

This week in history: January 19-25

This column profiles important historical events which took place during this week, 25 years ago, 50 years ago, 75 years ago and 100 years ago

18 January 2026

25 years ago: Philippine President Joseph Estrada unseated in judicial coup

On January 20, 2001, the Supreme Court of the Philippines removed President Joseph Estrada from office. The court's judicial coup was engineered by the military brass and sections of big business, who feared Estrada's continued rule would erode the legitimacy of bourgeois rule in the island nation. Estrada denounced the constitutionality of his removal and the installation of Vice President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo as his successor, but ultimately decided not to resist the conspiracy, instead calling for "national unity."

The immediate catalyst for the move against Estrada was a multi-million-dollar corruption scandal. In October the previous year, criminal allegations surfaced accusing him of accepting more than \$7.7 million in bribes from the operators of an illegal gambling racket called "jueteng" and pocketing another \$2.5 million from tobacco taxes. Estrada and his backers in the Senate, however, narrowly managed to block the public release of his bank records in a 11-10 vote.

Protests soon erupted that night around the EDSA Shrine—the same site where the 1986 "People Power" revolution had ousted President Ferdinand Marcos, replacing him with Corazon Aquino. The class character of these anti-Estrada demonstrations was overwhelmingly middle-class and pro-business in orientation. Exploiting the protests as political cover, the pro-Arroyo factions moved to execute their plan. The *coup de grace* came on January 19, when Armed Forces Chief of Staff Angelo Reyes publicly withdrew his support from Estrada and pledged allegiance to Arroyo.

A retired Air Force general bluntly described the event as a coup, dismissing the importance of the protests. Another politician involved in the plot later remarked, "We were grateful the protest took place. But even without the protests, we had a plan."

Arroyo's ascent to the presidency consolidated the interests of the Filipino elite and foreign capital—in contrast to the populist image cultivated by Estrada, who derived support from the poorest sections of society, and who offered limited resistance to IMF and World Bank directives. Arroyo's swift recognition by Washington underscored international approval of the new regime. The IMF and World Bank were pleased with the outcome.

The Communist Party of the Philippines, led by Jose Maria Sison, lent its support to Arroyo through its front organizations—Bayan, the National Democratic Front, and the Kilusang Mayo Uno trade union—portraying the coup as a "transition to democracy." Sison went so far as to attack leftist groups in Manila that expressed even mild criticism of Arroyo during her rise to power.

50 years ago: Communal massacres develop into civil war in Lebanon

On January 18-19, 1976, right-wing Phalangist militias, led by Pierre Gemayel and backed by sections of the Maronite elite overran the shantytown districts of Karantina and Maslakh in East Beirut. These neighborhoods—home to impoverished Palestinian refugees and Lebanese Muslims—were subjected to a systematic assault: houses were looted and burned, civilians were expelled, and summary executions were widely reported. The estimates of the number of those killed range from the hundreds into the low thousands.

The operation was a deliberate attempt by right-wing Maronite Christian forces to expel organized Palestinian and left-wing elements from strategic urban quarters and to weaken the Palestinian presence in the capital.

News of the massacres precipitated a rapid erosion of state authority. The regular army fragmented as sections of the security forces refused orders to attack Palestinian camps. Many soldiers sympathetic to the Palestinians deserted or realigned with newly formed militias. Within days, Palestinian fighters and allied Lebanese left-wing forces launched counterattacks against right-wing strongholds. Fierce fighting engulfed Beirut and other regions, and the balance of forces shifted significantly in favor of the coalition of Palestinian groups and the Lebanese National Movement, which by the week's end controlled large parts of the capital and significant areas of the country elsewhere.

Neighboring powers immediately sought to prevent the development of a new state with direct Palestinian representation and leadership. Damascus intervened on January 22, when Syrian President Hafez al-Assad dispatched Foreign Minister Abdul Halim Khaddam and top military officials to Beirut to broker a ceasefire. To enforce this truce, Syria established a "Higher Military Committee" composed of Syrian, Lebanese, and Palestinian officers. Militarily, Damascus permitted several thousand troops from the Palestine Liberation Army (PLA)—units effectively under Syrian command—to cross the border into Lebanon to act as a policing force.

Syria presented its role as stabilizing the situation, but its ultimate aim was to preserve its truce with Israel reached after the fighting in the Golan Heights during the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Damascus worked to prevent a total Palestinian/left victory that would trigger an Israeli invasion on its doorstep. Israel, for its part, viewed the potential for a left-wing victory as a strategic catastrophe. To prevent this, the Israeli government directly armed and funded the Phalangist militias, providing the right-wing forces with the weaponry and resources necessary to sustain their campaign against the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and its Lebanese

allies.

