

This week in history: October 7-13

6 October 2024

25 years ago: Pakistani military launches coup against Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif

On October 12, 1999, Pervez Musharraf, the commander of the Pakistani military, launched a coup against Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his Muslim League government. The military quickly established control of the 140-million strong country, seizing government buildings and the state-run news media and radio stations. Sharif and his brother Shehbaz were detained and put under house arrest.

Before Sharif's ouster, the Pakistani ruling elite had clashed over a Pakistani-organized military incursion into the Kargil-Dass-Batalik region in Indian-controlled Kashmir. The military assault was widely seen as a geo-political failure for Pakistan, since the United States, under President Bill Clinton, threw its support behind the Indian bourgeoisie and initiated a new strategic partnership with the country. Moreover, differences emerged with the military over the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and Sharif's letter of congratulations to Indian Prime Minister Atal Vajpayee on his reelection. Vajpayee had carried out nuclear weapons tests the year before in an act of nationalist sabre-rattling against Pakistan.

The Pakistani military portrayed the coup as a "spontaneous" rebellion of the rank and file, triggered by Sharif's attempt to replace Musharraf as chief of the army. Musharraf spoke of a country in economic turmoil: "Not only have all the institutions been played around with and systematically destroyed, the economy too is in a state of collapse." He accused Sharif of carrying out "self-serving policies" that "have rocked the very foundation of the Federation of Pakistan," including interference "with the armed forces, the last remaining viable institution" upholding Pakistan's "stability, unity and integrity."

There was no mass opposition against the military coup. Sharif was not a popular figure. His corrupt and authoritarian regime was responsible for the social catastrophe in the country. Sharif implemented IMF austerity programs, while fanning religious fundamentalism and trying to concentrate all power in the hands of his family and a small clique of Punjabi businessmen and politicians.

The Pakistani military, however, which had ruled the country for 25 of its 52 years of independence, bore even greater responsibility for the plight of the Pakistani masses. It squandered vast amounts of money on weaponry and military adventures and served as the principal guardian of the capitalist economic order in which government officials, the military brass, and political bosses monopolize Pakistan's wealth, while the vast majority live in desperate poverty.

50 years ago: Tories defeated in British elections

On October 10, 1974, the second general election within a period of just nine months was held in the United Kingdom. The British Labour Party won a narrow majority, allowing the party's leader and British Prime Minister Harold Wilson to form a government independent of any other parties.

After the previous election in February, Labour won the most seats in parliament but not enough to form a government. Attempts at negotiating a coalition government with both the Conservatives and the Liberal Party had failed, leaving the country in a crisis of rule.

The February election was called by the former Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath amid a national coal strike that had paralyzed the UK. Heath planned to use the election to create a mandate for major police repression against the miners.

That election resulted in a historic defeat for the Tories and was a massive repudiation of their plans to force the working class to pay for the global economic inflationary crisis. However, many workers were deeply skeptical of the Labour Party and of Wilson who had held the prime ministership once before, from 1964 to 1970.

The February election saw an increase in votes for the Liberal Party, which won over 19 percent. The Liberals benefited from many ballots cast as a protest against both Labour and the Conservatives.

In calling the October election Labour campaigned on the basis that their election to the majority would be a popular mandate for their "social contract" agenda of reaching a peaceful accommodation between the capitalists and the working class. Wilson argued that Labour's election allowed for the end of the miner's strike and the resumption of normal capitalist production.

Labour's campaign was not oriented to the working class, which had just demonstrated its militancy and revolutionary potential, but to the bankers and industrialists of Britain. Wilson sought to convince the British ruling elite that Labour could better manage their affairs and keep the working class suppressed.

While Labour won the election, it did nothing to resolve the social and political crisis that was rocking Britain and the entire world. The fundamental economic conditions that set hundreds of thousands of miners into strike action remained.

The election only set the stage that the next explosion of the class struggle would be a direct confrontation between the working class and the Labour Party. Already on October 3 mineworkers rejected a Labour Party demand that coal production be ramped up to shore up the mine owners' profits.

