

This week in history: November 13-19

12 November 2023

25 years ago: Indonesian security forces kill students

On November 13, 1998, Indonesian security forces killed 17 anti-government protesters when they fired at point blank range and drove armored vehicles into a march of tens of thousands on Jalan Sudirman, a major thoroughfare in central Jakarta.

The student protests—the largest since the ousting of President-dictator Suharto that May—steadily grew in size and intensity throughout the week. A number of students went to the capital from universities in other parts of Java.

Thousands of people looked on and applauded as the protest marches moved along the streets. One column of students marched through the poorer areas of Jakarta gathering support from workers, the unemployed and urban poor whose living standards were devastated by the country's economic crisis.

Student leaders called for an end to the “dual role” of the military which stemmed from the bloody 1965-66 coup that brought Suharto to power.

A Reuters news agency report described the situation as a war zone: “Troops dropped down on one knee and carefully aimed their shots. Some danced a victory jig when the protesters were temporarily beaten back, others picked up the stones thrown at them and hurled them back. One woman wept inconsolably right next to the soldiers firing at the crowd, crying out that her young son had been hit and dragged back.”

Defence Minister General Wiranto gave the green light for the assault on anti-government demonstrators when he publicly warned that his troops would take “stern action” against those who violated the laws or disturbed the peace. He called on Jakarta residents to stay off the streets.

The deaths exposed the real character of the regime headed by President B.J. Habibie and the proceedings of the special session of the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) which began earlier that week in the national parliament. Since he replaced Suharto in May of 1998, Habibie and the ruling Golkar party sought to cultivate a more democratic image but the military continued to dominate the government.

More than 30,000 heavily armed troops and police, backed by light tanks, armored vehicles, water cannon, horses and attack dogs were deployed around the capital. The parliament building itself was encircled with razor wire and barricades. Fifteen warships were stationed in Jakarta harbor.

50 years ago: Greek military junta massacres protesting

Athens students

On November 14, 1973, Students at Athens Polytechnic University began an uprising against the Greek military government of Georgios Papadopoulos. Thousands of students at the school and residents in the surrounding area joined marches and occupied university buildings demanding an end to military dictatorship.

In a press conference held in one of the occupied buildings the students read a statement declaring, “A primary condition for the solution of the people's problems is the immediate downfall of the junta's tyrannical regime and the parallel establishment of popular sovereignty.” The students added that they sought the “restoration of national independence from the foreign interests that have supported the tyranny in our country for years.”

Papadopoulos initially indicated he would not interfere with the protests and would respect the independence of the university. However, military hardliners demanded the uprising be smashed. After students built a radio station that broadcast calls for the Greek population to join the uprising and bring the government down, plans for martial law were set in motion.

On November 17, Papadopoulos deployed tanks to Athens Polytechnic that smashed through the university gates and then through student barricades. Street fighting lasted into the early morning hours between students armed only with rocks and bottles and police who had been issued machine guns.

The Greek government initially lied about the extent of the bloodshed, claiming that five people had been killed. Later investigations found that at least 40 youth were killed and over 2,000 injured by the military-police assault.

Papadopoulos had ruled Greece as dictator since 1967 when he led a coup of military officers to prevent elections from being held, taking control of the state. The coup was backed by the United States. The regime was characterized by massive repression against communists and other left-wing opponents of the dictatorship.

In the months preceding the protest, cracks in the Papadopoulos regime had emerged. In June 1973, hoping to appease growing protests calling for his immediate removal, Papadopoulos declared an end to the Greek monarchy and the establishment of a republic with himself serving as president until elections could be held.

Despite being a purely cosmetic change in the government, Papadopoulos faced major opposition from right-wing hardliners in the military who opposed any reforms. In 1973, multiple coup attempts were launched from within the Greek military. While none succeeded, the government was shaken.

In the instability that followed the Athens Polytechnic uprising, the right wing of the military led by Dimitrios Ioannidis would seize on the opportunity to oust Papadopoulos, launching a successful coup on November 25, dedicated to maintaining the military dictatorship.

