

This week in history: January 26-February 1

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

25 January 2026

25 years ago: Massive earthquake kills over 20,000 in India

In the early morning on January 26, 2001 a massive earthquake struck western India, decimating the densely populated state of Gujarat. Houses and workplaces crumbled, infrastructure collapsed, and many thousands of people were buried underneath concrete, wood, steel and debris. The earthquake measured around 7.9 on the Richter scale and was felt as far away as Pakistan. Numerous aftershocks shook the region.

While the death toll initially stood at 2,000, the true scale of the tragedy became clear days and weeks after: more than 20,000 lives were lost, 166,000 people were injured, and over 400,000 buildings were destroyed.

India, sitting on the conjunction of major tectonic plates, is no stranger to earthquakes. Yet no measures had been taken to fortify homes and businesses, nor plans developed to deal with natural disasters, though the dangers were known to the Indian state. A government study issued prior to the earthquake had warned that “disasters don’t kill people, buildings do,” and cautioned that “the number of unsafe buildings is increasing every day.”

But the Indian government ignored these recommendations for “retrofitting” structures to save lives. Profit was prioritized over safety. Capitalist construction and real estate firms cut corners, using shoddy materials such as weak pillars and adulterated cement. Government officials approved apartment complexes without proper safety assessments.

The disaster response was equally inadequate. Survivors described spending days without tents, blankets, food, or clean water, and being forced to sleep outside in the cold. Essential medical items such as antiseptics, antibiotics, painkillers, bandages, and anesthetics remained scarce for days, raising fears of epidemics like typhoid and cholera due to contaminated water and decomposing bodies. Poor coordination and planning delayed the arrival of heavy machinery, leaving rescuers to dig through the rubble with basic tools and often relying on their bare hands.

The international response highlighted the hypocrisy of the Western imperialist powers. Despite the staggering human and material losses—estimated reconstruction costs ranged between \$3.5 and \$5.5 billion—aid commitments from wealthy nations were

meager, totaling under \$20 million. The slow delivery of medical and logistical assistance contrasted sharply with the rapid mobilization these same states display in military interventions.

50 years ago: Indira Gandhi imposes President’s Rule in Tamil Nadu

On January 31, 1976, the Indian central government led by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi dismissed the elected state government of Tamil Nadu headed by Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), by invoking Article 356 of the Constitution and placing the state under President’s Rule. The move by Gandhi was intended to break the remaining regional center of opposition to the Congress Party and to deter mass independent movements that threatened the stability of bourgeois rule.

In June 1975, Gandhi and the Congress party implemented emergency powers that established nationwide martial law, known as “The Emergency.” This was imposed in reaction to mass rebellions in the form of strikes and student protests to fight back against long working hours, soaring inflation, chronic food shortages, and the massive inequality between the toiling masses and the Indian bourgeois. Chief among the struggles was the 1974 national railway strike where 1.7 million workers shut down national transportation networks for twenty days, demonstrating the possibility for a revolutionary advance by the working class.

By 1976 Tamil Nadu had become the only Indian state government not controlled by the Congress Party. The DMK, drawing on a social base among the lower castes and urban petty bourgeoisie, refused to strictly enforce the Emergency’s draconian regulations. Tamil Nadu became known as an “island of dissent” where opposition figures could still find refuge and certain publications maintained a degree of autonomy. For Gandhi, this relative independence risked developing into the center of a mass rebellion and had to be snuffed out.

Following the January 31 dismissal order, the state apparatus moved swiftly. Hundreds of DMK leaders and activists, including

members of Karunanidhi's family, were detained under the Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA). The DMK's press was subjected to severe censorship. To justify the takeover, Gandhi's government alleged "secessionist" tendencies in the DMK, though the true objective was the liquidation of any political formation that hindered the Congress Party's political domination.

While the DMK postured as a defender of democratic rights against what it labelled "northern" centralism, its own petty bourgeois character blocked the mobilization of the working class in a fight back. Despite the attacks on their own party, the DMK leadership refused to call for a general strike, fearing that an independent movement of workers would escape their control and threaten the capitalist system outright.

The Emergency period saw approximately 110,000 people jailed across India. In many urban and rural areas, the regime launched so-called "beautification" drives—in reality, a large-scale forced sterilization campaign combined with the demolition of slums, targeting the poorest layers of the working class. Cloaked in the language of national progress, the campaigns amounted to systematic brutality—a state effort to terrorize and punish the poor for daring to resist exploitation.

75 years ago: First nuclear bomb test conducted at the Nevada Test Site

On January 27, 1951, the United States conducted the first nuclear bomb detonation at the Nevada Proving Grounds, later renamed the Nevada Test Site (NTS), 65 miles northwest of Las Vegas.

The 1 kiloton weapon, nicknamed "Able," was the first of five nuclear weapons tests to be carried out within days of each other, as part of "Operation Ranger." This was the fourth overall US nuclear weapon test series, and the first since World War II to be carried out within the United States itself.

The detonation of Able marked the beginning of a new phase of US nuclear weapons testing, contributing to the development and testing of the first thermonuclear weapon, or hydrogen bomb, the following year. The US nuclear weapons project had begun during World War II with the Manhattan Project, which built the first atomic bomb in Los Alamos, New Mexico. The weapons would then be used in August 1945 against the populations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, killing hundreds of thousands.

After the war, the United States turned its attention to growing its nuclear weapons stockpile amid the Cold War against the Soviet Union. In December 1950, the Atomic Energy Commission was authorized by President Harry S. Truman to develop the Nevada Proving Grounds as a site for atmospheric atomic bomb testing. Over the next decade, 100 atmospheric tests of nuclear bombs were conducted, until the Limited Test Ban Treaty came into effect which banned the practice. The NTS would host over 800 underground nuclear weapons tests until 1992.

The atmospheric tests conducted at the NTS during the

1950s beginning with Operation Ranger had a host of serious health effects on people exposed to radiation carried by winds to populated areas. Multiple studies conducted in the following decades have found tens of thousands of excess cancer cases and deaths in people, especially children.

100 years: French colonial government in Tunisia bans unions and opposition newspapers

On January 29, Lucien Saint, the Resident General of the French Protectorate of Tunisia, issued decrees to suppress the Tunisian trade union confederation, the Confédération générale des travailleurs tunisiens (CGTT), and ban nationalist newspapers such as *Ifriqiya*, *Al-Asr*, *Al-Jadid* and *Le Libéral*. Another decree gave the Resident-General discretionary power to arrest and imprison nationalists without trial.

These were known in Tunisia and France as the "scoundrel decrees" (décrets scélérats).

Saint had implemented them because of growing Tunisian working class militancy. Tunisian workers grew frustrated with the first, French-led Tunisian union confederation, the CGT, which often ignored the specific needs of indigenous workers, such as wage parity with European counterparts. In 1924, Tunisian dockworkers in Tunis, Bizerte, and Sfax went on strike for equal pay. When European workers refused to support them, the Tunisians broke away to form the CGTT.

By the end of 1924, the CGTT had recruited nearly 10,000 members, and launched more aggressive and frequent strikes across various sectors, including the cement works of Hammamif and the transport sector.

The CGTT was emboldened by the support of the nationalist Destour Party, which had begun to call for a constitution, and members of the Tunisian Communist Party. An alliance between intellectuals, religious reformers, and the working class made the movement more dangerous to the French administration than earlier nationalist groups oriented to the upper classes.

The scoundrel decrees were able to effectively suppress opposition in Tunisia until 1932, when a new generation began to fight French imperialism.



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