

This week in history: March 11-17

10 March 2024

25 years ago: General strike in Ecuador against IMF austerity measures

On March 11, 1999, protesters clashed with soldiers and police on the second day of a two-day general strike in Ecuador to oppose rising prices and the austerity program of President Jamil Mahuad. At least three protesters were killed, including a 15-year-old student in Guayaquil, as police attacked workers, students, peasants and indigenous people. Scores of demonstrators were injured and hundreds more were detained by the police and army troops.

In the capital city of Quito almost all factories, public transport and businesses were shut down. Riot police used tear gas to disperse hundreds of protesters, who responded with stones and Molotov cocktails. The strike also paralyzed Guayaquil, the country's largest city, despite the arrest of trade union leaders before the walkout.

Commerce throughout the provinces of Carchi, Imbabura and Pichincha also ground to a halt. Across the country, indigenous people with rocks, trees and burning tires blocked several major highways. President Mahuad, who had declared a 60-day state of emergency before the strike, deployed 21,000 heavily armed soldiers and police to the major cities to guard roads, power plants and oil installations.

It was the second strike called by the Unified Workers Federation, then the country's largest union coalition, since Mahuad took office seven months prior. Workers demanded that Mahuad back down on austerity measures that ended fuel subsidies, froze wages and caused prices to soar. A right-wing proponent of free market policies, Mahuad privatized state-run enterprises and slashed social spending to bolster the confidence of foreign investors who held \$16 billion of the country's debt.

Inflation of 45 percent, the highest in Latin America, wreaked havoc on the living standards of millions of working and middle class people. Already one of the poorest nations in Latin America with 70 percent of its 12 million people living in poverty, Ecuador was confronting an Indonesia-like economic crisis since January 1999 when the collapse of the Brazilian currency led to a flight of capital from Latin America. This was exacerbated by falling prices for crude oil, one of Ecuador's major exports, and the multi-billion-dollar impact of El Niño storms, which flooded the coastal areas. The US and the IMF exerted intense pressure on Mahuad to proceed with austerity measures despite popular opposition.

50 years ago: Rigged election in Guatemala brings US-backed general to power

On March 12, 1974, Guatemala's Congress announced results of

what was a clearly rigged election, declaring that right-wing general Kjell Laugerud García would be president. Laugerud was, in all but name, an agent of the United States military-intelligence apparatus. He was backed by the most right-wing elements within Guatemalan society.

The two main candidates of the March 3 election had been Laugerud and Efraín Ríos Montt, himself an anti-communist general in the Guatemalan army. Laugerud and his Institutional Democratic Party (PID) had formed a coalition with the far-right National Liberation Movement, while Ríos Montt represented the National Opposition Front, a coalition of the Guatemalan Christian Democracy and the Social Democratic Party.

The first reports of the election results showed that the Opposition Front had a clear lead in the vote. At that point the government intervened to stop further reports from being released. Then, after several days, the Congress met and proclaimed Laugerud the winner. Yet even according to the official numbers no candidate won a majority. Laugerud was said to have won 45 percent of the vote to Ríos Montt's 34 percent. The Revolutionary Party, which also ran a military candidate, took the remaining 21 percent.

In response to the announcement, protests broke out in the cities. Street fighting between police and university students in Guatemala City resulted in at least 100 arrests. Workers in the trade unions organized mass meetings to discuss the situation and a response. The most militant sections called for a general strike to oppose the fraudulent election results.

While the National Opposition officially protested and charged outgoing President Carlos Manuel Arana Osorio of conspiring with the CIA to rig the results, it worked to stop the spontaneous movement of the working class from developing along revolutionary lines. While the police attacked students with clubs, gas, and firearms, Ríos Montt insisted that any protests must remain nonviolent.

Laugerud was the chosen successor to Osorio by the PID, and by extension the United States. He received his military training and education from the US military, attending classes at Fort Benning, Georgia and at the Command and General Staff College in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. He then served as the delegate from Guatemala to the Inter-American Defense Board, a US imperialist operation set up to oversee the military operations of Latin American countries.

Guatemala had seen a consistent stream of US-backed dictators since 1954 when the Eisenhower administration organized a coup against the government of Jacobo Árbenz to block the nationalization of several US-owned industries. From that moment the State Department and the CIA established a system of training and installing one military dictator after another. Laugerud would hold the office of the president until 1978, when yet another US-backed general replaced him.