The Ioannidis regime, however, could not resolve the crisis and suppress the democratic strivings of the Greek masses. The junta would last for less than another year, ceding power to exiled right-wing politician George Karamanlis, amid internal conflicts over the failure of its attempt to seize control of Cyprus, which provoked a Turkish invasion of the island, and a partition which still remains.

75 years ago: Strikes and rioting in Paris over attacks on living standards

On November 13, 1948, rioting and clashes broke out in several Parisian working-class suburbs, as the police responded with violence to strikes and protests opposing crippling inflation, including in foodstuffs, and a continuing suppression of wages.

The action had been initiated by the General Confederation of Labor (CGT), which was under the leadership of the French Communist Party (PCF). It had called a general strike in Paris, to oppose the refusal of the government to provide any cost-of-living relief, as it was implementing a big business program aimed at purported economic restabilisation.

The extent of participation in the strike remains unclear. Some of the clashes occurred as CGT officials and supporters were seeking to block the gates of factories and other workplaces which were not covered by the union confederation.

The stoppage was the tail end of a massive movement of the French working class in the post-World War II period. The French ruling class emerged from the war completely discredited as a result of its collaboration with the Nazis through the Vichy regime. As was the case elsewhere throughout the continent, the war was followed by a sharp social crisis. Mass strikes involving millions had continued throughout 1948.

The PCF, in line with the Soviet bureaucracy's policy of collaboration with imperialism, had played the crucial role in seeking to head off the movement and prevent a socialist revolution in France. The Stalinists had joined the capitalist governments that were cobbled together after the war, assuming control of key ministries.

As the US turned away from its erstwhile collaboration with the Soviet bureaucracy and towards an aggressive Cold War policy, Stalinists were ousted from governments in a number of European countries, including France and Italy. In 1947, the five Stalinist government ministers were expelled from the French government over their support for a strike by Renault workers.

The openly bourgeois Socialist Party, with support from the ruling elite and US imperialism, responded by splitting the CGT and creating a rival union confederation, Force Ouvrière. The November 1948 disturbances, while reflecting continuing anger

and opposition in the working class, were also an attempt by the Stalinists to head off this threat to their political position.

100 years ago: Italian parliament passes law to keep fascists in power

On November 18, 1923, the Italian parliament passed the "Acerbo Law," named after its fascist sponsor Baron Giacomo Acerbo, which would allow any party that won the most votes in a general election to control two-thirds of the seats in parliament if it polled over 25 percent. The remaining third of the seats would be divided up by the other parties proportionately.

The law was motivated by the fact that Benito Mussolini's National Fascist Party, a year after the infamous March on Rome, still only had a relatively small number of deputies in parliament. The fascists had gained control of the streets through violence and terror, and largely because the powerful Italian working class had been left without a revolutionary program by its leadership.

After the March on Rome, Mussolini had been appointed prime minister in 1922 by King Victor Immanuel III in accordance with the Italian constitution. The socialists (PSI) were still the largest single party in parliament and Mussolini ruled with the support of the Catholic Italian Popular Party (PPI) and the Liberal Party (PLI), both of which were unstable and included elements the fascists considered unreliable.

In addition, by the end of 1923, the fascists had not completely won over the bourgeoisie, though many industrialists had come over to them because of the fascists' role in suppressing the workers movement.

More importantly, the working class, while having suffered heavy defeats in 1921 and 1922 at the hands of fascist bands, had not been completely crushed. Socialists and Communists still stood at the head of workers' organizations, particularly in the northern industrial cities.

Mussolini had maneuvered the PPI out of his cabinet in April by backroom deals with the Vatican and was able to force the PPI representatives to vote for the Acerbo Law by intimidation from fascist squadristi.

The elections of April 1924 took place under the Acerbo Law. The fascists won 64 percent, largely through a campaign of violence, particularly in rural areas, and the law enabled them to gain a super-majority in parliament.



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