brutal crackdown against internal opposition to the war it was engaged in with the Palestinian people and a coalition of Arab states. Tel Aviv was placed under de facto martial law and a curfew, as armed patrols swept through what was then the second most populous city in Israel, searching for those who were not participating in the war. The operation was dubbed “Betzer” or “Strength.”

The little-known onslaught underscored the brutal foundations of the Israeli state. It had been established less than six months before, in May, as a result of the British withdrawal from Palestine and American imperialism's determination to establish a beachhead for operations in the Middle East.

The new Israeli government was dominated by the Zionist forces who had waged a terrorist campaign aimed at pressuring Britain to support a Jewish-dominated state, even though Palestinian Arabs were the majority of the population. Zionist leaders were engaged in a campaign of ethnic cleansing to drive out as many Arabs as possible, in line with the ethno-religious character of Israel as a Jewish state. As had been anticipated by the Zionist leaders and their imperialist backers, the proclamation of Israel had been met by an immediate declaration of war by neighboring Arab states.

The Zionist leadership had already introduced a system of quasi-compulsory military enrollment in late 1947, prior to the formal establishment of Israel. Men of military age were expected to join the armed militias and to follow their commands. After the May proclamation of independence, the system was formalized.

In August, the Israeli government took the opportunity of a lull in fighting with the Arab states to launch the internal crackdown. All males aged 17-50 and all women 18-35 were instructed to go to 20 enlistment centers in Tel Aviv, under threat of arrest if they failed to appear.

For five days, a curfew was instated in the city. It was patrolled by soldiers, led by the Kiryati Brigade of Haganah, which had been founded by Israel's Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion.

The troops went door to door. They were empowered with the right to forcibly enter any house, without any judicial warrant. Neighbors were encouraged to inform on one another. The operation was conducted amid a barrage of right-wing hysteria, with proclamations labeling “draft-dodgers” as traitors aiding the Arab war effort.

Some 2,764 people were arrested, 1,044 men and 1,720 women. Around 1,000 of the total were ordered to immediately enter into the armed services. Another 1,500 were instructed to enlist, but under a deferred draft. More than 200 were locked up as deserters.

On August 27, 1923, Enrico Tellini, a general in the Italian army, was assassinated outside of the Greek town of Ioannina near the Albanian border. Four of his companions were also killed. Tellini was a part of a League of Nations delegation inspecting the area because of a boundary dispute between Greece and Albania. The Albanian government blamed the Greeks and the Greeks blamed Albanian bandits. No perpetrators were ever identified.

The ambush, “the Corfu incident” as it came to be known, became the trigger event for aggression by Italian imperialism. In the days after Tellini's death, Italy's fascist government sent an ultimatum to the Greek government demanding an official apology, 50 million lire in compensation and that the killers be apprehended and executed. Italy further demanded that the funeral of Tellini and his companions occur in the presence of the whole Greek government, and that the Greek navy salute Italian ships that would be sent to the Greek port of Piraeus.

The Greek government rejected most of these demands. An anti-Greek press campaign was whipped up in Italy by the government and on August 31, Benito Mussolini, Italy's fascist leader, sent a detachment of the Italian navy to the Greek island of Corfu on the Adriatic Sea and bombarded a series of non-military targets, including refugee centers for ethnic Greeks from Turkey, killing dozens of civilians.

Rome landed thousands of troops on the island and closed Mediterranean waterways to Greek shipping. Mussolini, in a speech, claimed that Corfu had belonged to the Italian Republic of Venice for hundreds of years. The invasion of Corfu, in fact, had been planned by Mussolini since at least July.

The League of Nations condemned the action, and Italy was especially opposed by British imperialism, which had long treated Greece as a client state. Corfu was evacuated by the Italians by the end of September, only after Greece agreed to a series of humiliating conditions.

The action was a part of the expansion of Italian imperialism under fascism, including the murder of over a quarter of the Libyan population during a war that had begun earlier in 1923, and the later invasions of Ethiopia in 1935, Albania in 1939 and Greece in 1940. Italian troops fought alongside those of Hitler's German Nazi government as a part of the Axis powers in World War II.



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100 years ago: Italy seizes on “Corfu incident” to threaten Greece