

This week in history: January 20-26

20 January 2014

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

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25 years ago: US President George H.W. Bush sworn in

On January 20, 1989 George Herbert Walker Bush was inaugurated as the 41st US president. Bush, vice president for eight years under Ronald Reagan, was the Republican candidate to succeed Reagan after his two terms in office.

Bush declared in his inauguration speech that “a new breeze is blowing.” He proclaimed the coming era as “the age of the offered hand.” To the world, he promised the hand would be “a reluctant fist” but warned that the fist would be “strong and ... used with great effect.”

The threat of military violence was the only promise Bush would keep. As for his posture of representing a “new breeze,” this rhetoric was an admission of the vast unpopularity of the Reagan administration, both among working people in the United States, and the masses internationally.

Bush only won the 1988 presidential election because the Democratic Party effectively conceded a third term to the Republicans, nominating the colorless Michael Dukakis, who promised only to administer Reagan’s right-wing policies more efficiently, not to reverse them.

The central feature of Reagan’s eight years in office was the continued economic decline of the United States in relation to its major world competitors, reaching a historical milestone as the US became a net debtor nation and then the world’s largest debtor. This was the driving force of a frontal assault on the working class, through massive layoffs in industries such as auto and steel and a union busting and strikebreaking campaign of unprecedented dimensions. In all these policies, Bush was a willing collaborator.

The smashing of the 1981 strike of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) signaled the beginning of a decade of intense class warfare against workers in all areas, with the shameful collaboration of the AFL-CIO, who refused to support any of the strikes carried out by workers in the meatpacking, auto and steel, paper and other industries.

In the same period, the Reagan administration carried out

drastic cuts in the social programs. Combined with the destruction of jobs, this meant devastation for industrial cities. In Detroit for example, unemployment rose from 7.2 percent in 1970 to 23.2 percent in 1988 and the city’s poverty rate tripled since 1967, from 14.9 percent to 42.8 percent.

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50 years ago: 24th Amendment bans poll taxes in US

On January 23rd, 1964, the 24th Amendment to the US Constitution, prohibiting the imposition of poll taxes for federal elections, was ratified after South Dakota became the 38th legislature to approve it. Among southern states, only Tennessee and Florida had ratified the amendment. As recently as 1937 the Supreme Court had upheld fees required of voters prior to casting ballots, ruling in *Breedlove v. Suttles* that voting rights were not conferred by the federal government, but by the states.

Poll taxes prevailed in most southern US states from the late nineteenth century, one of a several tactics imposed in the wake of Reconstruction (1865-1877) and the US Civil War (1861-1865) aimed at blocking blacks from voting. Together with other measures, such as polling place literacy exams and the so-called “grandfather clause,” in which a voter had to demonstrate that his grandfather could vote, poll taxes effectively stripped the franchise from almost all blacks and the majority of poor whites.

General elections were of little importance in any case, as in the “solid South” elections were determined in racially exclusive Democratic Party primaries. The Southern oligarchy entrenched its rule by separating black and white workers in all public spaces through a system of racial segregation known as Jim Crow, and through the savage violence of the police and the Ku Klux Klan.

The adoption of the 24th Amendment was part of a move by the American ruling class to dismantle the legal framework of Jim Crow, in response to the explosive growth of black working class resistance against racial oppression in the South and, increasingly, in the cities of the North and West, beginning in the 1950s.

The 24th Amendment had passed Congress in 1962 with

bipartisan support, as northern Democrats and Republicans both voted for it, while southern Democrats were mainly opposed. While the poll tax had once been imposed by all eleven states of the old Confederacy (in 1905), by the time of ratification only five states still had it in place.

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75 years ago: Barcelona falls to Franco

On January 26, 1939, the Spanish Republican capital Barcelona fell to General Franco's fascist troops. With the fall of the city and the region of Catalonia, the Republic lost the second largest city of the country, the Catalan war industry, and 200,000 troops. The defeat, part of a rapid fascist military advance known as the Catalan Offensive, rendered the Republican cause irredeemably lost.

When news reached Barcelona on January 23 that Franco had reached the River Llobregat to the south of the city, an enormous exodus began. Approximately half a million men, women and children trekked towards the French border. Historian Paul Preston describes the horrible scene: "Women gave birth at the roadsides. Babies died of the cold, children were trampled to death. A witness summed up the horror of that dreadful exodus: 'At the side of the road a man had hung himself from a tree. One foot had a rope sandal, the other was bare. At the foot of the tree was an open suitcase in which lay a small child that had died of cold during the night.' It is not known how many people died on the roads to France." Around 20,000 wounded Republican soldiers were left behind in Barcelona, their injuries and missing limbs marking them out at once to the advancing fascist army for deadly reprisals.

The political crimes of Stalinism and the Popular Front policy stood exposed. By suffocating the Spanish Revolution, especially in its cradle, Barcelona, the Popular Front alliance between the social-democratic, Stalinist and anarchist parties and trade unions and the so-called progressive bourgeoisie cost the Spanish and ultimately the international working class dearly.

The Republican prime minister Juan Negrin, the Stalinists, the anarchists, and the rest of the Popular Front were far more fearful of working class revolution than they were of Franco.

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100 years ago: US intervenes in response to revolt in Haiti

This week in 1914, a nationwide revolt in Haiti developed against the rule of President Michael Oreste. It took place in the

context of a protracted period of political instability in the country, triggered in part by frequent military, diplomatic, and economic interventions by the United States.

Oreste had been elected president in May 1913, following the suspicious death of his predecessor, Auguste Tancredi. Oreste's short presidency, which began with social upheaval and political infighting, was characterized by repeated crises. Preparations for a revolt against his rule began in early January. Two revolts developed at around the same time, one led by Joseph Davilmar Théodore, an exiled senator, and the other by Charles and Oreste Zamor, two brothers who were prominent generals. Both movements appealed to the discontent of cacao farmers, particularly in the north of the country.

The Zamor brothers pursued Théodore's forces, forcing them to retreat and take refuge in the mountainous countryside, while intensifying their efforts to oust President Oreste. On January 24, the *New York Times* noted the growing strength of the revolt, warning that "The success of this kind of movement might be regarded as a direct challenge to the (US) administration's policy" and voicing concerns that American control of Haiti's customs may be threatened. The previous day, an American armored war ship, the *Montana*, had docked in Haitian waters.

On January 27, Michael Oreste was ousted, and forced to flee. Within days, French, German and American warships had docked in the capital Port-au-Prince, on the pretext of protecting their respective consulates. Oreste Zamor was elected president on February 8. The US administration immediately demanded that his government accept effective US control of Haitian customs along with finance and credit. These demands were opposed by Germany and France, who were eager to prosecute their own interests in the region.

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