This week in history: August 17-23

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

16 August 2026

25 years ago: Ukraine mine explosion kills 55 workers

On August 19, 2001, an explosion at the Zasyadko coal mine in Donetsk, Ukraine, killed 55 miners and injured dozens more. Extreme temperatures more than a mile underground hampered rescue efforts, preventing teams from getting within 100 yards of those trapped inside. The deadly blast was triggered by the combustion of coal dust and methane gas. One survivor vividly described the horrific scene simply as “piles of bodies.”

Only two years earlier a blast at the same Zasyadko pit killed 50 miners.

The mine was controlled by Yukhym Zvyahilsky, a former Soviet Communist Party official turned Ukrainian parliamentarian under the Party of Regions. Holding political immunity as a lawmaker, Zvyahilsky operated the mine for decades despite its notoriously lethal record. Although the mine operated at extreme depths—making heavy methane buildup an inherent risk—it relied on outdated, inadequate ventilation and rudimentary safety technology. Government regulatory enforcement completely failed to intervene, leaving miners at the mercy of management’s profit motives.

Across Ukraine, disregard for safety was killing and maiming workers at an alarming rate. In March 2000, a methane explosion at the Barakova colliery killed 82 miners, making it Europe’s worst mining disaster in two decades. In May 2001, another explosion killed eight miners, with three more dying in separate accidents that same weekend. By August 2001, Ukraine’s mining death toll had already reached 120, following 318 deaths in 2000.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union—a process that enriched former Stalinist bureaucrats—mine safety deteriorated further as the industry was privatized, with management routinely flouting regulations and knowingly exposing workers to lethal risks to boost production. Out of Ukraine’s 209 mines, only eight had been modernized in the preceding 20 years. The Donbas region employed over half a million people in an industry severely starved of basic investment and maintenance.

50 years ago: Ford narrowly defeats Reagan at Republican Convention

On August 19, 1976, incumbent President Gerald Ford narrowly secured the Republican presidential nomination in Kansas City, Missouri, defeating former California Governor Ronald Reagan on the first ballot by a vote of 1,187 to 1,070. It was the last major-party convention of the 20th century in which the nominee remained undecided before the opening roll call.

Ford had assumed the presidency two years earlier following Richard Nixon’s resignation in the Watergate scandal. His legitimacy had been badly damaged by his pardon of Nixon—which prevented a full investigation into Nixon’s crimes—and by a worsening economy marked by high inflation combined with rising unemployment and the first US trade deficit of the century.

Reagan’s primary challenge mobilized the party’s growing Sun Belt conservative base against the Eastern establishment wing represented by Ford. Exploiting public resentment of Ford, Reagan attacked Ford from the right, denouncing détente with the Soviet Union and Ford’s attempt to negotiate the Panama Canal treaties.

A major issue at the convention was an attempt by Reagan to win the nomination by exploiting procedural technicalities. Reagan’s campaign, knowing it trailed Ford in committed delegates, proposed a rule requiring each candidate to announce his vice presidential selection before the presidential ballot. Regan’s hope was that whichever wing of the party Ford snubbed in his choice would move to back him. Ultimately Ford and his supporters defeated the rule change, preventing him from having to tip the decision in advance.

The division between the two candidates was part of a shift to the right in capitalist politics. Both agreed on the necessity of launching an offensive against the living standards and democratic rights of the working class. The convention’s sharpest ideological expression came not from either candidate but from former Texas Governor and Treasury Secretary John Connally. The former Democrat, who had switched to the Republican Party in 1973, declared from the rostrum:

> In the years ahead, the American people must be told to accept an era of scarcity and sacrifice. We can no longer pretend that government can provide endless abundance. The American people must face the hard reality that preserving our free enterprise system will require discipline, restraint, and hard choices.

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Connally's speech was a declaration of class war as the ruling elite turned toward plans for major austerity. The platform adopted by the convention codified this rightward shift, endorsing anti-union "right-to-work" laws, the deregulation of energy monopolies, constitutional bans on abortion and school busing and increased military expenditures.

Ford eventually announced as his running mate Senator Robert Dole of Kansas, a staunch conservative who had aggressively defended Nixon during Watergate.

