

This week in history: September 16-22

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.

15 September 2024

25 years ago: Powerful earthquake hits Taiwan

On September 21, 1999, an earthquake measuring 7.6 on the Richter scale struck central Taiwan. In the small towns surrounding the epicenter, homes and residential apartments collapsed. Hundreds of people were killed in their beds and hundreds more remained trapped beneath rubble in the aftermath.

The worst affected areas were the Nantou and Taichung counties, known in Taiwan for their mountains and tourist resorts. Rescue efforts were delayed and interrupted by the isolation of the region. All telecommunication links were cut, roads twisted or severed and power lines downed. Rescue workers had little heavy equipment. Hospitals in the area had no power and morgues were not functioning. Helicopters operated flying in emergency medical supplies and flying out casualties and corpses, but flights were stopped in the days after due to potential dangers to the crews.

The earthquake inflicted damage across Taiwan and was followed by hundreds of aftershocks, dozens of which registered over 5.0 on the Richter scale. Over four million houses were without electricity in the following days. Two major hydroelectric dams were damaged. In the capital of Taipei, 150 kilometers north of the epicenter, a 12-story building collapsed, trapping more than 100 people. Numerous other buildings suffered varying degrees of structural damage.

Coming in the wake of the devastating earthquake in Izmit, Turkey, spokesmen from the US Geological Survey were widely quoted in the international press as stating that Taiwan escaped the same type of damage and death due to its superior building codes, which were modeled on those of California. Reports from Taipei recounted high rise apartment buildings and office towers swaying violently from side to side but not collapsing.

The death toll was 2,415. A further 11,305 people were injured and NT\$300 billion worth of damage was done. It was the second-deadliest earthquake in Taiwan's recorded history, after the 1935 Shinchiku-Taich? earthquake.

50 years ago: Hurricane Fifi kills 8,000 in Honduras

On September 18, 1974, Hurricane Fifi made landfall in Honduras bringing major devastation to the Central American country. The storm killed at least 8,000 Hondurans, making it the second deadliest Atlantic hurricane ever recorded up to that time, behind only the Great Hurricane of 1780 that killed an estimated 22,000 people in the Caribbean.

Meteorologists began tracking the development of Hurricane Fifi as early as September 7. Initially it was believed that the storm would not make landfall, with major newspapers reporting that there was no threat to any land area.

However, the storm made an unexpected turn in both direction and intensity. On September 15 the US National Hurricane Center declared the storm to be a tropical depression, the lowest scale of a cyclone-type storm. Experts' initial predictions showed that the storm would make a northerly turn that may have only slightly impacted Cuba.

But rather than turn, Fifi continued westward on a direct collision course with Central America, making landfall in Honduras. Just 24 hours after being officially named and designated, the storm had already doubled in size. By September 17 the storm reached its full strength as a Category 2 hurricane.

By the time the Honduran government issued evacuation orders it was far too late for many workers to take precautions, if they received any warning at all. Honduras was the poorest Latin American country, with an average per capital income of just \$270 per year, and the highly exploited Honduran working class was left totally alone to survive the storm.

Dangerous mountain roads were left open, causing buses and cars to be swept away by flooding and mudslides. Tens of thousands of buildings were totally destroyed causing hundreds of thousands of people to become homeless in the storm's aftermath.

For weeks afterwards newspapers were filled with stories of bodies being found floating in the rivers. To deal with the large number of dead the government ordered mass cremations.

In total Hurricane Fifi caused an estimated \$1.8 billion in damages, equivalent to \$11.1 billion in 2024 dollars. Virtually the entirety of Honduras' banana crop was destroyed, further escalating the economic crisis.

Honduras was totally dependent on bananas as its main export. Two US companies, United Brands and Standard Fruit, owned

nearly all the banana farms in Honduras and by extension most of the country. Of course, none of the profits produced by Honduran workers became available to bring relief to the devastation. Only the most limited aid was made available from the United States, a much of it organized by private charities.

Reporting on the hurricane, the *Bulletin* newspaper, US predecessor to the WSWS, wrote, “These people were murdered not so much by a hurricane, which is a common enough event in Central America, but by the fact that absolutely no preparations were made to save live in such cases. No transportation facilities, no relief centers, no medical teams—this is why thousands were left at the mercy of the hurricane.”

75 years ago: 118 perish in fire onboard SS Noronic in Toronto Harbor

On September 17, 1949, a massive blaze on board the SS Noronic, a passenger ship, rapidly spiraled out of control as it was docked in Toronto Harbor, claiming at least 118 lives. The tragedy was the outcome of lax safety measures bound up with cost-cutting and inadequate training of crew.

First launched in 1913, the Noronic was a five-deck, 362-foot passenger liner that had been dubbed the “Queen of the lakes.” Its September 1949 journey was a seven-day pleasure cruise of Lake Ontario, departing from Michigan in the United States. Of its 524 passengers, all but 20 were American citizens.

Disaster struck in the very early hours of September 17, when a fire broke out in a linen closet on board. It was first detected by a passenger who smelled smoke. When the closet was opened, a burst of fire exploded, rapidly engulfing the wooden decks of the ship. Survivors reported chaotic scenes, with people running about the ship without direction, and jumping into the harbor before being rescued by nearby vessels.

Safety measures were lax to non-existent. In the first instance, the antiquated design of the ship meant that passenger decks A, B, C, and D did not have gangplanks, with one only on deck E, the lowest on the vessel, having that escape route. Even here, only two of the four exits were operational at the time of the blaze. Most of the ship’s stairways caught fire, also blocking escape. The interiors were decked out with oiled rather than fireproof wood, ensuring the spread of any fire that broke out.

None of the ship’s fire extinguishers were in working order and there was no coordinated attempt to put out the blaze. The ship’s poorly trained crew members were reportedly in as much confusion and disarray as any of the passengers. The absence of a safety plan or training also meant there was no systematic effort to wake sleeping passengers. Those who woke either heard the commotion or were alerted by other passengers.

In the aftermath of the tragedy, an attempt was made in the press to scapegoat the crew who were accused of cowardice and negligence. Eventually, the ship owners would settle a series of civil claims for C\$2 million, in a tacit admission of responsibility.

100 years ago: US ends occupation of the Dominican Republic

On September 18, 1924, the United States withdrew its occupation force of Marines from the Dominican Republic, after the election in March of Horacio Vásquez, an American puppet, as president.

The US had sent troops in 1916 to ensure the repayment of loans to European creditors, whose governments were then engaged in World War I. It was particularly concerned that Germany might use the debt crisis as a pretext for projecting its military power into the Caribbean.

After forcing President Desiderio Arias to leave office by threatening to bombard the capital, Santo Domingo, the American military landed 800 Marines on May 15, 1916. Six months later, when an election seemed likely to produce an anti-US government, and with plans to enter World War I in their final stages, the Wilson administration simply imposed a US military government.

The military government ruled for eight years and oversaw the building of roads and other infrastructure, took over state finances, created military and police organizations loyal to itself, and oriented the country’s economy to American imperialism.

A guerrilla movement, the gavilleros, in the eastern part of the country resisted the occupation until 1922. The Americans used aircraft on the insurgents and provoked widespread opposition from the population.

The occupation came under increasing domestic American and international opposition after the end of World War I, but proposals by the US Congress to give it democratic window dressing were met with hostility by the Dominican people.

The occupation government installed a puppet Dominican president in 1922 and oversaw the 1924 election of Vásquez. Vásquez ruled until 1930 when he was overthrown in a coup that led after a few months to the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo, who had risen through the ranks of the American-controlled military.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact