# This Week in History: December 7-December 13

**7 December 2009**

*This Week in History* provides brief synopses of important historical events whose anniversaries fall this week.

25 Years Ago | 50 Years Ago | 75 Years Ago | 100 Years Ago

### 25 years: Canadian Auto Workers split from UAW

After 50 years representing both US and Canadian auto workers, on December 10, 1984 the United Auto Workers (UAW) loses its Canadian section in a split that results in the formation of the Canadian Auto Workers union (CAW).

The day before, Robert White, who heads the 120,000-member Canadian branch of the 1.2 million-member UAW, presented the UAW governing board with a series of demands that were certain to be rejected, including direct access to the union strike fund and independence in contract negotiations.

Owen Bieber, president of the UAW, says in response to the withdrawal of the Canadian section that the two unions will not have "an adversarial relationship."

This is far from the truth. Behind the split are the competing nationalist interests of the Canadian and US union bureaucracies. The declining value of the Canadian dollar has helped to lower labor costs and increase auto production in Canada, a fact resented by the US bureaucrats, who have attempted to sideline production in Canada whenever possible.

Inflation has also sparked a spirit of militancy among Canadian auto workers to defend their living standards. Canadian auto workers have fought off the sellout contracts the UAW has helped impose over the resistance of rank-and-file workers.

The nascent CAW attempts to channel this militancy behind a nationalist agenda. The cheaper Canadian dollar and Canada's national health system offer the auto makers competitive advantages if they shift production to Canada, White and his associate, Buzz Hargrove, reason.

White tells a *Bulletin* reporter from the predecessor *World Socialist Web Site*, "It's not a question of policies or principled differences, but that each country has to be in charge of our own destiny."

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### 50 years: President Eisenhower visits Afghanistan

President Eisenhower visits Kabul, Afghanistan, the first-ever visit by a US president to the country.

In articles on the visit, the *New York Times* notes the strategic importance of Afghanistan, a nation which is a "primary target of Soviet economic penetration." The purposes of Eisenhower's discussions with King Mohammed Zahir are to close the Soviet Union's "considerable lead" there, and to address concerns about the Chinese "pressing [the region] from the northeast."

In an editorial, the *Times* compares Eisenhower's visit to Alexander the Great's thrust into the region. "[S]trategy and economics still make modern Afghanistan, at the crossroads of Central Asia, an important country," the *Times* editorial board writes. "[T]hough Alexander rode in a chariot and Mr. Eisenhower is riding in a jet plane, it does not stretch facts too far to say that what we now call power politics was behind both journeys."

The Soviets have extended Afghanistan $250 million in aid, military and civilian, over the previous five years. The US has provided about half as much aid, including $51 million to build an irrigation system in Helmand province.

Afghanistan is in conflict with Pakistan over the latter's

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Pashtun-speaking tribal border areas, which Kabul says should be independent.

The visit to Afghanistan is bookended by trips to Pakistan and India. In both countries, hundreds of thousands line the streets to cheer the US president, who rides in an open car.

In India, Eisenhower offers tacit support to Prime Minister Jawaharal Nehru in India's heated rivalry with China over disputed border regions.

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**75 years: Spanish mines reopen after workers' rebellion**

In Spain, Premier Alejandro Lerroux announces that the coal and iron ore mines in the Asturian region will reopen, after the suppression of the miners' rebellion. Most of the 2,000 mine concessions in the area, with some 40,000 workers in their employ, are to resume operation.

The same week, Spain arrests Ramón González Peña, leader of the Asturian uprising and a leading member of the UGT (Unión General de Trabajadores), along with 13 others. A death sentence for Peña is subsequently commuted to life imprisonment.

The reopening of the mines and the arrest of Peña are among the final blows in the defeat of the October 1934 revolution in Spain.

The victory of the right-wing Confederación Española de Derechas Autónomas (CEDA) in the 1933 elections and the entrance of three CEDA members into the cabinet of Lerroux on October 1, 1934 led to a general strike throughout Spain, beginning October 4.

By October 6, the strike had turned to open rebellion in the Asturias, and the miners, under the leadership of the UGT, had taken control of Oviedo, the capital of the province. Workers took over several other towns in the region, including La Felguera, and set up soviet-style committees to govern the regions.

However, as the general strike begins to fail in other parts of Spain, and the leadership of the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT), a coalition of anarcho-syndicalist trade unions, remains essentially hostile to the socialist UGT, the Asturian revolutionaries are left isolated.

With the Asturias weakened, Spain's October revolution is brutally put down by the army under the leadership of General Francisco Franco.

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**100 years: Britain nears completion of Cairo-to-Cape Town "Red Line"**

Britain announces the official opening of the Congo portions of its "Cape-to-Cairo Railway" on December 12. The new sections complete a continuous stretch of rail line running 2,147 miles from Cape Town, South Africa.

The project aims to realize the dream of the late imperialist politician and magnate Cecil Rhodes of a "red line" running the length of Africa from north to south. The British believe that the railroad will help to draw all of the continent into their economic orbit.

The British face French and German opposition. Earlier opposition from Portugal, which claimed lands through which the railway would pass, ended with the British Ultimatum of 1890. The French have designs on an east-west railroad running through northern Africa; German control of Tanzania presents the British with a more formidable barrier.

Virtually all of Africa had been divided up among the great powers in the previous decades, in what has come to be known as "the scramble for Africa."

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