

## This week in history: August 24-30

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

**23 August 2026**

**25 years ago: Israel assassinates Abu Ali Mustafa, leader of Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine**

On August 27, 2001, Abu Ali Mustafa, sixty-four-year-old leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), was killed while working at his office in the city of Al-Bireh, West Bank. Two Israeli Apache helicopters fired laser-guided missiles through his window in a targeted assassination campaign. Survivors found his body decapitated and charred. The explosion and shrapnel wounded several bodyguards and a worker.

Abu Ali Mustafa was the highest-ranking Palestinian leader murdered by the Israeli military during the Second Intifada. Israel had organized a kill list targeting dozens of Palestinian activists and leaders. Western imperialist powers, above all the United States, provided advanced military technology, training and intelligence to facilitate the criminal assassination campaign.

The ruling class in Israel framed the murder as retaliation for an attack on the Marganit military base in southern Gaza. Several armed Palestinians infiltrated the base, killed three Israeli soldiers, and were themselves killed in a firefight. But the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), not Mustafa's PFLP, claimed responsibility. Israeli officials nonetheless blamed Mustafa, with government spokesman Ra'anan Gissin claiming Mustafa was "planning future attacks" from his office. No evidence was offered to support these allegations.

The timing of the assassination coincided with escalation of the war against the people of Palestine. Israeli F-16 and F-15 warplanes carried out pre-dawn bombing raids on Palestinian security installations in Gaza and the West Bank, and tanks and armored bulldozers destroyed a security forces building in Rafah, killing a Palestinian policeman.

Israel was unconditionally backed by Washington in its expanding military actions to politically decapitate the Palestinian resistance movement. Just three days before the killing, US President George W. Bush denounced Yasser Arafat for not doing enough to stop "terrorist activity," declaring that "the Israelis will not negotiate under terrorist threat." Following the assassination, the State Department issued only mild criticism while reiterating the demand that Arafat do more to stop attacks on Israel.

**50 years ago: Soweto student uprising builds into general strike of South African workers**

The week of August 24, 1976, a three-day general strike called by the Soweto Students' Representative Council (SSRC) brought Johannesburg and its surrounding industrial belts to a standstill. Between 70 and 80 percent of the black workforce answered the call. Of 220,000 daily commuters from Soweto, the overwhelming majority refused to enter the city.

The student revolts that erupted on June 16 against the hated Bantu education system now developed into an open class struggle, with the industrial working class stepping onto the political stage to directly challenge the apartheid state.

The Soweto township was designed to be a segregated ghetto to provide Johannesburg with cheap labor. Under the Group Areas and Natives Resettlement Acts of the 1950s, the apartheid regime demolished mixed inner-city working class neighborhoods and banished over a million black residents miles outside Johannesburg. Banned from living in the city center, black workers were permitted into Johannesburg only to work before being expelled every night back to unpaved, unlit "matchbox" ghettos and single-sex migrant hostels.

In 1976, an estimated 80 percent of African families in Soweto lived below the official poverty line. Black miners earned as little as 35 cents an hour, crouched in three-foot shafts in 90-degree heat where rock bursts routinely caused fatal injuries and permanent paralysis. Black life expectancy hovered under 50 years, and malnutrition and preventable diseases claimed the lives of more than 10 to 15 percent of black infants before their first birthday.

After the massacre of over 170 youth in June, student militants, including 19-year-old SSRC president Tsietsi Mashinini, recognized that student protest alone could not fight apartheid, but that it required the mobilization of the working class to shut down production. Through leafleting, station pickets and factory-gate appeals, youth called upon the black working class to launch a political strike.

The strike terrified the capitalist class. Industrialists like Harry Oppenheimer of the mine-owning Anglo American Corporation warned that the lack of legal trade union apparatuses left the regime without a bureaucratic buffer to hold back radicalized workers.

Without this political pressure valve, the state turned to outright repression. Heavily armed paramilitary police backed by armored

“Hippo” personnel carriers fired live ammunition and tear gas into crowds and picket lines. Security Branch police launched midnight raids across the townships, detaining over 800 student leaders, workers and parents without trial and issuing shoot-on-sight orders for SSRC leaders like Mashinini, who was forced to flee the country. To break the strike police deliberately incited right-wing vigilantes, providing them with weapons and escorting them in police convoys to attack striking township residents in bloody street battles.

