

This week in history: January 29-February 4

28 January 2024

25 years ago: Report establishes chimpanzee origins of HIV

On February 4, 1999, a report was published in *Nature* magazine which explained that HIV-1, the main type of human immunodeficiency virus which causes AIDS, originated in a subspecies of chimpanzees from equatorial West Africa. The report detailed the work carried out by a group of researchers at the Department of Medicine and Microbiology at the University of Alabama, Birmingham, led by Feng Goa, showing that monkeys carry viral infections similar to HIV, called simian immunodeficiency virus (SIV).

By the end of 1999, the World Health Organization and the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS estimated 34.3 million people were living with the virus, 95 percent of whom lived in developing countries.

It had long been suspected that HIV-1 came from chimpanzees, but scientists had been unable to identify the precise subspecies until this study. This breakthrough was the latest in a string of findings over the previous decade and a half aimed at unveiling the origins of HIV-1.

The researchers carried out tests on tissue from a chimpanzee that died in 1985. The chimp, known as Marilyn, had been part of the US Air Force space travel research program. Marilyn had been used to breed other chimps for the program. They used biochemical techniques to amplify, sequence and analyze the genetic makeup of the SIV virus. They were able to show that its genetic makeup closely matched those of the three main strains of the HIV-1 virus, known as M, N and O.

It had been previously demonstrated that another HIV virus known as HIV-2, a form of HIV found mainly in West Africa, had its origins in a form of SIV found in Sooty Mangabey monkeys. But the source of HIV-1 had remained unknown. While other chimpanzees had been shown to carry SIV viruses, they did not have a close genetic relationship to HIV viruses.

Chimpanzees in Africa were found in several subspecies related to geographical origin. Marilyn belonged to the subspecies *Pan troglodytes troglodytes*, which is found in Gabon, Equatorial Guinea and Cameroon. The first recorded case of AIDS in 1959 occurred in a man living in Kinshasa just across the Congo River from Gabon.

The fact that the three strains of HIV-1 were all closely related to the SIV virus found in this subspecies of chimpanzees suggested that the virus crossed from ape to man on at least three separate occasions. The findings from the report were a significant step forward in understanding the nature of the virus and providing clues for the medical treatment of the disease.

50 years ago: American truck drivers strike against fuel prices

On February 1, 1974, nearly 100,000 independent truck drivers in the United States went on strike demanding that price increases be rolled back. Sharp increases to gas prices had brought on by the Arab oil embargo connected to the Yom Kippur War in the Middle East fought by Israel, backed by the US, against Egypt and Syria.

Independent truck drivers own their own trucks and work on a contract basis with companies that require long-haul shipping. The drivers themselves are responsible for the costs of maintaining their trucks, including fuel.

The national average price of gas jumped from 39 cents in 1973 to over 55 cents in 1974, an increase of over 40 percent. It had become common to see long lines of cars at gas stations as rationing measures were introduced to limit consumption. Among other restrictions, a national speed limit of 55 mph was imposed to conserve gas.

All these measures negatively affected independent drivers. Not only did they lose net pay from the increased gas prices, but the rationing and speed limits forced them to make more frequent stops for fuel and caused jobs to take longer, resulting in fewer contracts.

“We’re against Nixon and the oil companies,” said one driver, Freddy Stanton, who spoke with *The Bulletin*, American predecessor of the *World Socialist Web Site*. “Nixon is working with Exxon to push prices up. Nixon has done more harm to this country in two years than any other president in 200 years.”

Another driver commented, “I personally say Nixon and the companies are responsible. They are all in a conspiracy. They want outrageous prices for diesel fuel and everything else.”

Organized somewhat spontaneously through their CB radios, truck drivers staged a series of smaller protests throughout December 1973 and January 1974. The demonstrations commonly involved drivers using their trucks to block highways, leading to confrontations with police.

During those months, thousands of independent drivers formed or joined trucker organizations like the Owner-Operators Independent Drivers Association and the Council of Independent Truckers to coordinate their strikes. By the time the national strike began, the Nixon administration had mobilized the National Guard to patrol highways and use force against drivers blocking the interstates.

In one clash in Ohio, a special riot police unit called “Impact” attacked picket lines of truckers who had been preventing shipments of fuel from being delivered. Later the police found the headquarters of the strikers and burned it down.

