This week in history: August 31-September 6

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

30 August 2026

25 years ago: Mexican Volkswagen workers' strike ends

On September 5, 2001, an 18-day strike action by 12,400 autoworkers at the massive Volkswagen (VW) plant in Puebla, Mexico ended after the pro-company union–the Independent Union of Volkswagen Workers (SITVW)–accepted management's terms. Workers received a 10.2 percent wage increase, a 3.5 percent increase in food vouchers, and 1 percent more for school supplies.

Mexican autoworkers had demanded a 31 percent wage increase to match rising inflation. They rejected a paltry offer of 9 percent brought back by the SITVW the previous week, but the bureaucracy ultimately ended the strike without meeting the needs of the membership.

The settlement was brokered through the active collaboration of Labor Secretary Carlos Abascal and union leaders, who worked to prevent the strike from developing into a broader movement against deteriorating economic conditions and the government of President Vicente Fox.

Union officials steadily lowered their wage demands, wearing down worker resistance, until capitulating. Puebla's governor further pledged collaboration in improving business conditions, while VW made no guarantees about preserving jobs.

There was more than enough money for substantial pay raises, improved benefits and stronger safety measures. While VW bitterly fought the strike, the implementation of new technology made the company even more profitable. The Puebla plant, VW's third-largest worldwide, had doubled its manufacturing output since the early 1990s even while slashing employment from 20,000 to 12,400. Using "cluster" technology (grouping parts factories around the assembly plant), VW sharply intensified the pace of work. With the union bureaucracy's assistance, labor costs per car had been driven down from 10 percent of the total cost to only 3.7 percent.

Yet this did not satisfy VW's appetite. Their response to this pro-company settlement was retaliation against the workers. Vice President Francisco Bada announced the cancellation of a planned $1.5 billion investment in Mexico, redirecting Jetta production to China. VW officials said workers there were "less assertive," a reference to the Beijing government's brutal suppression of strikes.

Globalized production intensified Volkswagen's assault on workers not only in Mexico but internationally. In Germany, the IG Metall bureaucracy had just agreed to longer hours for less pay; in South Africa, VW had fired 1,300 workers the previous year who were fighting the dismissal of militant shop stewards.

For Mexican autoworkers, the fight against a global corporation required an international struggle that rejected the nationalism promoted by union leaders. Volkswagen workers in São Paulo, Brazil, had begun rolling strikes the month before to demand productivity bonuses. Their action underscored both the international scope of the struggle against worsening conditions and the betrayal by the union bureaucracies in both countries.

50 years ago: Soviet fighter pilot defects to the US, hands over MiG-25

On September 6, 1976, Soviet Air Defense Forces Lieutenant Viktor I. Belenko landed his MiG-25 "Foxbat"fighter jet at Hakodate Airport on the Japanese island of Hokkaido. Belenko had broken formation during a training exercise, flying at low altitude across the Sea of Japan before landing on a civilian runway. Upon landing, he fired two warning shots into the air to keep bystanders back, requested political asylum in the United States and asked Japanese police to cover the aircraft with canvas to shield its military secrets.

The Soviet Union immediately protested the incident, characterizing the flight as an emergency landing caused by technical failure. Moscow claimed Belenko was being held against his will and demanded the immediate return of both the pilot and the interceptor. However, when a Soviet embassy official met with Belenko at a Japanese police station to urge his return, the pilot refused.

US intelligence agencies viewed the arrival of the MiG-25 as an unprecedented windfall. Then-CIA Director George H.W. Bush called the defection an "intelligence bonanza," and American military specialists dismantled and examined the aircraft before eventually returning it in pieces to the Soviet Union months later. Belenko was flown to the United States on September 9, where he was interrogated extensively by the CIA, the Defense Intelligence Agency and the Air Force.

Belenko provided detailed testimony regarding the harsh living conditions and low morale within the Soviet armed forces. He reported that enlisted men at his Far Eastern base were housed in squalid barracks, suffered brutal discipline and experienced high rates of desertion and suicide. He also described chronic supply shortages, pervasive distrust from commanding officers and stifling supervision by political commissars.

The American corporate press seized upon Belenko's statements to mount an extensive propaganda campaign. Outlets like the *New York Times* published detailed accounts highlighting his astonishment at the abundance of American supermarkets and the well-supplied mess halls on US Navy aircraft carriers.

Politically, the responsibility for the entire episode rested with the Stalinist bureaucracy. The parasitic regime in Moscow, defined by

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corruption, bureaucratic arrogance and the suppression of workers' democracy, created the conditions that alienated Belenko from the Soviet Union.

Belenko had advanced through the Young Pioneers and into the military's elite flight program. Discouraged by the repressions under the Stalinist regime, he told Japanese police upon landing: "Life in the Soviet Union has not changed from that existing in the days of Czarist Russia, where there had been no freedom."

