This week in history: October 16-22

15 October 2023

25 years ago: Pipeline explosion in Nigeria kills over 1,000

On October 17, 1998, an oil pipeline explosion that occurred in Jesse, Nigeria, southeast of Lagos, killed over 1,000 people. It was the deadliest accident in the history of the country's oil industry.

Witnesses said victims had been soaked by gushing oil and were engulfed in flames when the fuel ignited. Others were trapped in a ditch where a pool of petrol had collected. A patch of land the size of a soccer field was charred as the fire followed the flow of the volatile liquid.

Poorly equipped hospitals and health centers in the remote region were inundated with the dead and injured and were forced to turn many away. Nigeria's military ruler, General Abulsalami Abubakar, visited the site and said no compensation would be paid to the relatives of the victims. He declared that the damage to the pipeline was an act of sabotage, echoing the claims of representatives of the Pipeline and Products Marketing Company (PPMC), the state-owned firm that operated the pipeline.

Company officials said that the fire was started by "tools used by saboteurs." Other reports claimed it was ignited by someone lighting a cigarette, or by a spark from a motorcycle.

BBC News reported that although the government and foreign oil companies in the area knew about the disaster soon after it happened, the matter was not made public. As a result, medical assistance was delayed, and only arrived after many had already died. Overtaxed hospitals and clinics also turned away many victims.

For the people of Jesse, mostly poor cassava farmers and small traders, the ruptured pipeline, which had been spewing gasoline for three days, offered an opportunity for desperately needed income. The corruption and mismanagement of the state-owned petroleum company, along with the indifference of the multinational oil companies that reaped huge profits in the impoverished Niger Delta region, led to hundreds of oil spills and pipeline ruptures. A week after the disaster, another pipeline ruptured north of Jesse. The NNPC immediately declared that it was the result of sabotage.

In the aftermath of the tragedy the anger of area residents and youth erupted in violence. Six people died as a result of rioting in the town of Warri as armed young people burned down houses and attacked oil company employees. Intertribal conflict also erupted between two ethnic minorities in the region—the Ijaw, mainly poor fishermen, and the Itshekir, mostly subsistence farmers.

50 years ago: OPEC imposes oil embargo on US

On October 17, 1973 members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), which included Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Libya, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, among others, began an embargo on the sale of oil to countries that were allied with Israel in the Yom Kippur war. The principal target of the embargo was the United States, with other countries including the Netherlands, Rhodesia, South Africa and Portugal also barred from purchasing OPEC oil.

Total oil production from OPEC countries was also reduced by 5 percent, causing oil prices throughout the entire industrialized world to jump dramatically, even in countries not directly subjected to the embargo. The price of oil nearly quadrupled in a matter of weeks. Adjusted for inflation to 2022 dollars, in 1972 oil was $17.36 per barrel. By 1974 the price had jumped to $68.73 per barrel.

The embargo was imposed against the United States after the Nixon administration announced that it would begin a massive rearmament of Israel, to bolster the regime's supplies of tanks and other weapons that had taken major losses in the initial offensive by the Egyptian military. The US military conducted a major airlift, dubbed "Operation Nickel Grass," to deliver the weapons to Israel.

Nickel Grass was the largest airlift in history, exceeding the Berlin Airlift of 1948-49. Over the course of 32 days, the US delivered over 22,300 tons of tanks, artillery, ammunition and other supplies to the Israeli war against Egypt and Syria.

The embargo had an immediate impact on the ongoing American economic crisis. By 1973 a major strike wave was under way as workers fought back against inflation that was eating away at workers' standard of living. The halting of oil sales to the US ramped up the crisis to a new degree, leading to the largest economic recession in the US since the Great Depression.

Long lines of cars waiting at gas stations became a common sight as gas was rationed. Speed limits became widespread for the first time and some areas placed restrictions on weekend driving. Even the lights at New York's Times Square were shut off in an attempt to save fuel.

While during the Vietnam War the Johnson administration had initially advanced a policy of "guns and butter," to provide some increased spending on social programs and welfare in addition to the war spending, by 1973 Nixon was giving expression to a change in the ruling policy forced by the declining world economic position of the United States. The working class now must pay for the wars waged by imperialism in the form of major price increases and wage cuts.

