

This week in history: October 28-November 3

27 October 2024

25 years ago: EgyptAir Flight 990 crashes off US coast, killing 217 title

On October 31, 1999, EgyptAir Flight 990 plunged into the Atlantic Ocean 60 miles off the coast at Nantucket, Massachusetts. All 217 people on board died: 35 Egyptian military personnel, 54 Egyptian civilians, 100 Americans, 21 Canadians, and people from Syria, Sudan, Germany and Zimbabwe. The plane was enroute to Cairo International Airport after stopping at JFK International Airport in New York City.

In an effort to shield Boeing from the fallout, US officials churned out deliberate propaganda beginning only days after the crash—despite the fact that a thorough investigation of the wreckage by authorities from both the US and Egypt had just started. After crews searching the crash site uncovered the cockpit tape, the FBI and US government agencies seized on an Islamic prayer snippet uttered by the pilot Gameel Al-Batouti right before the crash to label him a suicide pilot in order to fuel anti-Arab bigotry. The government manipulated corporate-controlled media, led by the *New York Times*, ran articles supporting the claim without any factual evidence.

Some commentators, Arab and non-Arab alike, opposed the suicidal pilot theory. They pointed out that Al-Batouti was an experienced pilot who was financially secure and set to retire, and that he had purchased gifts for his children back in Egypt. As the *Washington Post* admitted, a genuine investigation might take “months and perhaps years of painstaking examination of wreckage and remains.”

Less than two days before the catastrophe, it was revealed that Boeing had concealed from National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) officials investigating a previous deadly crash, TWA Flight 800 in 1981, which had killed 223 in Thailand, that the aircraft manufacturer was well aware of the dangers of a fuel tank explosion in its 747 jets. The EgyptAir Boeing 767 was produced in Everett, Washington in 1989 on the same assembly line as the plane that crashed over Thailand.

The Everett plant was working such heavy overtime during 1989 that it produced widespread complaints from rank-and-file machinists, ultimately sparking a 48-day strike that began October 4, 1989. Both planes were produced by scab labor after the strike had started.

Bill Johnson, president of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers local at the Everett plant, defended the company against the suggestion that heavy overtime had contributed to the disasters. He said it was “highly improbable” that stress on workers had led to faulty construction. “You can be assured that when that plane goes out the door it is of the utmost quality that the flying public expects,” Johnson told the press.

50 years ago: Muhammad Ali regains world heavyweight boxing

On October 30, 1974, boxer Muhammad Ali fought and defeated the reigning world heavyweight champion George Foreman in an internationally televised event. At an estimated 1 billion viewers, the fight ranks among the most watched events in history.

Billed as “The Rumble in the Jungle” because it took place in the central African country of Zaire, today’s the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the event saw tens of millions of dollars flow through it. The sum paid to the fighters Ali and Foreman, \$5 million each, was record-setting for the time.

The promotion and conduct of major boxing matches, especially title fights, where enormous sums of money are brought forward to watch two men beat one another unconscious, displays some of the most degraded and debased elements of capitalist society. That Ali agreed to participate in the event, in the brutal right-wing dictatorship of Zaire of all places, expressed the limits, and ultimately the bankruptcy of the black nationalist politics he espoused.

Ali previously held the heavyweight title until 1967, when it was stripped from him and his boxing license was suspended for his refusal to be drafted into the US military during the Vietnam War. Ali was among a number of popular black artists, athletes, and intellectual figures in the 1960s and early 70s who, in addition to supporting the civil rights movement, were openly and militantly anti-imperialist. Notwithstanding their orientation to petty-bourgeois nationalism, these protests could on occasion speak to the mass anti-war sentiment of oppressed people throughout the world.

Shortly before he was arrested for refusing the draft Ali remarked to the press, “You want to send me to jail? Fine, go ahead. I’ve been in jail for 400 years. I could be there for 4 or 5 more, but I’m not going to go 10,000 miles to help murder and kill other poor people. If I want to die, I’ll die right here, right now, fighting you, if I want to die. You’re my enemy, not any Chinese, not any Vietcong, not any Japanese. You’re my opponent when I want freedom. You’re my opponent when I want justice. You’re my opponent when I want equality.”

The government of the fight’s host country Zaire was a brutal dictatorship established after a period of immense crisis and anti-colonial struggles following the end of Belgian occupation in 1960. In 1965, General Joseph Mobutu, later taking the name Mobutu Sese Seko, was installed through a CIA-backed coup. Four years earlier the US government carried out the assassination of the Congolese left-wing nationalist leader Patrice Lumumba. Under Mobutu, Zaire served as the principal US client regime and tool of Cold War policy in Africa.

