

This week in history: October 19-25

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

18 October 2026

25 years ago: Two postal workers die in anthrax poisoning targeting Democratic politicians

On October 21 and 22, 2001, two veteran US postal workers—Joseph Curseen, Jr. and Thomas Morris—died from anthrax poisoning after they inhaled spores at their postal job at the Brentwood Road site in Washington DC. The facility had processed an anthrax-laced letter addressed to Democratic Senate leader Tom Daschle. Two other Brentwood workers were seriously ill. In New Jersey, a third postal worker at the Hamilton Township facility near Trenton contracted pulmonary anthrax, and two others tested positive for the less lethal skin form of the disease.

The official response revealed a criminal double standard. Politicians and media figures received immediate testing and treatment, but postal workers were kept in the dark, denied testing, and told they were not at risk, sparking outrage over the government's failure to protect them.

The Daschle letter was opened on October 15, after which the senator's office was quarantined, the Capitol mail system shut down, and 50 people placed on antibiotics. Yet authorities knew the same day that the letter had passed through Brentwood and Trenton. For a week they insisted postal workers were not at risk, claiming anthrax spores could not escape sealed letters. The facilities were kept open, and workers were neither tested nor given medical assistance. Action was not taken until October 21, after more workers fell ill, and only after the two deaths did the Centers for Disease Control order antibiotics distributed to all postal workers without testing.

The American Postal Workers Union (APWU) turned a blind eye to the safety of its members, with the well-paid bureaucracy following the decisions of the Bush administration. The APWU joined with the Postal Service and the government to downplay the immense danger workers confronted on the job. Worried about the Post Office's business image, the APWU issued a newsletter urging letter carriers not to wear gloves or masks because "this is not the visual image we wish to project to the citizens we serve." The union bureaucracy was more concerned about fear in the public than workers' health.

After public outrage over the deaths, both capitalist political parties attempted to mask their contempt for the lives and well-being of postal workers. Republican and Democratic politicians rallied to defend the White House. Homeland Security director Tom Ridge defended the CDC and FBI, while House Democratic leader Richard Gephardt refused to criticize federal officials, saying "we are all having to learn something we don't know enough about."

The WSWWS noted at the time that the anthrax in the Daschle letter and another sent to Sen. Patrick Leahy was weapons-grade material

genetically traced to the US military's own germ-warfare program—spores identical to stocks produced at the Army's Dugway Proving Ground in Utah and distributed through Fort Detrick, Maryland, and a CIA laboratory. Since the intended victims were the two most prominent Democratic leaders in Congress, the evidence pointed not to foreign terrorists but to right-wing elements with links to the military and the Bush administration.

50 years ago: Arab League summit sanctions Syrian military occupation of Lebanon

On October 25, 1976, heads of state from across the Arab world convened in Cairo, Egypt, to formally ratify an agreement sanctioning Syria's military occupation of Lebanon and to enforce a counter-revolutionary ceasefire in the Lebanese Civil War. The treaty had been drawn up one week earlier, during an emergency summit in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, convened by King Khalid and attended by Syrian President Hafez al-Assad, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, Lebanese President Elias Sarkis, Kuwaiti Emir Sabah Al-Salim Al-Sabah, and PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat.

The gatherings ratified Syria's military intervention to crush the Palestinian and Lebanese left. The accord designated Syria's invasion as a 30,000-man "Arab Deterrent Force" (ADF) under the nominal authority of President Sarkis. In reality, the force was composed overwhelmingly of the Syrian regular troops already occupying Lebanon and commanded directly by Assad. The Cairo summit thus converted Syria's June 1976 invasion force into a "peacekeeping" operation blessed by the Arab League.

Assad's forces had crossed the border not against the fascist, imperialist-backed Phalangist militias, but against the allied forces of the PLO and the Lebanese National Movement (LNM) led by Kamal Jumblatt, which by the spring of 1976 had brought the right-wing militias to the brink of defeat. Fearing that a revolutionary victory would meet with mass support across the Middle East and inspire further uprisings, the Arab regimes intervened to crush the PLO-LNM. In planning the invasion, Damascus maintained discreet communications with Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to assure Washington that the intervention had no intention of threatening the Israeli border, in turn securing US and Israeli approval for the occupation.

The Arab League diktat forced sweeping concessions on the Palestinian leadership, which was bankrolled by Saudi petrodollars. The accord compelled Arafat to submit to the restrictive 1969 Cairo Agreement, requiring Palestinian fighters to withdraw once again into

designated camps and surrender their heavy weaponry, while leaving the Zionist-funded Phalangist militias largely intact.

Under threat of attack by the better-armed and supplied ADF, the PLO and LNM largely complied, withdrawing from the mountains and Beirut districts they had won and handing over their heavy weapons. Major fighting subsided through the winter of 1976–77. Yet the peace was entirely one-sided.

