

This week in history: June 15-21

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

14 June 2026

25 years ago: Left-wing journalist Lori Berenson sentenced to 20 years in Peru show trial

A Peruvian court sentenced American journalist Lori Berenson to 20 years in prison on June 20, 2001. The verdict, handed down by Judge Marcos Ibazeta, was a political charade that exposed the true character of bourgeois “democracy” in Latin America. Berenson’s supposed crime was “collaborating” with the Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA).

Initially arrested in November 1995, when she was 26, Berenson was tried by a hooded military judge and sentenced to life imprisonment for treason. Defense lawyers had the conviction overturned, but she remained in prison awaiting a civilian retrial. The new proceedings were no less corrupt. The identical evidence from the military court was resurrected—including statements extracted under torture, secret videotapes of Berenson consulting with her attorney, materials likely planted by police and the self-serving testimony of a Panamanian co-defendant. The trial opened with the presumption of guilt.

The credibility of the judge was further undermined when Alberto Fujimori’s intelligence chief, Vladimiro Montesinos—himself a fugitive implicated in massacres, bribery and election-rigging—confessed that the judge was “a member of the team.” Defense attorneys argued the original case had been fabricated by Montesinos from the start.

The verdict came under newly elected president Alejandro Toledo, who had presented himself as the democratic antidote to Fujimori’s authoritarianism. But Toledo was no less committed to IMF austerity in a country where over half the population lived in poverty. Berenson made this connection in her statement to the court, noting that insurgent movements in Latin America “have a lot to do with social and economic conditions” and that governments respond militarily “to draw attention from these conditions.”

Her case drew condemnation from Amnesty International, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the UN Human Rights Committee, all of which found her rights had been violated. Peru ignored them. Berenson served nearly 15 years before release on parole in 2010. She was not allowed to leave Peru until 2015. The United States government, which routinely invokes human rights when it suits its foreign policy interests, made no serious effort to secure her freedom.

Whatever the precise nature of Berenson’s connections to the MRTA, her sympathy for the organization reflected genuine convictions about poverty and injustice in the region. But by the time of her arrest, both the MRTA and its far more brutal rival Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) had already been strategically broken by the Peruvian state. Their guerrillaist methods, rooted in nationalism and Stalinism rather than the independent

mobilization of the working class, had diverted a generation of radicalized youth into a futile and often catastrophic dead end.

50 years ago: Soweto uprising begins in South Africa

On June 16, 1976, police in the segregated township of Soweto, South Africa, opened fire on thousands of black students protesting the introduction of Afrikaans as the official language in black schools. The demonstration, organized by the Soweto Students’ Representative Council, called for the total abolition of the hated Bantu education system.

The Bantu Education Act, introduced in 1953, was designed to segregate black South Africans into underfunded all-black schools. These schools suffered from a pupil-to-teacher ratio often exceeding 60 to 1, while receiving a fraction of the funding allocated to white institutions. The imposition of Afrikaans, the Dutch-descended language of the Boer ruling elite, threatened to block any remaining avenue to higher education and professional employment opportunities for black workers.

The students’ anger stemmed from a social crisis facing the black working class, the backbone of South Africa’s industry. Workers endured cramped hostels or squalid township housing lacking basic utilities. Under these brutal conditions, life expectancy was under 50 years, and infant mortality in some areas exceeded 10 percent. In stark contrast, the white minority elite enjoyed one of the highest standards of living in the world, funded directly by the hyper-exploitation of black workers.

After the first day of the Soweto uprising, 176 students had been killed by the police. Among the dead were children as young as 13 years old.

Over the following weeks, the uprising spread to over 80 townships across South Africa. The apartheid regime continued to respond with brutal military and police occupation, killing upwards of 700 people and detaining thousands more.

A few months later, the student protests had grown into an all-out labor rebellion. Hundreds of thousands of workers responded to the police murders by launching massive, highly coordinated general strikes that paralyzed Johannesburg and other major industrial centers. These actions demonstrated the immense social power of the South African working class, shaking the apartheid government to its core.

Despite this immense revolutionary energy, the working class entered these struggles without its own revolutionary socialist party. In its absence, the spontaneous mass movement could not develop into a conscious struggle for workers’ power and the overthrow of the capitalist state.

Instead, the political leadership was dominated by the African National Congress (ANC) and the Stalinist South African Communist Party (SACP). The SACP utilized its political influence to promote the “two-stage” theory of revolution, which claimed that socialist tasks had to be postponed until after a long period of capitalist democracy. This nationalist program subordinated the interests of the working class to the emerging black bourgeoisie.

