

This week in history: October 30-November 5

29 October 2023

25 years ago: Anwar Ibrahim trial begins in Malaysia

On November 2, 1998, the trial of Malaysian former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim began. Sacked from his government posts on September 2 and expelled from the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), Anwar was subjected to a barrage of flimsy allegations in the government-controlled press, involving sexual indecency, hindering police investigations and sedition.

Mass protests broke out in early October against the Malaysian regime headed by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. Tens of thousands of protesters defied a government ban on public gatherings and braved the attacks of hundreds of riot police armed with water cannon, tear gas, electric prods and batons.

Anwar, who vigorously denied the accusations against him, was arrested on September 20 and held for nine days under the country's Internal Security Act (ISA) before being taken into court and charged with three counts of corruption and four of homosexual acts. He had visible bruising to the face and neck and accused the police of beating him unconscious on the first night of his detention.

High Court Judge Augustine Paul sentenced Zainur Zakaria, one of Anwar's defense lawyers, to three months jail on charges of contempt of court. Zainur's "crime" was that he presented an affidavit in the court on behalf of his client calling for two prosecutors, Abdul Gani Patail and Azahar Mohamed, to be discharged from the trial for attempting to blackmail an associate of Anwar, Nallakarruppan Solaimalai, into giving false evidence against Anwar concerning sexual relations with five women.

Nallakarruppan, one of Anwar's tennis partners and the former executive director of gaming company Magnum Corp, was facing charges in a separate trial related to unlawful possession of 125 rounds of ammunition allegedly found by police in his safe.

Under the country's draconian Internal Security Act (ISA), Nallakarruppan faced a mandatory death sentence if found guilty. In a sworn statement attached to Zainur's affidavit, Manjeet Singh Dhillon, a defense lawyer representing the businessman, alleged that both prosecutors attempted to pressure his client to give evidence against Anwar in exchange for changing the ISA charge to a lesser one.

In an extraordinary legal decision, Judge Paul not only dismissed the affidavit, saying there was no supporting evidence, but then claimed that in filing the motion, Anwar's defense was attempting to "undermine the integrity of a trial in progress." Acutely aware of the political ramifications of the trial, Paul bluntly stated: "It is my duty to guarantee that the persons who are following this trial are not hoodwinked in any way."

50 years ago: Nixon impeachment proceedings begin

On October 30, 1973, the US House of Representatives Judiciary Committee took the initial steps toward impeaching President Richard Nixon. On a party-line vote of 21 to 17, the Democratic Party majority approved a formal inquiry to gather evidence against the president to be used in pursuing impeachment charges. The committee granted its chairman, Representative Peter W. Rodino, Jr., the power to issue subpoenas in the course of the inquiry.

Upon the approval of the inquiry, Rodino said that the crisis surrounding the Nixon White House required a "high level of intensity and urgency," and that he did not believe that "this crisis in authority can be permitted to continue for a long duration."

The House impeachment inquiry was the first step taken to initiate the removal of the sitting president from office. A Senate investigation into the Watergate scandal had begun earlier in the year, but it had only been tasked with collecting evidence. While several explosive revelations had already been made, including that audio recordings existed of all White House conversations, Nixon was stonewalling the investigation by invoking what he called "executive privilege" and refusing to cooperate with the investigation or turn over subpoenaed items.

The House inquiry was spurred on by what became known as the Saturday Night Massacre of October 20, 1973. On that night, Nixon ordered his Attorney General, Elliot Richardson, to fire Archibald Cox, the special prosecutor appointed by the Justice Department to handle the investigation into Watergate.

The decision was clearly to disrupt the investigation and replace Cox with someone who would be a Nixon yes-man. However, the plan backfired on Nixon when the leadership of the Justice Department refused to go along with the cover-up. Upon receiving the order, Richardson resigned immediately. Then Nixon moved down the line to the Deputy Attorney General William French Smith, placing on him the order to fire Cox. Smith also refused and then resigned his office.

Finally, the third most senior person in the Justice Department, Robert F. Bork, followed Nixon's order and carried out the firing of Cox. Bork would appoint Leon Jaworski to be the new special prosecutor. Jaworski took office on November 1.

