

This week in history: August 28–September 3

27 August 2023

25 years ago: Riot police attack Korean workers

On September 3, 1998, the Kim Dae Jung government in South Korea sent in more than 10,000 riot police to smash a 17-day strike, acting directly at the behest of Korean and international investors. Police attacked hundreds of workers and their families occupying six factories of the country's largest auto parts maker, Mando Machinery. For over 10 hours police swept through the factory grounds, beating and dragging people off, filling jails and hospitals with the injured.

Helicopters sprayed workers and their wives and children with tear gas, while armored personnel carriers crashed through their metal and human barricades. Riot police armed with gas canisters, water cannon and heavy equipment were shown on national television beating and kicking workers. Strikers and their supporters were forced to lie flat on the ground before being hauled away for interrogation. At least 1,600 workers were detained.

At the Assan plant in Choongnam, striking families fled to the roof of the factory building, where helicopters dumped tear gas canisters on them. Trapped under this barrage, workers sustained many serious injuries. Skulls were cracked and strikers suffered broken limbs. One worker, Son Sung-Gyoon, 34, fell from the fourth floor of the building as police rushed up the stairwells.

The Mando workers had been sitting in at the six factories since August 17, fighting the company's plans to terminate 1,090 workers out of a total of 4,500. Riot police also stormed a workers' occupation at Halla Electronics, owned by Mando's parent company the Halla Group.

Mando supplied auto parts to domestic car makers and also international giants such as GM and Ford. It posted a turnover of 1.4 trillion won in 1997, but went bankrupt that December in the wake of the country's currency and share market crash.

The violent operation was the first time that the government headed by Kim, a former pro-democracy dissident, had used the country's paramilitary police forces to attack workers en masse and break a strike. The regime had come under intense criticism from financial markets and media editorials for retreating from using the same methods against striking Hyundai workers the previous month.

The police raids were also calculated to intimidate Hyundai workers, who voted a day earlier to reject the agreement that their union had struck with Hyundai to end a protracted occupation against mass sackings. A Labour Ministry spokesman said the Mando operation could be taken as a warning to the Hyundai workers not to resume their struggle.

50 years ago: Nixon refuses to comply with court order to release White House tape recordings

On August 29, 1973, Federal Judge John J. Sirica ordered President Richard Nixon to provide the court with tape recordings of White House conversations related to the Watergate break-in of the Democratic National Committee headquarters. In July, during the US Senate hearings investigating the Watergate scandal, White House aides had revealed that a tape-recording system had been installed in the Oval Office that recorded nearly all conversations held with the president.

Shortly after, a grand jury issued a subpoena for the recordings. Invoking what he called "executive privilege," Nixon had refused to cooperate with the Watergate investigation, claiming that releasing information would damage national security.

In the first major challenge to Nixon's refusal, Sirica's order stated:

President Richard Nixon, or any subordinate officer, official or employee with custody or control of the documents or objects listed in the grand jury subpoena ... is hereby commanded to produce forthwith for the court's examination in-camera [in secret], the subpoenaed documents or objects.

Knowing full well that an inspection of the tapes would implicate him directly in the Watergate conspiracy, the president maintained his refusal to cooperate. The White House issued an official reply to the order that read:

... in-camera inspection of these tapes is inconsistent with the President's position relating to the question of separation of powers as provided by the Constitution and the necessity of maintaining the precedent of confidentiality of private Presidential conversations for this President and Presidents in the future. The president will not comply with this order.

Nixon added in a press conference that to carry out duties a president "must be able to do so with the principle of confidentiality intact." In other words Nixon admitted that to effectively do the president's business of attacking the living standards of the working class, waging wars abroad and carrying out domestic repression of political opponents, he must be allowed to operate behind closed doors and away from public scrutiny.

Sirica's order came with a provision allowing the Nixon administration to appeal the order. It would take nearly one year before the dispute was resolved.

In October Nixon would order Watergate special prosecutor Archibald Cox to drop the subpoena for the tapes. In what became known as the "Saturday Night Massacre," Nixon's attorney general

and deputy attorney general resigned after refusing Nixon's order to fire Cox. Eventually, Robert Bork, who was willing to fire Cox on behalf of Nixon, was chosen to lead the Justice Department.

However, Cox's eventual replacement, Leon Jaworski, decided to continue to pursue the subpoena of the tapes. The case would make its way to the Supreme Court, which on July 24, 1973, ruled that the White House must release the recordings.

