

This week in history: July 6-12

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

5 July 2026

25 years ago: Citing dementia, Chilean court stops prosecution of former dictator Augusto Pinochet

On July 9, 2001, the Santiago Appeals Court terminated the prosecution of former Chilean military dictator Augusto Pinochet. The three-judge panel voted 2-1 to accept Pinochet's dismissal on medical grounds, citing tests that diagnosed him with "mild to moderate senile dementia."

This decision was widely seen as a politically orchestrated campaign by the imperialist bourgeoisie and Chilean politicians to shield Pinochet from accountability, and a travesty of justice. By halting the case on medical grounds, the court effectively limited further scrutiny of the human rights crimes committed under his US-backed regime and helped cover up the bloody legacy of his 17-year rule

Although the dictatorship imprisoned, tortured, and killed tens of thousands, the case focused on the "Caravan of Death," a military operation in which a special unit executed political prisoners in the weeks following the 1973 coup. Pinochet, 83 at the time of the trial, was charged with orchestrating 57 homicides and 18 kidnappings tied to these ruthless actions.

The court's reliance on a dementia diagnosis proved controversial. Chilean law traditionally allowed only narrowly defined conditions such as insanity or severe senility to bar prosecution. Prosecutors argued that the medical findings—impaired motor function, mild memory loss, and occasional disorientation—did not meet that threshold.

Prosecutors denounced the ruling as a pretext to prevent the trial from proceeding. Lawyer Eduardo Contreras stated that Pinochet had not been diagnosed with "dementia in the sense that it is established in our laws." He warned that applying such a standard broadly "would effectively set free a huge number of prisoners... If not, then it can only be concluded that there was a shameless attempt to pass a judgment to suit Pinochet."

The decision sparked immediate protests. Around 1,000 demonstrators, many relatives of victims, gathered outside the court, throwing stones and shouting insults before police dispersed the crowd and arrested four people. That same day, President Ricardo Lagos, alongside military chief General Ricardo Izurieta, urged respect for the judiciary, signaling official support for the ruling despite public outrage.

50 years ago: *Washington Post* pressmen indicted in state witch-hunt

On July 7, 1976, a federal grand jury handed down the first felony indictments against striking *Washington Post* pressmen, in one of the most aggressive union-busting operations in postwar US history. Members of Newspaper Web Pressmen's Local 6 were subjected to a nine-month grand jury investigation aimed at criminalizing strike action and establishing a national precedent for crushing militant labor activity.

The conflict began on October 1, 1975, when pressmen struck against severe concessions demanded by *Post* publisher Katharine Graham. Graham sought to eliminate lifetime job guarantees, slash crew sizes, and impose unilateral management control over the implementation of new technologies and production practices. The demands were a frontal assault on conditions pressmen had fought decades to secure. Having secretly trained managers and scabs at an Oklahoma school, Graham immediately deployed permanent replacements and secured restrictive court injunctions to cripple picket lines.

On the strike's first night, as management prepared to run the presses and marched in with scab labor, a confrontation erupted in the pressroom and some equipment was damaged. The state seized on this incident as the pretext for its calculated frame-up. To break the union, Graham collaborated with the Ford administration's Justice Department, spearheaded by US Attorney for the District of Columbia Earl Silbert.

The *Post* was basking in its post-Watergate reputation as a liberal watchdog of democracy while it worked hand-in-hand with the state to attack its own workforce. Silbert, who had previously tried to block the Watergate investigation, now directed a grand jury that subpoenaed over 80 pressmen who had printed the Watergate revelations. Silbert aggressively pressured so-called "targets" and 'subtargets' to testify against their colleagues.

In the first round, the grand jury indicted seven pressmen, including Eugene O'Sullivan, who faced up to 40 years in prison on felony charges of rioting, grand larceny, and destruction of property. Eight more pressmen were indicted shortly after. *Post* manager Mark Meagher boasted to the *New York Times* that their goal was to leave "one union dead on the battlefield" to ensure others were "chastened by the combat."

The pressmen fought courageously but were isolated by the trade union bureaucracy. AFL-CIO President George Meany refused to mobilize solidarity actions, while the Newspaper Guild crossed picket lines to keep the paper running. Indeed, when striking pressmen occupied Meany's headquarters in late February 1976 to demand support, the labor chief responded by calling the police to have them arrested. Due to this treacherous isolation,

Local 6 was already effectively crushed by the time the indictments were handed down. In May 1977, the judicial dragnet concluded with 14 pressmen receiving sentences ranging from probation to one year in prison.