The Saturday Night Massacre and the initiation of impeachment in the House marked a major turning point. The crisis of political legitimacy in the White House, coming amidst a major strike wave and the American defeat in Vietnam, was too dangerous for the US ruling elite to dismiss. Congress was forced to act against Nixon or risk the working class intervening directly into the situation.

75 years ago: Truman wins US presidential election

On November 2, 1948, Harry S. Truman overwhelmingly won the US presidential election, maintaining his position as the leader of American imperialism. Notwithstanding his incumbency, the victory was described as an upset, contradicting polling and the predictions of pundits. It came amid sharp divisions within Truman's Democratic Party.

Truman won 49.6 percent of the popular vote. In the anti-democratic system of the Electoral College, Truman received 303 votes as against his nearest rival Republican candidate Thomas E. Dewey, who won 189 votes in the Electoral College and 45.1 percent of the popular vote.

While Dewey had been tipped to win, Truman also faced a challenge from Henry A. Wallace. The former Democratic vice-president in the Roosevelt administration ran for the Progressive Party, which opposed the Cold War policies of confrontation with the Soviet Union, on the grounds that such a conflict could weaken American imperialism and made various left-populist appeals. Truman was also challenged by Strom Thurmond, a "Dixiecrat" candidate from South Carolina, whose campaign was based on opposition to any turn away from the Jim Crow segregationist policies that the Democrats had upheld for decades.

The election occurred under conditions where Truman had made limited gestures towards ending the most egregious forms of racial discrimination. Truman was also supported by virtually the entire trade union bureaucracy, even though his administration had led an offensive against post-World War II strikes and stoppages, including through the deployment of troops against struggling workers.

In a November 15 article in its newspaper, the *Militant*, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) took stock of Truman's victory. The SWP, then the American section of the world Trotskyist movement, had run its own candidate, under the banner of building an independent movement of the working class.

The November 15 article stated: "We said last summer that the Democratic party was in a crisis and that this crisis, stemming from the conflict of hostile social groups within the party, was brought on by the mounting difficulties and drive to reaction of American imperialism.

"'New Dealism'—the policy of granting concessions to the working people—became a luxury that hard-pressed American capitalism could no longer afford. The period of the 'cold war' with Russia became likewise the period of the Taft-Hartley law, witchhunts, spy scares, labor injunctions, union busting and lowered living standards at home."

Truman had overseen this reaction, including witch hunts domestically and the development of a major diplomatic and geo-political offensive against the Soviet Union, aimed at asserting the untrammelled global hegemony of American imperialism. The Democratic Party president would intensify this program over the following years.

100 years ago: Military crackdown in Melbourne police strike

On the evening of October 31, 1923, 29 policemen in the city of Melbourne in Victoria, Australia refused to go on their shift in protest of the regime of spying by a unit Special Supervisors, who followed constables on patrol and reported on them to the police brass. The constables called the Special Supervisors "spooks" and had lodged many complaints about them. The Police Commissioner summoned 100 recent police recruits to replace the strikers, but the recruits also went on strike.

The Melbourne police were drastically underpaid and had no pensions. Although the police had a union, the Victorian Police Association, it was widely regarded as ineffectual.

After meeting with a leader of the strikers the next day, Thursday, the Premier of the Nationalist Party government in Victoria, Harry Lawson, demanded that the strikers return to work the following day and promised they would not be victimized, but neither would authorities address strikers' demands. The strikers refused and were dismissed only to be joined by hundreds more police on Friday. A small force of scab police, detectives, and retired officers called back to duty now constituted the city's operative police force. Confrontations broke out between strikers and scabs.

On Friday and Saturday, Melbourne was overtaken by widespread rioting. Crowds attacked scab policemen and, in one instance, drove them into Town Hall and besieged them there. There was looting and three people died.

The military was mobilized, and hundreds of soldiers entered the city, set up machine gun nests at critical intersections and placed guards at the banks. The next day a force of 2,000 volunteer special constables was organized by Sir Henry George Chauvel, one of the highest-ranking Australian army officers and veteran of British imperialism's ventures from the Boer War to Palestine. The volunteer force restored order. In subsequent days, nearly a third of the Melbourne police force was fired.



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