The British Trotskyist movement at the time, the Workers Revolutionary Party, intervened in the election with its own slate of candidates fighting for an international socialist program and won several thousand votes. In the WRP's election manifesto the statement explained, "The right to a decent standard of living for millions of

workers and their families can only be defended by nationalizing the banks, the land and basic industry without compensation and under workers' control. Noting short of that. ... The three main parties, Labour, the Tories and the Liberals, say their main aim is to beat inflation. They mean beating the working class."

75 years ago: Stalinist state formally established in East Germany

On October 7, 1949, a new East German state was formally established with the promulgation of a Constitution and the appointment of a president. The move consolidated and formalized the partition of Germany, flowing from World War II and the subsequent breakdown of relations between the imperialist powers and the Stalinist bureaucracy of the Soviet Union in the developing Cold War.

The Constitution was largely based on that of the Weimar Republic that preceded the Nazi seizure of power in 1933. The new state was dominated by the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED), which had been established in 1946 through a merger of a segment of the reformist Social Democratic Party and remnants of the Stalinist Communist Party.

The Constitution, however, contained hardly any references to socialism or workers' power. Instead it included non-class references to the "indivisibility of the German people," and to the new state representing all "citizens." The Constitution guaranteed private property within limits, but provided for the new state to confiscate enterprises owned by former Nazi war criminals as well as those accused of monopolistic practices aimed at controlling the economy.

The first president of the new state, Wilhelm Pieck, was a decades-long Stalinist functionary. He had been a member of the German Communist Party during its heroic period in the 1920s. However he had long since become a flunky of the Soviet bureaucracy in the Soviet Union.

Pieck had been in the Soviet Union throughout the late 1930s, as the bureaucracy carried out the mass murder of Trotskyists and other socialist opponents of its privileged rule. He had also been secretary of the Communist International from 1935 until its dissolution in 1943, during which time it was based upon the openly counterrevolutionary Popular Front program of seeking alliances with the imperialist "democracies" against fascism.

In the wake of the Nazi defeat in 1945, Germany had been occupied by the Allied powers, including the US, Britain, France and the Soviet Union. An uneasy power-sharing arrangement broke down as the imperialists shifted from their wartime alliance with the Stalinist bureaucracy to a program of aggressive confrontation, aimed above all at establishing the hegemony of American capitalism in Europe and globally.

100 years ago: British intelligence agency receives copy of forged Zinoviev letter

On October 9, 1924, a copy of a letter, ostensibly written by the chairman of the Executive Committee of the Communist International, Grigory Zinoviev, to the leadership of the Communist Party of Great

Britain, was telegraphed to the headquarters of the British Special Intelligence Service in London from its office in Riga, Latvia. The copy of the letter—no original has ever been found—was written in English.

The letter enjoined the British Communist Party leaders to use its influence on the Labour Party to see that diplomatic and trade relations between Russia and Britain be developed:

A settlement of relations between the two countries will assist in the revolutionizing of the international and British proletariat not less than a successful rising in any of the working districts of England, as the establishment of close contact between the British and Russian proletariat, the exchange of delegations and workers, etc., will make it possible for us to extend and develop the propaganda of ideas of Leninism in England and the Colonies.

The letter ended by suggesting that the Communist Party prepare cadres for an insurrection. "Go attentively through the lists of the military 'cells', detailing from them the more energetic and capable men, turn attention to the more talented military specialists who have, for one reason or another, left the Service and hold socialist views."

That summer the Labour Party had suffered a vote of no confidence in the British parliament over the case of John Ross Campbell, a workers' leader who had written an anti-war article in the Communist Party's *Workers Weekly* and was being threatened with a trial for treason. As a result, new elections had been called for October 29. The Labour Party sought to distance itself from the Communist Party and had ruled out affiliation with the party at its congress in London on October 7.

The right wing, however, was determined to smear Labour as a pro-Communist organization. The "Zinoviev Letter," as it came to be known, was published in the *Daily Mail* four days before the election with the claim that it represented "a great Bolshevick plot to paralyse the British Army and Navy and to plunge the country into civil war."

Both Zinoviev and the Communist Party denied any involvement with the letter, but British ruling circles promoted the fiction that it was genuine, helping to ensure the victory of the Tories by a landslide.

Scholars now widely regard the letter as a forgery.



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