

This week in history: May 27-June 2

27 May 2024

25 years ago: Show trial of Kurdish leader, Abdullah Öcalan, begins in Turkey

On May 31, 1999, the trial of PKK (Kurdish Workers Party) Chairman Abdullah Öcalan began before a State Security Court on the Turkish prison island of Imrali. Öcalan was accused of high treason and separatism, both charges which carried the death sentence.

He had been abducted months earlier by the Turkish National Intelligence Organization in Nairobi, Kenya, after an internationally coordinated manhunt. His persecution and trial marked a repudiation by governments around the world of the fundamental democratic right of political asylum.

After the presiding judge rejected a motion that the trial be postponed, prosecutors read the indictment. Öcalan, speaking through a microphone from a sealed glass booth, gave what was described by press reports as a “rambling” 40-minute statement, in which he acknowledged responsibility for his alleged crimes and pleaded with the court to spare his life. He pledged to transform the PKK into a nonviolent political party and “work with the Republic of Turkey toward the goal of peace and brotherhood.”

Öcalan clearly showed the effects of more than three months in solitary confinement, including the first 10 days after his October abduction, when he was held incommunicado. The PKK leader was denied all but the most cursory consultation with his lawyers.

The abduction of Öcalan was an act of international banditry. With the help of the American CIA, the Turkish secret police (MIT) whisked Öcalan away from the Greek embassy in Nairobi in a private plane, pumped him full of drugs and, in the dead of night, transported him to Turkey.

There he was presented before television cameras in handcuffs, at times with a blindfold over his eyes, and with two large Turkish flags prominent in the background. Afterwards Öcalan was locked away on the prison island of Imrali in complete isolation. For weeks he was allowed no access to a lawyer despite continuous interrogations. His lawyers were forced to work under impossible conditions. In the discussions with their client, when they were permitted at all, security personnel were always in attendance. Only a few weeks before the start of the trial were the lawyers permitted to see the indictment and file material. Öcalan himself was refused any access to this material.

50 years ago: Sunningdale Agreement collapses in Northern Ireland

On May 28, 1974, the Sunningdale power sharing agreement for Northern Ireland that had created the Northern Ireland Executive

collapsed after a general strike led by right-wing and fascistic Ulster paramilitary organizations. The Executive, headed by Brian Faulkner of the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), had lasted less than five months when it came into power at the start of the year.

Signed in December of 1973, the Sunningdale Agreement was an attempt by British imperialism to hand power in Northern Ireland over to the so-called “moderate” factions of the Irish Nationalist and British Loyalists in a coalition government. The 11-member Executive was comprised of six representatives of the UUP, including Faulkner as chief executive, four from the Social Democratic and Labor Party (SDLP) and one from the Alliance Party (APNI).

Before Sunningdale, Northern Ireland had been governed directly by the British government, which had sent soldiers to occupy the north in 1969 to crackdown on Irish Nationalists and then in 1972 dissolved the Stormont parliament that had ruled in the north since the 1921 partition of Ireland.

Since 1971 the British occupation had carried out a policy of mass internment for anyone suspected of association with the Irish Republican Army or holding personal support for Irish unification. In addition to the thousands arrested without trial and tortured while interned, British soldiers carried out several massacres of Irish Catholics including Bloody Sunday in 1972 and the Ballymurphy massacre in 1971.

The terms of Sunningdale proposed to establish a “Council of Ireland” comprised of members from both the Northern Ireland Executive and the Republic of Ireland. The body would not have any legislative powers and was conceived of mainly to facilitate police cooperation in arresting militants who operated across the partition border. The agreement also included language which suggested that if the majority of the north supported reunification that the British government would not prevent it.

Even though Sunningdale kept Northern Ireland solidly under control of the British government and did not release any of those interned, the agreement was furiously opposed by the most right-wing Ulster Loyalist groups. The Ulster groups, like the Ulster Workers Council (UWC) and the fascist Ulster Defense Association (UDA), opposed Sunningdale in that it suggested a united Ireland was a possibility.

On May 15 the UWC called a general strike supported by the Ulster paramilitary groups. The strike succeeded in shuttering the northern economy, in particular shutting down critical power stations. While many Northern Irish Protestant workers were undoubtedly swept up in the strike being misled by Ulster nationalist propaganda, the character of the strike was less a worker uprising and more a period of unrestrained right-wing terror.

The Ulster fascists carried out a series of bombings in Dublin and Monaghan on May 17 that killed 34 people. Catholics in the north were beaten and attacked by mobs from the Ulster Volunteer Force. In total 39 civilians were killed by Loyalists and over 300 reported

injured.

It was clear from the outset that the fascist violence had the full support of the British Army, which did nothing to prevent attacks on Catholic civilians. The Ulster paramilitary organizations had long been known to be armed and supported by the British government to carry out the suppression of Irish Nationalism.

After two weeks of Ulster terror, the strike was called off after Brian Faulkner resigned on May 28, effectively dissolving the Sunningdale government. The British government would resume direct rule over Northern Ireland until the Good Friday Agreement in 1998.

75 years ago: Dozens killed in clashes between Bolivian miners and government troops

On May 29, 1949, major clashes between Bolivian workers at the Catavi tin mine in the province of Bustillos and government troops resulted in dozens of deaths.

Casualty estimates varied wildly and were politically tinged. Some claimed that hundreds of miners were killed, while the government asserted that dozens died, the majority of them soldiers. It appears that at least 52, likely mostly workers, lost their lives as a result of direct injuries.

The clashes occurred in a context of political upheaval. Miners had launched a political strike against the government's deportation of key leaders of the Miners Union, including Juan Lechín, to Chile. Closely associated with the oppositional Revolutionary Nationalist Movement (MNR), they were accused by the conservative Republican Party government of having planned an uprising.

With mining at the centre of the Bolivian ruling elite's wealth, the sector had been the scene of repeated explosive struggles. In 1942, an earlier conservative government had responded to a workers' strike demanding a 100 percent increase in wages by arresting all union leaders and ordering troops to open fire on workers.

By 1949, conditions in the mines remained dire, with sub-poverty-level pay and the absence of basic safety measures. As in the 1942 dispute, the Republican government responded to the 1949 strike and occupation of Catavi by sending in the troops, with reports that on at least one occasion they opened fire with machine guns. The corporate press internationally, including such publications of American imperialism as the *New York Times*, branded the miners as the aggressors and published worried articles about the prospects of further instability.

Over the following months what has been described as a low-level civil war between the MNR and the Republican administration ensued. The Bolivian miners represented a powerful revolutionary force in South America. But the MNR advanced a petty-bourgeois reformist program, hostile to an independent struggle for workers' power or for the unification of the working class throughout Latin America.

100 years ago: Socialist deputy denounces fascists in Italian parliament

On May 30, 1924, Giacomo Matteotti, the leader of the reformist Unitary Socialist Party (Partito Socialista Unitario, PSU), delivered a speech against the National Fascist Party of Benito Mussolini in which he denounced the violence and intimidation by fascist bands in the national elections in April.

He said: "The fact is that only a small minority of citizens were able to express their vote freely; most of the time, almost exclusively those [of left and democratic sympathies] ... were prevented by violence ..."

The fascists, who had come to power in 1922 because of the unwillingness of the Socialist Party to lead a struggle for power by the working class under highly favorable conditions, had not stabilized their grip on the country, and socialist, communist and other workers organizations were still able to function.

The election of 1924 marked a consolidation of fascist power. Fascist bands had suppressed left-wing votes throughout the country and, because of the recently passed Acerbo law that gave two-thirds of the seats in parliament to the party that won the largest number of votes, provided that it was more than 25 percent, the fascists gained a supermajority.

Matteotti had been editor of the socialist daily *Avanti!* He had opposed the Italian imperialist invasion of Libya in 1911 and Italy's entrance into World War I in 1915. In 1919, he was elected to parliament as a representative from the Socialist Party. He was the author of *The Fascists Exposed: A Year of Fascist Domination* (1924). Matteotti was also one of the founders of the bourgeois human rights movement.

He had been threatened in Mussolini's newspaper *Il Popolo d'Italia* in 1923. "Indeed, if he happened to find himself, one day or another, with his head broken (really broken) he would certainly have no right to complain ..." the newspaper proclaimed.

The fascists were to make good on these threats in June, when Matteotti was kidnapped by the fascist secret police. After a violent struggle to throw him into a car, the fascists stabbed him to death. The killers were arrested, and the murder was to roil Italy for months and threaten Mussolini with a coup by elements of his own party, whom he was able to suppress.

In a speech in January 1925, he took responsibility for Matteotti's murder and justified it as necessary: "When two elements are in conflict and are irreducible, the solution lies in force. There has never been another solution in history and there never will be."

The speech is regarded as the beginning of Mussolini's personal dictatorship.



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