Despite this terror, the strike dealt a devastating blow to the apartheid economy, proving that the struggle against white minority rule was fundamentally a class struggle by the working class against the mine owners, the corporations and the banks.

#### 75 years ago: United States and Philippines sign Mutual Defense Treaty

On August 30, 1951, the United States and the Republic of the Philippines signed the Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) in Washington D.C. The pact declared that an armed attack on either party in the Pacific would endanger the peace and safety of both and commits each to “act to meet the common dangers in accordance with its constitutional processes.”

An attack was defined broadly to include strikes on the territory, island possessions, or armed forces, public vessels and aircraft of either party anywhere in the Pacific. The treaty committed both sides to building up their individual and collective military capacity and to mutual consultation when either party’s security is threatened, and it is set to “remain in force indefinitely.”

The treaty formalized a deeply unequal relationship rooted in decades of colonial violence. The Philippines was seized by US imperialism in 1898 during the Spanish-American War, followed by a brutal pacification campaign that killed hundreds of thousands of Filipinos. After decades of direct colonial rule interrupted by Japan’s wartime occupation, Washington granted formal “independence” on July 4, 1946—but only after securing secret agreements that preserved American dominance over foreign policy and economic life.

In 1947, the head of the newly “sovereign” Philippine government Manuel Roxas signed a Military Bases Agreement granting Washington 99-year leases over 23 bases, including the vast Clark Air Base and Subic Naval Base, where US forces operated under extraterritorial jurisdiction, immune from Philippine law. The MDT, whose preamble spoke of “mutual pride” in the “historic relationship” between the two peoples, provided the political-legal framework for this ongoing subordination under the guise of a partnership of equals.

The treaty remains in force today, repeatedly invoked by Washington as an “ironclad commitment” to justify the transformation of the Philippines into a forward base for war against China. This has included the return of US forces to bases closed in 1992, the deployment of long-range missile systems capable of striking Beijing and massive annual war games which rehearse conflict in the South China Sea.

#### Bonapartist regime in Poland

On August 26, 1926, the Polish government announced that President Ignacy Mościcki would issue 55 decrees that would strengthen the Sanacja or “moral cleansing” of the Polish state apparatus under the dictatorship of Marshal Józef Piłsudski.

These decrees dismantled traditional checks and balances in the Polish state. Among other measures, they created a 26-member State Law Council that would serve as a bureaucratic gatekeeper, stripping the Sejm (parliament) of legislative initiative by requiring pre-approval of all bills based on legality and expediency.

This was coupled with a decree designating Piłsudski as supreme commander of the armed forces—answerable to nobody. These measures effectively subordinated both the legislature and the military apparatus to executive command. On the economic front, the decrees were used to overhaul state finance mechanics. This would bring on a rapid stabilization of the economy for next two years that helped foster confidence in the government by the Polish bourgeoisie, reflected in a surging stock market turnover and industrial recovery.

Following the devastation of the First World War and the Polish-Soviet War, Poland’s Second Republic had suffered from chronic parliamentary fragmentation, hyperinflation and political paralysis. Piłsudski’s May 1926 coup d’état was an attempt to quell this dysfunction, but the newly established regime required institutional legitimacy to govern effectively. The package of 55 decrees demonstrated Piłsudski’s intention to bypass parliament entirely and enact sweeping administrative and fiscal changes without legislative resistance.

This centralization gained even greater urgency within the broader European crisis of the mid-1920s. The 1925 Locarno treaties had stabilized Western European borders while leaving Poland’s border with Weimar Germany without international guarantees, exacerbating the Polish ruling class’s sense of geopolitical vulnerability. By asserting centralized executive control, Piłsudski sought to project national unity and resolve to external rivals.

The 1926 Polish decrees epitomized the postwar European retreat from parliamentarism in the face of mounting class struggles and preparations for a second world war, and the turn to Bonapartism and dictatorial rule. This was most clearly epitomized in 1926 by fascist Italy but was a trend common to all the major European powers and was to be exhibited most catastrophically in the coming to power of the Nazis in 1933 in Germany.



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