The Workers League (predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party) would launch a campaign to defend the pressmen and fought to explain that the strike had become a political struggle against the capitalist state itself. Winning the fight required mobilizing the working class independently of both the AFL-CIO bureaucracy and the Democratic Party who had come out as open enemies of the pressmen.

75 years ago: Korean War truce talks begin at Kaesong

On July 10, 1951, armistice negotiations opened at Kaesong, near the 38th parallel, to end the Korean War, which had been waged for just over a year at this point.

Initiated by Soviet UN representative Yakov Malik, the talks brought together North Korean General Nam Il and US Vice Admiral Charles Turner Joy. After two weeks of discussion, a five-point agenda was adopted on July 26: fixing a military demarcation line and demilitarized zone, arrangements for a ceasefire and supervisory body, the exchange of prisoners of war, and recommendations to the governments involved.

The talks almost immediately began to unravel. Washington refused to discuss the withdrawal of foreign troops. When the North Korean and Chinese delegations walked out in protest, US forces escalated military pressure until negotiations resumed at Panmunjom in October 1951.

Yet the war dragged on for two more years. The US, prosecuting its first major neo-colonial intervention after World War II, had no interest in a swift settlement. Under the McCarthyite witch-hunt at home, the conflict served to justify anti-communist repression of workers' movements and political opposition to capitalism. South Korean President Syngman Rhee, a US puppet installed after Washington's unilateral division of the peninsula in 1945, further obstructed any resolution by demanding UN forces help him conquer the entire country.

Fighting finally halted with the armistice on July 27, 1953—but no peace treaty was ever signed, leaving the peninsula in a formal state of war to this day. During three years of war, between four and five million Koreans were killed, roughly half of them civilians.

100 years ago: Nationalist Northern Expedition begins in China

On July 9, 1926, the Northern Expedition, a massive military

incursion of the nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) from Canton (Guangzhou) to subdue the northern warlords, formally began when the KMT leader Chiang Kai Shek accepted the post of commander-in-chief of the National Revolutionary Army (NRA).

Chiang had already taken power in a coup in Canton in March and sidelined other leaders of the movement, notably the "left" wing of the KMT led by Wang Jingwei. Chiang also imposed rules that forced the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to hand over lists of their members within the KMT, banned them from heading any department in the KMT central headquarters, and dictated that CCP members could not exceed one-third of any committee.

Nevertheless, Chiang could not afford to break with the USSR, whose weapons, military specialists and political support he counted on for the Northern Expedition. Stalin, whose bureaucratic faction in the Russian Communist Party and Soviet state was now dominant, was happy to oblige. He had encouraged the subordination of the CCP to the nationalist KMT based on the Menshevik theory of the two-stage revolution, which subordinated the working class, represented by the CCP, to the Chinese bourgeoisie represented by Chiang.

This was vigorously opposed by Leon Trotsky and the Left Opposition, which fought for the line of the permanent revolution in China, according to which the tasks of the bourgeois-democratic revolution (unification of China, redistribution of the land to the peasants, an end to warlordism) could only take place under the leadership of the working class in close alliance with the peasantry.

Chiang's immediate strategy was to strike north into Hunan province to take out the warlord Wu Peifu, who was distracted fighting a rival faction near Beijing. The advance was swift. Just two days after the formal launch, on July 11, NRA forces successfully captured Changsha, the capital of Hunan.

The Northern Expedition sparked peasant risings and workers strikes as it proceeded. As the WSWS recently noted: "without the support of the Communist Party, Chiang could not have postured in front of the masses as their liberator and the Northern Expedition would have been a complete failure—one warlord battling others."

But Chiang attempted to suppress these movements, with Stalin's support. As Trotsky was to remark five years later from his exile in the Turkish island of Prinkipo: "Stalin was perfectly aware that the advance of Chiang Kai-shek's armies had meant ... the bloody suppression of strikes, the destruction of trade unions, and repression of the peasant movement."

The reactionary character of Chiang's strategy—and Stalin's program—was demonstrated in the most brutal fashion when Chiang suppressed the workers' uprising in Shanghai in April 1927.



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