As a direct consequence of this political subordination, the apartheid regime was able to survive for nearly two more decades. The ruling class used this prolonged period to orchestrate a negotiated transfer of power to the black nationalist elite. The ANC-SACP alliance acted as the primary guarantor of capitalist property relations, ensuring that the wealth of the mining and financial sectors remained untouched.

75 years ago: Truman signs into law the Universal Military Training and Service Act

On June 19, 1951, US President Harry S. Truman signed into law the Universal Military Training and Service Act, which lowered the draft age to 18-and-a-half years old and established a system of universal military training for all young men.

The bill was a modification to the existing system of compulsory military service. The Selective Service System (SSS) was established in 1948 as a database of registered male US citizens and permanent residents who are potentially subject to military conscription.

The previous minimum age for draft registration was 19, as set by the Selective Service Act of 1948. The new law required every male between the ages of 18 and 26 to register with the SSS when instructed to do so by local draft boards. Those conscripts aged 18 years and 6 months or older were liable for training and service in the armed forces.

The new law also increased the minimum active-duty service time of conscripts, previously set at 21 months, to 24 months.

The legislation also established for the first time a system of universal military training (UMT), a concept which had been championed by Truman since the closing months of World War II. In 1945, he said to a joint session of Congress: “The backbone of our military force should be the trained citizen who is first and foremost a civilian, and who becomes a soldier or a sailor only in time of danger—and only when Congress considers it necessary.”

While the UMT system was never practically implemented, the fact that the conditions for its use were set down in law reflected the greater militarization of American society under conditions where the US was engaged in a global effort to secure its position as the world’s dominant power. Testifying before Congress in January 1951, Selective Service Director Maj. Gen. Lewis B. Hershey declared that military manpower plans must be “based on the assumption that the nation will be in a critical period for an indefinite length of time and that all-out war will be a possibility for at least the immediate future.”

The changes were bound up with an increased demand of military recruits to fight the wars of US imperialism, particularly at this time in Korea. For that purpose, the armed forces were also directed to lower the physical and mental standards required for military service. Hundreds of thousands of young men previously declared 4-F (unfit for service) were re-screened under the new requirements to bring in large numbers of new registrants for the draft.

100 years: German workers vote to expropriate the princes

On June 20, 1926, more than 14.4 million German voters went to the polls demanding the seizure, without compensation, of the vast dynastic estates of the former ruling houses—the Hohenzollerns (Prussia), the Wittelsbachs (Bavaria), and dozens of lesser dynasties deposed in the revolution of November 1918. Of those who cast ballots, 96 percent voted yes. But the result was nonetheless undone under a constitutional technicality.

The episode laid bare the class character of the Weimar Republic. The German Revolution of 1918-19 had abolished the monarchy but left its social foundations intact. The judiciary, staffed overwhelmingly by imperial-era appointees, repeatedly sided with the princes in property disputes. Negotiations between the German states and the former rulers dragged on for years, while inflation, unemployment and social misery devastated broad layers of the population. By 1925, conservative parties were backing generous settlements for the aristocracy, provoking widespread anger among workers.

The campaign for expropriation was initiated by the Communist Party (KPD) and joined, with considerable reluctance, by the Social Democrats (SPD). Together they gathered more than 12 million signatures—three times the threshold required under the Weimar Constitution to trigger a referendum. The measure went first to the Reichstag, where the bourgeois parties voted it down, sending the question to the electorate.

The right responded with obstruction. Reich President Hindenburg—the former field marshal who embodied the old officer caste’s continuity within the new republic—ruled that expropriation without compensation was unconstitutional confiscation, raising the threshold for passage from a simple majority to 50 percent of all eligible voters, nearly 20 million “yes” votes. The DNVP, the party of agrarian aristocracy and heavy industry, organized a massive boycott campaign. In the countryside, where landlord pressure over tenants and farm workers was intense, abstention was effectively coerced.

The tactic worked. Turnout reached only 39 percent. The princes kept their estates. The former Kaiser, watching from Dutch exile, reportedly described the 14 million who had voted to expropriate him as “bastards.”

The defeat exposed the political crisis of both working-class parties. The SPD, ever fearful of appearing too radical, gave the campaign grudging support while defending the very constitutional framework that had been weaponized against it. The KPD, operating under growing Stalinist influence, failed to advance a strategy capable of breaking that framework rather than working within it.

The unresolved contradictions sharpened in the years that followed. The princes and landed elites, spared expropriation, would later help finance and legitimize the rise of National Socialism.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)