Belenko would be granted US citizenship by a special act of Congress in 1980 and worked as an aerospace and defense consultant under the name Viktor Schmidt. With the assistance of US intelligence agencies, he maintained a highly private existence for the remainder of his life, living in the American Midwest until his death in Illinois in September 2023 at the age of 76.

75 years ago: Sri Lanka Freedom Party founded

On September 2, 1951, S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike **formally inaugurated the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), dissolving the Sinhala Maha Sabha—the organization he had founded in 1932—and launching a party that would dominate the island's politics for the next six decades.**

At the founding, Bandaranaike set out the new party's social base, calling for the participation of the maha sanga (Buddhist clergy), indigenous physicians, teachers, farmers and workers, and pledging economic and social improvement for the "common man." The appeal was directed at the traditional Sinhala layers hostile to the English-speaking elites, along with dissatisfied local business interests and those who felt that independence had failed to meet their aspirations.

The founding was the culmination of a break set in motion weeks earlier. In July 1951, Bandaranaike had risen in parliament to announce his resignation from the ruling United National Party, declaring that Ceylon had only gained "independence by name." A leading figure in the UNP government—he had served as Leader of the House and was widely regarded as second-in-charge in the new regime—Bandaranaike was breaking from a party the broad masses considered little more than an appendage of the former British colonialists.

Bandaranaike's roots lay deep in the colonial establishment. Born in 1899 to an aristocratic Christian family, he was educated at Oxford, where he became secretary of the Oxford Union, and was called to the Bar in 1924 before entering the Colombo Municipal Council in 1927. The Sinhala Maha Sabha he had founded in 1932 was based on an appeal to the "common man," a combination of populism and Sinhala chauvinism that led the Trotskyist Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) to warn that, under certain conditions, it could become a version of "brown fascism."

The SLFP's orientation was shaped by a central political fact: the LSSP was the only party which enjoyed genuine mass support, and the new party was formed to counter its growth. The SFLP drew support from the Ceylonese bourgeoisie, who hoped to strike a better bargain with imperialism and saw its Sinhala populist demagogy as a useful instrument for dividing the working class along communal lines.

The trajectory of the SLFP confirmed this assessment. In the aftermath of the 1953 hartal—a general stoppage that assumed insurrectionary proportions—the party adopted the "Sinhala only" language policy as the central plank of its 1956 election campaign. Its victory inaugurated the first anti-Tamil pogroms in the country's history, setting in motion the communal politics that would culminate in the civil war consuming the island decades later.

100 years: British gunboats open fire on Chinese city

On September 5, 1926, two British gunboats and the chartered armed steamer Kiawo opened fire on Chinese troops holding two British steamers, the Wanhsien and the Wantung, in the port city of Wanhsien (now Wanxian) on the Yangtze River in Sichuan province. The Chinese troops belonged to General Yang Sen, acting under the regional warlord Marshal Wu Peifu.

Yang's troops resisted, firing on the British ships from gun emplacements along the riverbanks. The British retaliated by shelling Wanhsien itself, killing, by some accounts, nearly 1,000 Chinese, both soldiers and civilians, and destroying more than 1,000 buildings.

The Wanhsien Incident, as it came to be known, originated earlier in the year when Yang Sen, Wu Peifu's local commander, imposed a tax on foreign merchant shipping in the area. The British refused to pay, stationing HMS Cockchafer nearby and warning Yang not to interfere with British vessels.

Earlier in August, Yang's forces had seized the British merchant ship SS Wanhsien; a British boarding party that found 100 Chinese soldiers aboard and secured the ship's release after a tense standoff. On August 27, Yang's troops again tried to board the Wanhsien, and British crewmen again talked them into abandoning the attempt.

On August 29, Yang's troops tried to seize another British steamer, the Wanliu, at Yunyang. As the ship tried to escape, it swamped two Chinese sampans, killing 64 people and sinking a cargo of silver worth tens of thousands of dollars. Yang's troops then boarded the Wanliu, which Royal Marines subsequently retook by force. In response, Yang seized the Wanhsien and the Wantung, demanding compensation for the drowned soldiers and the lost silver. The British refused.

After the September 5 battle, the Chinese Beiyang government formally protested the bombardment of a civilian port as an unnecessary and premeditated use of force. British Foreign Secretary Austen Chamberlain later maintained that the Royal Navy had struck only legitimate military targets.

The incident occurred amid political upheaval throughout China and a revolutionary upsurge among Chinese workers and peasants. Chiang Kai-shek, the Nationalist leader, had launched his Northern Expedition from Canton to suppress the warlords and unify the country, putting pressure on Wu Peifu and alarming British imperial interests. Mass strikes and student protests had besieged foreign legations for the previous two years, including incidents in which imperialist troops fired on demonstrators. This mass movement would culminate the following year in the Shanghai working class's seizure of power—and its betrayal by the Communist International under Stalin's leadership.

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