

# This week in history: September 4-10

3 September 2023

## 25 years ago: Indonesian students demand Habibie resignation

On September 8, 1998, students from some 40 universities across Jakarta planned a protest outside the national assembly building to demand the resignation of President B.J. Habibie after troops violently evicted several hundred students from the building's grounds the day before.

Students demanded that Habibie stand down because of his handling of the country's economic crisis and his failure to lower soaring food prices. In addition, they called for the former dictator Suharto, who had stepped down under the pressure of international finance after mass popular protests in May, to be placed on trial for corruption and repression during his 32-year rule. Their demands included reduced prices for food and other essentials, the withdrawal of the military from politics, and new members of parliament.

This followed the dismissal of top-ranking Indonesian officer and son-in-law to former president Suharto, Prabowo Subianto, following a three-week military investigation into his involvement in the abduction and torture of political activists.

Two hundred students marched to Atma Jaya Catholic University after several hundred riot police blocked their path to parliament. Other students were stopped at military roadblocks on major roads leading to the assembly compound.

Students also planned a major demonstration in Surabaya, Indonesia's second largest city, where Habibie was due to visit. Some 2,000 students marched and rallied there against soaring food prices, in what students described as a "warm up" for Habibie's visit. A spokesman told reporters that students would hold Habibie hostage until he agreed to quit.

Several students were injured, some seriously, when security forces used batons, bayonets, shields and tear gas to drive them out of Jakarta's parliament precinct the day prior. At least two students underwent emergency surgery at Atma Jaya Hospital for bayonet wounds. Others were treated for head wounds and teargas inhalation.

The brutal action underscored the repressive character of the military-dominated regime headed by Habibie. Earlier the same week troops initially put on a show of restraint when some 2,000 students pushed down the assembly's main gate and occupied its surroundings. Some 300 students remained overnight, before the troops attacked the next morning.

The demonstration was the first major student protest in the capital since May, when students sat in the assembly building during several days of marches, rioting and looting that precipitated the resignation of Habibie's mentor, General Suharto.

## 50 years ago: Strike of 35,000 teachers in Michigan

On September 4, 1973 teachers in the Detroit Public School system and 33 other districts in Michigan began a strike that would last in Detroit for 43 days. The strike was the longest in the school district's history, and saw teachers defy court injunctions and face down threats of arrests.

The main issue in the strike was the teachers' demand that wage increases keep up with record-setting inflation. Teachers called for a 9.7 percent raise in the first year of the contract and a cost-of-living clause to maintain their standard of living for the following years.

Willy Hewitt, a math teacher at Northwestern High School, told reporters from the WSWs predecessor, *The Bulletin*, that "We didn't have a strike in 1972 over wages. Looking back, that was wrong. Even the 9.7 percent we're asking for now wouldn't take us to where we were in 1971." Another teacher added, "You can't isolate wages from the whole economy. With prices the way they are, how can you survive? That's why if the judge turns around and signs an injunction, we're not going back. I'd be willing to go to jail."

Among other issues, teachers also demanded classroom size limits and improvements to school buildings and resources. "I once had to teach English grammar to 46 students in the stinking cafeteria without a blackboard," said one teacher.

Teachers in Detroit had closely followed the 1970 strike of teachers in Newark, New Jersey and had prepared themselves based on that experience. Detroit teachers expected a long strike that would include injunctions and police intervention to break up the pickets.

The strike completely shut down the schools throughout September. At the end of the month the school board sought an injunction against the strike, which would have imposed a raise of just 3 percent and would have allowed police to arrest teachers who defied the order and continued to strike.

In a unanimous decision on September 30, teachers voted to reject the back-to-work injunction and to continue the strike. The teachers union, the Detroit Federation of Teachers, was fined over \$2.5 million for refusing to order teachers back to work.

For another two-and-a-half weeks teachers continued striking as the fines against the union piled up. This caused panic among union bureaucrats that their funds could be run dry. They began looking for a way to bring the strike to an end.

The strike continued until October 17, when the union agreed to settle the wage, class size and other disputes in arbitration. Teachers went back to the classrooms without their demands met. In return for their role in ending the strike without a raise for teachers, the school board dropped the fines against the DFT.