The accord froze the war allowing the right-wing forces to regroup, rather than ending it. The Phalangists remained entrenched in their enclaves and continued to consolidate their arms and holdings. In March 1977, Jumblatt was assassinated by Syrian intelligence forces and fighting soon resumed.

Desperate to preserve the agreements made with imperialism and Zionism after the 1973 Yom Kippur War, the Arab leaders used the accord and the Syrian occupation to enforce the Arab bourgeoisie's agreements with Washington across the entire Middle East. The regimes functioned openly as gendarmes of international capital in the region.

75 years ago: Egypt declares state of emergency as anti-colonial struggle against Britain intensifies

On October 19, 1951, the Egyptian government declared a precautionary state of emergency in Cairo amid an escalating confrontation with British imperialism over its continued military occupation of the Suez Canal Zone.

Britain had occupied Egypt since 1882. Although Egypt had formally gained independence in 1922, Britain retained extensive control over the country, including its military and strategic infrastructure. Under the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty, British troops remained stationed in the Canal Zone, a vital artery of international trade and a strategic military base for imperialist domination of the Middle East.

On October 8, the Wafd government of Prime Minister Mustafa el-Nahhas announced the unilateral abrogation of the treaty, responding to mounting popular demands for an end to British occupation. The decision, formally enacted on October 15, was greeted by widespread demonstrations and an upsurge of anti-colonial sentiment.

Britain refused to recognise Egypt's decision and responded with military reinforcements and increasingly aggressive measures to maintain its occupation. On October 16, British troops opened fire amid protests and clashes in Ismailia, killing five Egyptians. British forces established roadblocks and restricted the movement of Egyptian troops through the Canal Zone.

The confrontation provoked growing resistance among Egyptian workers and the broader population. Workers began withdrawing their labour from British military installations, disrupting the functioning of the occupation forces. Demonstrations, strikes and other forms of resistance expressed the determination of the Egyptian masses to end decades of colonial subjugation.

The United States supported Britain's continued military presence, notwithstanding Washington's efforts to present itself as sympathetic to Arab nationalism. The Truman administration regarded the Suez Canal and the oil-rich Middle East as strategically indispensable and sought to incorporate Egypt into a US-led military alliance directed against the Soviet Union.

The Wafd regime, representing sections of the Egyptian national bourgeoisie, had itself collaborated with British imperialism, including through the 1936 treaty. The growing anti-colonial movement, however, reflected popular aspirations for genuine national independence that extended far beyond the government's

limited objectives.

The confrontation intensified over the following months. In January 1952, British troops killed dozens of Egyptian police at Ismailia, triggering mass protests and the burning of Cairo. The deepening crisis culminated in the overthrow of the monarchy by the Free Officers in July 1952.

100 years ago: Trotsky and Kamenev removed from politburo of Russian Communist Party

On October 25, 1926, a joint plenum of the Central Committee and Central Control Commission, dominated by Stalin's bureaucratic faction, voted to remove from the politburo Leon Trotsky and Lev Kamenev, prominent Bolsheviks who had worked closely with Lenin, because they were leaders of the Joint Opposition to the Stalinist faction.

The plenum, as Soviet historian Vadim Rogovin notes, also "issued a warning to CC members Trotsky, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Piatakov, Yevdokimov, Sokolnikov, Smilga, and CC candidate-member Nikolaeva for their 'violation of Party discipline'." It removed a third leader of the Joint Opposition, Grigorii Zinoviev, from his role as chairman of the Communist International.

The removals followed by a week a tactical retreat by the Opposition in face of physical and administrative provocations by the Stalinists at Opposition speaking events. Trotsky described these methods and their significance:

The struggle of ideas gave place to administrative mechanics: telephone summons of the party bureaucrats to attend the meetings of the workers' locals, an accumulation of automobiles with hooting sirens in front of all the meetings, and a well-organized whistling and booing at the appearance of the oppositionists on the platform. The ruling faction exerted its pressure by a mechanical concentration of its forces, by threats and reprisals. Before the mass of the party had time to hear, grasp or say anything, they were afraid of the possibility of a split and a catastrophe.

The October 1926 removals from the Politburo marked the point at which the Stalinist bureaucracy abandoned even the pretense of inner-party democracy and was a decisive step in the degeneration of the Soviet state—the process Trotsky would later analyze as the rise of a Bonapartist bureaucracy over the working class.

The purge of the United Opposition was not a one-time settling of accounts but the opening of a process—once the apparatus had destroyed the opposition, it would inevitably turn on its own members, because a bureaucracy that rules by expulsion cannot stop at its first victims. The fate of Nikolai Bukharin, Alexei Rykov and Mikhail Tomsky in the 1930s would confirm this.



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