Attorney General William Saxbe threatened to establish spy rings to enable police to arrest militant truckers. “This means we are going to have at every place these people gather, and on the scene of every act of violence reported, people who are investigating and collecting evidence,” he said in a statement.

The strike had a major impact. Within just a few days stores were unable to resupply their goods and many heavy industries temporarily shut down without their shipments of parts and raw materials.

On February 7, one week after the national strike began, heads of the independent driver organizations cut a deal with the federal government to order truckers back to work. Under threat of military occupation of the highways, the agreement allowed drivers to place a small fuel surcharge into their contracts and granted them exceptions to the rationing rules.

75 years ago: US announces de jure diplomatic recognition of Israel

On January 31, 1949, US President Harry S. Truman announced that the US was extending *de jure* diplomatic recognition to the state of Israel, following the conclusion of its first national election days before. *De jure* recognition, meaning declaring the official legitimacy of a state, followed US *de facto* recognition of the Zionist state immediately upon its establishment in May, 1948.

Truman noted that the US had been the first country in the world to grant *de facto* recognition to Israel. The state had been established with the assistance of British and US imperialism, to serve as a beachhead against the Arab nations.

The US statement underscored its support for and complicity in the crimes that led to and accompanied the foundation of Israel. That included terror campaigns by Zionist militias aimed at depopulating Palestinian villages, as well as massacres and other violations of international law.

Truman's January 31 statement was issued amid the ongoing Arab-Israeli war that began shortly after the establishment of the new state. That included aggressive and expansionist Israeli operations targeting Egyptian forces in the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Desert the month before.

The January 25 elections for a Constituent Assembly were intended to provide the new militarist state with a democratic and even progressive gloss. The Mapai party received more than 35 percent of the votes, twice as many as its nearest contenders. Mapai, led by Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, was fully committed to the ethno-nationalist program of Zionism, but presented itself as a social-democratic organisation seeking to improve the plight of workers and the poor. It was a predecessor of the Israeli Labour Party.

The parties most closely associated with the terrorist campaigns that led to the formation of Israel received a negligible result. The Fighters' List had been established by former members of the Stern Gang, which carried out bombings targeting the British in the latter stages of its mandate over Palestine, and who were implicated in multiple mass killings. They received 1.2 percent of the vote. The Jabotinsky Movement-Brit HaTzohar won 0.67 percent of ballots. It was presented as the continuation of the legacy of Ze'ev Jabotinsky, the leader of the Revisionist or fascistic Zionists, who had been most explicit on the racial-supremacist character of that political program.

The sidelining of the hardliners reflected fears within the Israeli bourgeoisie that they could destabilise the new state and discredit it abroad.

100 years ago: Dawes Committee arrives in Germany to enforce reparations

On January 30, 1924, members of the Allied committee tasked with recommending financial measures to enable Germany to resume paying war reparations arrived in Berlin. Known as the "Dawes Committee" after its American chairman, Charles Dawes, a financier who had served as Director of the Bureau of Budget in the Harding administration, the imperialist delegation was met by German government officials under heavy security, apparently because of threats from the far right. In one mysterious incident, a bystander ran up to Dawes and handed him an envelope that contained a single *rentenmark*, the supposedly stable currency that Germany had begun using since November.

The Dawes Committee had been established by the Allied Reparations Commission, which was in turn established by the 1919 Treaty of Versailles to ensure that the Central Powers defeated in World War I paid reparations to the Allies.

Germany had been unable to make payments on its reparations. Hyperinflation had devastated the German economy and in January 1923 French and Belgian troops had invaded and seized Germany's Ruhr Valley to take reparations directly out of German industry. Germany had come within a hair's breadth of a socialist revolution in October and Adolf Hitler had staged his infamous Beer Hall Putsch the next month. Tensions were rising between France and Britain on how to quell the volatile situation in Central Europe.

The Dawes Committee developed the Dawes Plan—championed by the new Labour government in Britain and by American imperialism—essentially putting Germany into financial receivership, which involved a new schedule of payments and the infusion of large sums from American banks to boost industrial production. France and Belgium agreed to withdraw their troops and Europe was assured a modicum of stability until the Great Depression of 1929.

Dawes was to be Vice President in the administration of Calvin Coolidge in 1925 and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize that year for the work of the committee.



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