## 75 years ago: Democratic People's Republic proclaimed in North Korea

On September 9, 1948, a Democratic People's Republic of North Korea was proclaimed by its Stalinist leadership, formalizing a division of the peninsula that persists to this day. The establishment of the new state, closely aligned with the Soviet Union, reflected the deepening of the Cold War.

Korea had been subjected to brutal neo-colonial rule by Japan for much of the 20th century, including during World War II. At the conclusion of that conflict and with the defeat of Japan, Soviet forces established a military occupation in the north, with the US in the south. That power-sharing arrangement reflected the Soviet bureaucracy's counter-revolutionary alignment with the allied imperialist powers in the latter years of the world war.

While the partition was initially meant to be temporary, it deepened, along with the breakdown of the postwar understanding between the Soviet bureaucracy and American imperialism. The US moved to consolidate an effective military dictatorship in the south. In 1946 it brutally repressed a major peasant uprising and cracked down on all other forms of social and political opposition.

In North Korea, ferment in the wake of the defeat of Japanese forces had been expressed in the creation of various workers' and peasants' organizations. As in the south, there were also a number of Christian tendencies, some of which were more politically radical than others.

The new North Korean state was nominally established under the leadership of Kim Tu-bong, Chairman of the Stalinized Workers' Party of North Korea Central Committee. But primary political power rested with Kim Il Sung, who was named premier. The entire process was closely overseen and directed by representatives of the Soviet bureaucracy.

Kim Il Sung had been involved in various anti-Japanese militia and struggles dating back to at least the early 1930s. But his political record had always been that of a Korean nationalist, not a socialist internationalist. His evolution, and those of other North Korean leaders, had been conditioned by the programs of Stalinism and Maoism, which had legitimized class collaboration and falsely proclaimed the heterogeneous peasantry to be a key revolutionary force, rather than the working class.

While the North Korean leadership would assert its aspiration to reunify Korea on socialist foundations, in practice the Stalinists were hostile to any united struggle by the working class across the peninsula and throughout the region, lest it undermine their own dominance and upset the interests of the Soviet bureaucracy. Though with verifying and multitudinous titles, Kim Il Sung would remain the absolute ruler of North Korea from 1949 until his death in 1994, when leadership of the state was passed to his son Kim Jong Il.

### **100 years ago: League of Nations admits Irish Free State as member**

On September 10, 1923, the Assembly of the League of Nations unanimously admitted the Irish Free State, the newly established polity that comprised the southern 26 counties of Ireland and was a part of the British Empire, to membership.

The president of the Free State, W. T. Cosgrave, told the Assembly, "Ireland comes amongst you as an independent nation, and as a co-equal member of the community of nations known as the British Commonwealth." Ireland, nevertheless, was admitted to the League as

a dominion, that is with semi-colonial status, a position that Irish delegates were at pains to deny. As historian Kevin Hora reports, "the Japanese delegate had been corrected by his Irish counterpart for erroneously ascribing lesser status to [British] Commonwealth members than to other states." The Japanese delegate was of course not in error.

The section of the Irish bourgeoisie that governed the Free State—and brutally suppressed its opponents with terror and British weapons during the Irish Civil War—sought membership to maintain the fiction that Ireland was now an equal partner with British imperialism in world affairs.

The Free State registered the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921, the document that partitioned Ireland and made it subordinate to British imperialism, with the League in an effort to give it international legitimacy.

The Irish ruling class also hoped to apply pressure to British imperialism by membership in the League. Hora cites one Irish observer in Germany at the time: "Similarities in the legal system, currency and language made the state ... nothing more than a province of Great Britain ... even to an intelligent German the significant story on the passport 'British subject by birth' was a conundrum."

The inclusion of the Free State was not only a coup for its leaders, but delighted world imperialism. On the day of the admission of Ireland, the *New York Times* reported, during the Assembly, "There was a very apparent consciousness of the exceptional circumstances attached to the welcoming of this new member and none ever had a warmer greeting."

The League was known by millions of colonial slaves as a mouthpiece for the imperialist powers. It had made the British, the Italians and the French rulers over "protectorates" such as Palestine and Syria, with the fiction that their rights were protected by the League until such time as they were capable of self-government. Now the League of Nations was telling them that perhaps they could aspire to the higher status of colonialism offered to the Free State.



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