75 years ago: US-backed South Korean regime launches brutal campaign against insurgents

On March 13, 1949, South Korean President Syngman Rhee issued orders for the military to conduct a high-intensity offensive aimed at “eradicating” a popular rebellion on Jeju Island that had been a thorn in the side of his US-backed regime for the previous two years. The directive was followed by mass civilian killings, roundups and other atrocities.

The issue of popular opposition on Jeju Island had erupted shortly after the end of the decades-long Japanese occupation of Korea, with the routing of Tokyo at the conclusion of World War II in 1945. North Korea was occupied by troops from the Soviet Union, who sought to direct a partisan anti-colonial movement into the establishment of a Stalinist state there. South Korea was occupied and controlled by the US, which helped to install an authoritarian capitalist regime headed by Rhee, a right-wing strongman.

Jeju Island had been a centre of opposition to the Japanese occupation. At the end of the war, there was widespread hostility to the prospect of a permanent division of the Korean peninsula. This fused with anger over difficult conditions in the countryside, as well as high prices and limited wages in the city. The Stalinist Workers Party of South Korea (WPSK) played a leading role and had a mass membership on the island.

In March 1947, protests opposing the division of Korea had been brutally repressed on the island and leading members of the WPSK imprisoned. A year later, a general strike opposing the crackdown as well as moves towards permanent partition involved up to 100,000 workers.

In April 1948, the WPSK initiated an uprising, leading guerrilla bands which attacked police stations and municipal buildings. Together with the sporadic urban operations, the WPSK carried out a rural war for the best part of a year.

Rhee’s call for a final offensive was aimed at the consolidation of his regime. National elections had been held, but due to the rebellion, parliamentary positions for Jeju Island were not filled. In the course of the offensive, South Korean troops were accused of indiscriminately killing people suspected of involvement in, or even simply sympathy with the rebellion. Mass roundups and summary executions were carried out. According to official figures, 2,345 guerrillas and 1,668 civilians were killed in the space of two months.

The South Korean forces were under the command of the American military. Its officers documented the crimes and reported them to Washington, while backing and assisting the atrocities.

100 years ago: Zionist colonialism promoted at meetings in New York City

On March 11, 1924, Chaim Weizmann, the head of the World Zionist Organization, said in a speech at the Ritz-Carlton hotel in New York City that “in the future the Jew might be of inestimable value in reclaiming the desert and waste lands of the Near East in cooperation with the Arabs.” Weizmann was on a tour raising funds to support Jewish colonization in Palestine, then under a British imperialist mandate.

He noted that Jewish settlers had planted 250,000 trees, drained swamps and built roads, and that Palestine could absorb 2,000 Jewish settlers a year. He said that Hebrew had by then become a semi-official language in Palestine and told the audience that the hostility between Jews and Arabs was exaggerated. He was seeking \$1,500,000 for the Palestine Foundation Fund.

A few days earlier, Professor Elwood Mead, of the University of California, had spoken to a meeting of the Palestine Foundation Fund in New York City, claiming, “For centuries, but a shadow of its glorious past, Palestine will, within the coming five years, again, play a great role in the history of the world through its Jewish pioneering achievements.”

Mead, an engineer whom US President Calvin Coolidge had recently appointed Commissioner of the Bureau of Reclamation, had visited Palestine in 1923 at the invitation of the World Zionist Organization. Mead had published an article in *The American Review of Reviews*, one of the leading literary publications of its day, praising the Zionist project. The article was a coup for the Zionist movement, which had difficulties in gaining traction among American Jews, and Mead was invited to speak across the country. Mead played an essential role for Zionism in not only claiming that the Jewish colonization of Palestine was economically viable but necessary, since the Arab inhabitants were responsible for its backwardness.

As historian Robert E. Rook has noted, according to Mead,

“Only Zionist ‘intelligence, science, and high purpose’ would unlock the riches of the Huleh basin, ‘which could not be expected if the present Bedouin cultivators remain in control.’ Mead further argued that Arabs had not only squandered their economic opportunities in Palestine, but had also destroyed their inheritance, the mandate’s land and water resources. In short, using an argument that future American Zionists, both Jewish and non-Jewish, would employ, Mead placed the blame for Palestine’s poor economic performances squarely upon Arab culture.”



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