Ali, who only a few years earlier was willing to be arrested for his refusal to support the Vietnam War, was now willing to have his fights held in the cockpit of US imperialism’s operations in Africa

without a word of protest.

75 years ago: CIO industrial unions spearhead American Cold War witch hunt

From October 31 to November 2, 1949, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), one of the two main union federations in the United States, held its national convention. The event was a milestone in the prosecution of an anti-communist witch-hunt by the trade union bureaucracy.

The centerpiece of the convention was the expulsion from the CIO of the United Electrical Workers (UEW). That was done explicitly because the UEW was led by members and supporters of the Communist Party. The convention was dominated by hysterical anti-communist slanders and demagoguery.

The convention delegates voted in favor of three constitutional amendments that would bar Communist Party members and sympathizers from the CIO, and to allow the CIO Executive Board to revoke the charters of its affiliates and also remove any members who oppose the official policies of the CIO.

The CIO, led by its president Phillip Murray, was signaling its full support for the Cold War policies of the Democratic Party administration of President Harry S. Truman, involving suppression of the class struggle within the US and continuous overseas aggression aimed at establishing the untrammelled hegemony of American imperialism in Europe and throughout the world.

In the weeks prior to the CIO convention, the Truman administration had secured the conviction and imprisonment of Communist Party leaders on trumped-up charges of plotting to overthrow the American government, under draconian Smith Act legislation.

In reality, the Stalinists of the Communist Party were ardent defenders of American capitalism. In line with the counter-revolutionary policies of the Soviet bureaucracy, they had openly supported American imperialism through most of World War II. The Stalinists were blindsided by the shift in American foreign policy after that global conflagration, from a wartime alliance with the Soviet bureaucracy to aggressive confrontation with it.

Compromised by their reactionary record and still pining for an alliance with the Democratic Party government, the Stalinist union leaders were unable to mount any challenge at the CIO Congress.

The UEW, founded in 1937, was at the time of its expulsion the third-largest CIO union.

100 years ago: Senator Robert La Follette condemns American foreign policy

On October 30, 1924, Senator Robert La Follette of Wisconsin, the Progressive Party candidate for US president, delivered a speech in Massachusetts in the final days of the campaign in which he sharply criticized American foreign policy. In the election La Follette faced John W. Davis, a Democrat and former diplomat, and Calvin Coolidge, the Republican incumbent.

La Follette told an audience of 10,000 in Boston that over the

previous 20 years the United States had created “in Central and South America our Irelands, our Egypts and our Indias.” He continued: “Helpless peoples are being crushed into submission in order to compel them to pay tribute to our international bankers and industrial exploiters.”

After he acclaimed the role Massachusetts had played in the struggle against slavery in the Civil War, he continued: “At the same time, Asia, Africa and Europe and in the Near East, American oil interests and concession hunters, with the aid of the State Department, are competing with the financial imperialists of England and France for the control of the world’s resources.” He forecast that American troops would be sent to China and all over the world “to collect usurious claims.”

He ended his speech by saying: “We have desecrated the finest traditions of America, of New England, of Washington, of Jefferson, of Adams and of Lincoln. We have sown the seeds of future wars. We have started on that course of empire which ended in the destruction of Rome.”

He attributed this to the control of the American government by the “private monopoly system,” and added, “With the system in power, it has made no difference whether the administration was nominally Republican or nominally Democratic.”

The next day, the Executive Council of the Central Trades and Labor Council of Greater New York, the bureaucratic apparatus that sat upon 700,000 workers, rescinded its endorsement of La Follette, saying that he could not be elected, and swung its support to Davis.

La Follette’s criticism of imperialism expressed the viewpoint of American middle class radicalism, which attempted to locate the root cause of foreign policy in “mistakes” and “betrayals” by elected representatives, rather than in the logical outcome of capitalism itself, as Lenin had most famously established in his volume *Imperialism* in 1917. La Follette’s own “progressive movement” had itself been dominated by his bitter rival and the foremost American imperialist, Theodore Roosevelt.

Coolidge would go on to win the presidency on November 4 in a landslide. La Follette won the electoral delegates in his home state of Wisconsin and received almost 5 million votes, or about 17 percent of the popular vote nationally.



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