The embargo would last until March 1974, when an oil summit was held in Washington D.C. to negotiate an end and resume oil

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sales to the US. However, even after the embargo ended oil prices continued to rise steadily, reaching over $130 per barrel (in 2022 dollars) by 1980.

75 years ago: Chinese Communist Party seizes Changchun in Manchuria

On October 20, 1948, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), through its People's Liberation Army (PLA), seized control of Changchun, the largest city in Manchuria. The strategically significant victory came after a protracted siege directed against the nationalist and reactionary Kuomintang (KMT).

The successful offensive was part of a vast civil war, spanning the enormous Chinese landmass. The PLA mobilised hundreds of thousands in its peasant army, against the warlordist KMT, which had been the main force of reaction for decades.

The protracted civil war took place in the post-World War II context. The KMT and the CCP had fought alongside one another against Japanese occupation of China during that conflict.

In the aftermath of the defeat of Japan, the CCP leadership under Mao Zedong had made overtures towards the formation of a coalition government. That was in line with the Stalinist perspective of class collaboration and a "two-stage" revolution, which would limit developments in China to the framework of capitalist rule. It was the KMT's intransigence that resulted in the civil war.

Manchuria had long been of central geostrategic and political significance. It had been a focal point of imperialist interventions in China, and its control was viewed as a stepping stone to dominance over the whole of China. It had been the location of the Japanese-controlled puppet state of Manchukuo from 1931 on, occupied by a huge Japanese army. Changchun had been designated as a "model city" during its occupation by Tokyo.

The Soviet Union had seized Manchuria after the defeat of the Japanese. But in line with the Stalinist bureaucracy's sordid deals with imperialism, the Red Army had been withdrawn and Manchuria relinquished to the KMT.

The PLA began its preparations for an offensive on Manchuria as early as 1947, amid a broader winter offensive. It was not until May 1948, however, that the plans were set in motion. Then began a four-month campaign that cut off the province from the rest of China, which included a military blockade of all supplies and guerrilla attacks. The KMT attempted to circumvent the siege with air drops of supplies, but the size of its forces and of the civilian population made this an unviable strategy.

On October 14, the PLA secured control of Chinchow after a massive artillery barrage. The town was a key strategic point, being the main entry point from central China to Manchuria.

Heavy fighting ensued, between the PLA and the KMT forces, which both numbered an estimated 100,000, over control of Changchun. Casualties were heavy on both sides, with estimates of the losses being more than 15,000 each. Eventually, on October 20, the KMT forces would would surrender in what became a significant turning point in the war.

100 years ago: German Communist Party stands down from insurrection

On October 22, 1923, the German Communist leader Heinrich Brandler accepted the refusal of left-wing Social Democrats at a workers conference in Chemnitz, in the state of Saxony in eastern Germany, to organize a general strike. The action would have been the signal for the armed seizure of power by German workers' organizations, including factory councils, under the direction of the German Communist Party (KPD).

Military plans for an uprising had been made in several cities, although in many cases workers' "proletarian hundreds" lacked sufficient arms.

On October 10, Brandler and two other communist leaders had joined the Saxon state government at the invitation of the left Social Democratic leader Erich Zeigner, a move that had been discussed in the international communist leadership earlier that month in Moscow. Communists had also entered a coalition government in the state of Thuringia. The purpose was to facilitate the arming of the working class under conditions where the KPD lived a semi-legal existence, with the frequent banning of its press.

The situation was dire. Hyperinflation had caused a rapid decline in living standards and unemployment had ballooned. The industrial Ruhr Valley was occupied by French troops demanding war reparations. The southern state of Bavaria had come under the control of far-right forces, and the Social Democratic president of the Weimar Republic, Frederich Ebert, had given broad powers to the German military. Troops were now threatening to invade "Red Saxony" and restore order.

But the German Communist leadership lost its nerve and allowed the Social Democrats to take the initiative. In the words of the historian Pierre Broué, "Above all, the communists were profoundly disoriented. The reaction of the left Social-Democratic delegates seemed to show that the working class was not ready to fight. No alternative plans existed, the KPD delegates could not but follow the current."

Couriers were sent to other regions of Germany calling off the insurrection, although word did not reach Hamburg, where an attempted seizure of power went ahead. The military marched on Saxony the next day and disbanded the government.

The failure to seize power had a profound impact on the KPD and on the German and international working class, particularly in the Soviet Union, where workers had been anticipating a "German October" with bated breath.

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