The tapes left no doubt that Nixon had full knowledge of the break-in and had ordered subordinates in his cabinet and the CIA to cover up his involvement and that of others in the administration. In the face of this overwhelming evidence, Nixon resigned the presidency on August, 9 1974.

75 years ago: Right-wing parliamentary assembly convenes in West Germany

On September 1, 1948, a right-wing parliamentary assembly convened in the city of Bonn, in the British-controlled zone of northwestern Germany. The new body marked a further step towards the establishment of a West German state, based on the maintenance of capitalist rule and a close alignment with the victorious imperialist powers in World War II, Britain and above all the US.

The assembly was not the product of a direct election. Instead its members were selected by the various state governments in western Germany, some of which were themselves undemocratic provisional formations. The assembly was convened under conditions of a continuing occupation by the US and Britain, with both of those powers directly involved in its convocation.

The assembly was dominated by right-wing bourgeois parties. Out of 65 voting members, the body included 27 from the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), who blocked with several much smaller Christian parties. The Social Democrats also held 27 seats. They were as committed as the far right to the stabilization of capitalism and the establishment of a new bourgeois state.

The assembly elected Konrad Adenauer of the CDU as its president, foreshadowing his role as the first head of the West German state. Adenauer, while he had come into conflict with the Nazis, was a fanatical anti-communist committed to free market policies. He was heavily oriented to Washington and London, viewing alignment with them as the best means of establishing a strong state apparatus, including a military and intelligence service.

The assembly would eventually adopt a constitution. While it included various pledges to maintain parliamentary democracy and respect the rights of citizens, these differed little from provisions in the old Weimar constitution that had failed to prevent the Nazis from being elevated to power in 1933. Above all, these purportedly democratic clauses were aimed at aligning the emerging West German state with the Cold War that was being waged by the US against the Soviet Union.

At the conclusion of World War II, Britain, the US, France and the Soviet Union had engaged in an uneasy power sharing arrangement in Germany. This was a continuation of the alignment of the Stalinist bureaucracy with the imperialist powers, in line with its nationalist and pro-capitalist program. In exchange for a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, the Stalinists suppressed any independent action by the working class in Western Europe, and helped to restabilize

capitalist rule.

As the US turned towards the aggressive assertion of its dominance in 1947, the relations deteriorated, with the division of Germany into a Soviet-controlled east and an imperialist-dominated west becoming ever more deeply entrenched.

100 years ago: Japanese cities leveled by earthquake

On September 1, 1923, at 11:59 a.m., an earthquake measuring 7.9 on the moment magnitude scale shook the Kanto region of Japan's largest island, Honshu, which includes Tokyo and Yokohama, Japan's largest port city. The earthquake had been caused by a collision of two continental plates from which developed a fault six miles underneath the floor of Sagami Bay, 30 miles east of Tokyo.

The quake lasted for four minutes. Buildings collapsed, burying thousands. Fires erupted throughout urban areas, including in Tokyo, and a tsunami killed hundreds as it swept up on the coast of Sagami Bay. In Tokyo, water mains burst, making it impossible to put out fires for days. In rural areas, landslides buried whole villages.

At least 140,000 people died, including 44,000 in downtown Tokyo who were immolated in a "fire whirl" of high winds and fire. The filmmaker Akira Kurosawa, then 13 years old, describes the carnage there in his autobiography: "No corner of the landscape was free of corpses. In some places the piles of corpses formed little mountains. On top of one of these mountains sat a blackened body in the lotus position of Zen meditation."

In the days and weeks after the earthquake, over 6,000 Koreans living in the Kanto region were murdered by vigilantes. The home ministry on September 3 sent a message to police stations saying, "there are a group of people who want to take advantage of disasters. Be careful because Koreans are planning terrorism and robbery by arson and bombs."

Rumors spread that Koreans were poisoning the water. Japanese witnesses have said that police told citizens that it was permissible to kill Koreans. At the time, Korea was a colony of Japan and tens of thousands of Koreans worked in Japan as cheap labor. Hundreds of Chinese were also murdered by mobs.

The government used the emergency to assassinate leading socialists and communists. In one incident that came to international attention, a prominent anarchist couple, Sakae Sugi and Noe Itô, and their six-year-old nephew were murdered by a squad of military police led by Lieutenant Masahiko Amakasu, who was convicted of murder but released in 1926.



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