Ford's narrow victory was achieved only by accommodating the political demands of the Reagan right. The 1976 convention demonstrated that the political center within the capitalist parties was moving decisively to the right. Although Ford would lose the general election to Democrat Jimmy Carter, the Kansas City convention made clear that the Reagan faction would soon be the dominant force in the Republican Party.

75 years ago: Britain imposes economic sanctions on Iran after oil nationalization

On August 22, 1951, the British cabinet under Labour Prime Minister Clement Attlee imposed sweeping economic sanctions against Iran, escalating the crisis triggered by the Iranian parliament's nationalization of the British-owned Anglo-Iranian Oil Company four months earlier. The sanctions prohibited the export of key British commodities, including sugar and steel; directed the withdrawal of all British personnel from Iranian oil fields and all but a hard core of about 300 administrators from the Abadan refinery; and blocked Iran's access to its hard-currency accounts in British banks.

The imposition of the sanctions followed the collapse of last-ditch negotiations between the British government and that of Iranian Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh. Britain had offered to accept Iranian ownership of the AIOC's properties but insisted on retaining management control over technical personnel—a condition Mossadegh rejected as incompatible with genuine national sovereignty.

The sanctions were explicitly punitive. By withdrawing technical personnel, Britain aimed to demonstrate that Iran could not operate the world's largest refinery at Abadan or market its oil independently. As Attlee stated, the core employees left behind were there "to show that the British oil company is not deserting Persia." About 2,000 British workers had already left since July 1.

The nationalization, approved by the Iranian senate on April 30, 1951—the same day Mossadegh was sworn in as prime minister—had struck a major blow to British imperialist interests. Since 1908, the AIOC had extracted Iran's oil wealth while paying Iran a fraction of the revenue.

The August 1951 sanctions were the opening salvo in a campaign of imperialist economic warfare. Britain had already begun blockading Abadan in June, preventing tankers from leaving and shutting down the oil industry. When economic strangulation proved insufficient, Britain turned to the United States.

That campaign culminated in August 1953, when the CIA and MI6 orchestrated the coup—codenamed Ajax—that overthrew the democratically elected Mossadegh, reinstalled the Shah as absolute ruler, and reorganized Iranian oil under a new consortium in which five American companies shared the spoils. The boycott of Iran's oil became the template for the sanctions regime that the United States and its allies have wielded against Iran continuously since 1979.

100 years: German Communist Party expels oppositionists

On August 20, 1926, the German Communist Party (KPD) expelled Ruth Fischer and Arkadi Maslow on orders from the Kremlin because they were supporters of the Zinoviev faction in the Russian Communist Party, which had combined with Trotsky's Left Opposition to form the United Opposition in July.

Fischer and Maslow had become the main leaders of the KPD after the October 1923 debacle in which the KPD under the leadership of Heinrich Brandler failed to act on a favorable revolutionary situation. Stalin, who had opposed an insurrection in Germany, sought to blame Brandler for the failure of the KPD. Fischer and Maslow replaced him in 1924.

Fischer and Maslow followed the line of the Zinoviev-Kamenev group in the Russian Communist Party, which had been allied with Stalin's bureaucratic faction since 1923. They participated in the "literary discussion" against Trotskyism unleashed in late 1924—a coordinated campaign across the Comintern in which Trotsky's "Lessons of October," his critical analysis of the lessons of the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917, was denounced as a "distortion of party history" and "an attempt to replace Leninism with Trotskyism."

Then, as The Historical and International Foundations of the Socialist Equality Party of Germany **notes: "Only when Zinoviev broke with Stalin and allied with the Left Opposition, did a violent faction fight flare up in the KPD as well. On the orders of Moscow, Fischer and Maslow were replaced and expelled from the party."**

The two had played a generally ultra-leftist role in the KPD, and, in conjunction with the Fifth Congress of the Communist International in 1925, downplayed the significance of the October 1923 defeat in Germany and refused to draw any lessons from it.

The expulsion of Fischer and Maslow exemplified the fact that, under Stalin, party leaderships of the Comintern were not selected on the basis of political program or revolutionary capacity, but rather for their willingness to subordinate the interests of the working class in their own countries to the diplomatic requirements of the Soviet bureaucracy. The result, in Germany, was the division and paralysis of the most powerful workers' movement in Europe—and the opening of the road to power for Hitler in 1933.

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