The crisis in Lebanon, which had to this point been limited to armed skirmishes between small bands of militia fighters, developed into full-scale civil war. While the initial Syrian intervention was presented as a diplomatic mediation, it set the stage for the Arab state to act as a leading counter-revolutionary force. By June 1976, as the Palestinian and leftist forces continued to threaten the rule of the Maronite-dominated state, the Assad regime would launch a full-scale military invasion of Lebanon. This operation saw the Syrian army waging direct military operations against the PLO, effectively acting as the first strike force of imperialism against the militants.

75 years ago: US napalm bombings kill hundreds of South Korean civilians

Between January 19-20, 1951, US warplanes attacked South Korean villages with napalm, killing somewhere between 250 and 400 people. Napalm is a gelatinous incendiary mixture of a gelling agent and gasoline or diesel fuel, designed to cling to dwellings, clothing and human flesh and burn intensely.

The first napalm attack occurred on January 19, with Navy and Air Force planes attacking the village of Sanseong-doing, located 100 miles southeast of the South Korean capital of Seoul. Three separate waves of bombing destroyed 69 houses and killed 51 people.

Survivors of the attack said that there were no North Korean combatants in the village, a fact confirmed by a US military report the following month, which acknowledged that there were no enemy casualties. One US officer described the assault as the “methodical burning out [of] poor farmers when no enemy is present.”

The following day, the village of Yeongchun, located a further 20 miles southeast of Sanseong-doing, was also attacked. Eleven warplanes dropped napalm and firebombs at the entrance of a cave shelter where hundreds of South Korean civilians had sought refuge. Survivors later reported fires spreading and incinerating people inside the caves.

Casualty estimates vary. Seoul’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission estimated the number of people killed at “well over 200,” while survivors from the nearby village have given estimates of 360 dead.

The bombing of two South Korean villages with deadly napalm was an expression of the official US policy during the Korean war to target civilians. This has been confirmed not only by the details of the atrocities themselves, but by military documents that have been declassified in the following decades, as well as the testimonies of military personnel.

Nor was it the first and only time the US used napalm attacks to massacre civilians during the Korean War. Beginning with the September 1950 bombing of Wolmido Island, which killed at least 10 people, US warplanes dropped over 30,000 tons of napalm on North and South Korea during the three-year war.

100 years: Textile strike in Passaic, New Jersey led by Communists

On January 25, 1926, 15,000 textile workers went on strike at various locations in and near Passaic, New Jersey, led by the Trade Union Educational League (TUEL), which was affiliated with the Workers (Communist) Party. The TUEL, under the energetic leadership of Albert Weisbord, a party member and a recent

graduate of the City College of New York, organized a United Front Committee.

The workers, who were largely immigrant, earned a miserable annual income of \$1,000 to \$1,200 for male workers, while female workers earned even less, from \$800 to \$1,000. This is at a time when the minimum wage for subsistence in the US was estimated to be about \$1,400 annually. Workers worked 10-hour days and were tied to the hated piecework system.

After the employers made 10 percent wage cuts in the fall of 1925, anger ran so high among workers that Weisbord was able to organize a United Front Committee (UFC) that initially attracted about 1,000 workers. On January 21, a worker at one mill was fired for supporting the UFC. UFC representatives met with the management, which rejected any demands to rehire the worker. On January 25, a larger committee of 45 was elected to demand that management rescind the pay cut and implement a 44-hour week. The entire committee was fired on the spot and within an hour, 4,000 workers walked out.

James P. Cannon, the founder of the American Trotskyist movement, who was a leading member of the Communist Party at the time, described the significance of the strike in his *First Ten Years of American Communism*:

The strike ... revealed the Communists as the dynamic force in the radical labor movement and organizing center of unorganized workers disregarded by the AFL unions—displacing the IWW in the field.

The Passaic strike was well organized and expertly led, and under all ordinary circumstances should have resulted in a resounding victory. The only trouble was that the bosses were too strong, had too many financial resources and were too determined to prevent the consolidation of a radical union organization.

After months on strike, the UFC leaders decided that a bad settlement was worse than none and made the mistake of bringing in the American Federation of Labor to negotiate it. The employers agreed but on condition that the UFC disband and Weisbord be removed as leader.

Cannon recalled that the party’s central committee voted unanimously in favor of these conditions.

All that was wrong from start to finish. The “United Front Committee” should have been the starting point for an independent union of textile workers. For that it would have been far better to “lose” a strike than to end with a disgraceful settlement...



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact