

This week in history: August 26- September 1

25 August 2024

25 years ago: East Timor votes for independence from Indonesia

On August 30, 1999, East Timor voted for independence from Indonesia. The votes showed 78.5 percent support for independence. According to the UN, 432,287 people, or 98.6 percent of eligible voters, took part, with 344,580 rejecting Indonesia's alternative autonomy scheme.

Western powers immediately brought forward plans for military intervention in the Indonesian-occupied former Portuguese colony following the release of the results of the United Nations-supervised ballot on secession.

After the vote, gangs killed at least three local UN employees, together with secession supporters. Journalists and UN staff were beaten and threatened at gunpoint. Militia roadblocks cordoned off entire areas in the territory's west. Witnesses saw members of the Indonesian military's elite Kopassus (Special Forces) collaborating with the thugs.

Sections of the Habibie regime in Indonesia, particularly the top military officers with extensive business interests in East Timor, were fomenting the violence. By some reports, Indonesian generals and their local supporters were intent on partitioning the territory, tying the western half to Indonesian West Timor.

Others in Indonesian ruling circles, including opposition figurehead Megawati Sukarnoputri, were known to be anxious to stop a breakaway from encouraging similar moves across the Indonesian archipelago, particularly in resource-rich provinces such as Aceh, Riau and West Irian (West Papua). One purpose of the bloodshed and mayhem was to intimidate people in those provinces.

But the imperialist governments so anxious to send troops to East Timor represented the same forces that supported and participated in the oppression of the East Timorese masses for decades—first under Portuguese rule (which extended for 400 years) and then Indonesian military occupation. As a consequence, terrible poverty afflicted the Timorese people: in 1999, 80 percent of the 800,000 population lived at a subsistence level, per capita income was less than \$300 a year and illiteracy rates exceeded 35 percent.

Intervention by the capitalist powers had nothing to do with protecting the rights of the East Timorese workers, poor farmers and youth, let alone uplifting their living conditions. Nor did so-called independence provide any genuine liberation to the people of East Timor.

50 years ago: Female prisoners in New York rebel against violent treatment

On August 29, 1974, inmates at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility for Women staged an uprising against the prison guards in protest abusive conditions. About 200 women in the prison launched the rebellion after one inmate, Carol Crooks, was brutally beaten and then thrown into solitary confinement.

Crooks had first been sentenced to serve time at Bedford Hills as a young woman in 1972 after pleading guilty to a manslaughter charge. Upon arriving she discovered the abhorrent conditions prevalent in US prisons. Among the abuses inmates faced was arbitrarily being subject to solitary confinement, or "segregation" as it was known at the prison.

Prisoners were taken away from the general population and thrown into the segregation cells and isolated from outside contact for days and weeks at a time oftentimes without a bed or anywhere to sit. This form of torture would be dished out to inmates purely at the whim of the guards, appearing to be random or vindictive to many inmates. Crooks herself was placed into solitary confinement in February 1974 and held there for over five months.

In July 1974, with the assistance of her attorney, Crooks filed a lawsuit against the prison for its use of confinement and other forms of punishment without any form of due process. The court ruled in Crooks' favor, ordering her release from confinement and holding that prisoners have a right to due process before being sent to solitary confinement. The victory in the suit made Crooks a leader to other inmates facing similar abuses.

Infuriated by the result of the suit, the prison guards rebelled against the ruling and launched an attack against Crooks. In the evening of August 29, a squad of male guards from the nearby Greenhaven prison was sent into Bedford Hills ostensibly to transfer her to another prison. The use of male guards was extremely unusual in the women's prison which is normally staffed by all-female guards.

The guards cut off the inmates' access to phones, then burst into Crooks' cell, handcuffed her, and dragged her away. At one-point other inmates witnessed the guards throwing the handcuffed Crooks down a concrete stairway. She was then put into the back of the guards' station wagon and beaten until she arrived at a solitary confinement facility.

Witnessing the attack and believing that the guards had murdered Crooks, other women prisoners rebelled against the guards, overwhelming several officers and managed to open the cells of 200 inmates.

Led in part by Dollree Mapp, the appellant in the 1961 Supreme Court case *Mapp v. Ohio*, who was imprisoned in Bedford at the time, the women issued demands that included proof that Crooks was alive, restored access to phones, and that they be allowed to speak with lawyers and members of the press.

The prison warden responded by spraying the women with a water cannon to break up their protest. He threatened the use of the National Guard, and eventually forced them back into their cells. All the women identified as leaders of the rebellion were sent to solitary confinement shortly after.

The inmates would file a class action lawsuit on similar grounds to Crooks' suit. Both in 1975 and in 1981 courts would order that the prison end its use of unrestricted solitary confinement. Much of the reporting surrounding the incident cites the lawsuits as a "landmark" victory for the treatment of prisoners. However, all those responsible for the torture and abuse of the inmates, including the Bedford Hill superintendent Phyllis Joan Curry and the prison's guards, were never punished for their actions.

In the years after the cases the courts' orders were consistently flouted, and the practice of solitary confinement continues only with slight

modifications. In a 2016 interview published by *The Village Voice*, Crooks was asked how things have changed in the prison system since 1974. She responded, “It didn’t get no better, it got worse.”

75 years ago: Right-wing mobs attack concerts by Paul Robeson

A concert by famed black singer and actor Paul Robeson in Peekskill, New York was attacked by a right-wing mob on August 27, followed by a similar assault on September 4. The incidents, which included the involvement of state and police forces alongside fascistic groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, exposed the poisonous atmosphere being created by the anti-communist witch-hunts fomented by Republicans and Democrats in Congress and the Democratic administration of President Harry S. Truman.

Robeson became a particular target of far-right forces because he was a prominent black cultural figure who opposed the witch-hunts and the Cold War with which they were associated. Close to the Stalinist Communist Party, Robeson had appeared at the House Committee on Un-American Activities, condemning proposed legislation that would have forced socialists to register as foreign agents.

He had appeared at a Stalinist-sponsored World Peace Conference in Paris in the weeks before the attack, at which he declared: “We in America do not forget that it was on the backs of white workers from Europe and on the backs of millions of blacks that the wealth of America was built. And we are resolved to share it equally. We reject any hysterical raving that urges us to make war on anyone.” Robeson had called for friendship with the Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellite states.

The first August 27 concert was subjected to a police stand-down, despite the fact that right-wing veterans and racist organizations had openly declared they would attack it. That allowed a mob to assault concertgoers with baseball bats and rocks. Thirteen were seriously injured, an effigy of Robeson was lynched, and the Klan held a cross burning.

After that concert was canceled entirely, union and left-wing forces mobilized a defense campaign, to facilitate a September 4 performance.

The Militant, publication of the Socialist Workers Party, then the Trotskyist party in the United States, showed that at that concert, mobs had attacked attendees with state police and troopers looking on and doing nothing. The SWP called for a broad mobilization of the workers’ movement against the attacks.

100 years ago: Henry Ford praises the Ku Klux Klan in interview

On August 26, 1924, the *Montreal Star* published an impromptu interview with Henry Ford, the owner of the Ford Motor Company and one of the richest men in the world, in which he praised the Ku Klux Klan as his yacht was passing through the Lachine Canal in Quebec, on its way to Michigan.

Ford made his comments from 10 feet above reporters while he was waiting on the deck of his yacht for the lock of the canal to fill. After insulting the city of Montreal, Ford warmed to his topic and told reporters after a mention of the KKK:

It is the victim of a mass of lying propaganda and is therefore looked upon with disfavor in many quarters. But if the truth were

known about it, it would be looked up to as a patriotic body concerned with nothing but the future development of the country in which it was born and the preservation of the supremacy of the true American in his own land.

Ford’s remarks were immediately reported in the world’s press and the next day he was at pains to deny he had ever made them. He told his staff, according to a subsequent report in the *Star*, “to make a positive denial of an absolutely false statement.” The *Star*, however, was able to corroborate his remarks from independent witnesses on the canal.

The US elections were in full swing in August, and the topic of the KKK—which was then at the height of its membership and influence—had come up repeatedly. Both major candidates, the incumbent President Calvin Coolidge for the Republicans, and former congressman John W. Davis for the Democrats, had made public statements on the Klan.

Davis condemned the Klan after it played an important role at the Democratic National Convention, held from June 24 to July 9 in New York City. Davis, only nominated on the 103rd ballot, had faced former Treasury Secretary and son-in-law to Woodrow Wilson, William McAdoo, a segregationist who had a substantial number of pro-KKK delegates. These delegates played an outsized role in preventing New York Governor Al Smith, a Catholic, from being nominated.

Coolidge said that he would study the issue. The independent populist candidate, Senator Robert LaFollette, said that the Klan contained the “seeds of death.”

Ford—who would publicly support Coolidge in the election—was not only a vicious enemy of the labor movement and communism but was already known in 1924 as a notorious antisemite. Between 1920 and 1922 he published his screed, “The International Jew,” in *The Dearborn Independent*, which he owned.



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