

This week in history: March 30-April 4

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25 years ago: Bundesbank plan to impoverish East German workers

On March 31, 1990, the proposal by the Bundesbank, the central bank of West Germany, for a two-for-one exchange proposal for East German marks was made public. Less than three weeks after the election victory of the right-wing alliance in the East German elections, the West German capitalists and their Stalinist and petty-bourgeois collaborators in the East revealed the real content of reunification under capitalism. Behind the phrases about “democracy,” the bourgeoisie moved to take advantage of the disintegration of Stalinism to step up the attacks on the working class.

The two-for-one proposal, introduced at a policy-setting meeting of the Bundesbank on March 29 and revealed publicly on March 31, would decimate the savings and pensions of millions of workers. Under the plan, savings accounts of 2,000 Eastern marks or less would be converted at a one-to-one rate, but anything over that would be at the lower rate. More than four out of five families were estimated to have at least 5,000 marks in savings accounts.

Postal workers in the East German city of Suhl held a warning strike on April 2 to press for a one-to-one exchange rate. The Stalinist-led Labor Union Federation called for a nationwide demonstration on April 5.

During the election campaign, West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl repeatedly promised voters in the East that their savings would be fully protected under the monetary union. He subsequently denied having promised a one-for-one exchange rate, saying he told East Germans only that he would “find a helpful formula for ordinary citizens to convert their savings.”

Stung by the reaction to the plan, Kohl issued a statement saying that no final decision had been made. Both Kohl’s political allies and opponents accused him of reneging on the most important campaign promise made during the Eastern election campaign—that their savings would be exchanged at parity.

Eberhard Engel, a leader of the East German Christian Democrats, revealed the capitalist attitude towards East

German workers, “We have to teach them to work eight hours. Freedom also has its hard side.”

Kurt Kasch, a board member of West Germany’s largest commercial bank, Deutsche Bank, predicted that “there are going to be many psychological and mental problems in East Germany. ... This is the change they wanted and now there is no turning back.”

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50 years ago: GDR shuts down Berlin Autobahn

On April 5, 1965, East German authorities, with the support of the Soviet Union, closed the 110-mile highway linking the Federal Republic of Germany with West Berlin for four hours as a protest against the upcoming meeting of the West German Bundestag in Berlin. It marked the first time that the interzonal autobahn had been closed since the 1949 Berlin blockade.

The East German Stalinist regime opposed the assertion by the West German government that West Berlin was part of the bourgeois Federal Republic and maintained that the Bundestag had no right to meet there. The provocative decision of the West German government to schedule a symbolic session of the Bundestag, the lower house of parliament, in West Berlin was seized on by Moscow as an occasion to strike a pose of opposition to US imperialism, which was continuing a campaign of unrestricted air strikes against North Vietnam.

The Soviet Union openly threw its support behind the tie-up of the autobahn with Marshal Grechko, commander of the combined forces of the Warsaw Pact, appearing in East Berlin.

Meanwhile Soviet authorities advised the Western imperialist allies to keep their aircraft above 6,500 feet in the three air corridors to Berlin, while the Warsaw Pact forces staged military maneuvers. Two days later, Soviet jets buzzed West Berlin while the Bundestag met, shattering windows throughout the former German capital.

This impotent gesture by the Stalinist bureaucracy only underlined their abandonment of international socialism. The bureaucracy made no appeal to the working class in the western countries, where opposition to American imperialism’s war on Vietnam was growing.

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75 years ago: CIO leader Lewis attacks Roosevelt

On April 1, 1940, the United Mine Workers President John L. Lewis, leader of the Congress of Industrial Organizations, attacked the Roosevelt administration and threatened to organize labor, youth, old age, blacks, and farmers groups in opposition.

Speaking to a crowd of 25,000 miners in West Virginia, Lewis pointed to America's 12 million unemployed: "Not a single solitary suggestion is being made in America on how to provide Americans with work. Far from settling the unemployment question, the existing administration is curtailing the meager relief heretofore extended to men and women out of work. What a sad commentary it is that we are putting men and women off relief, careless of whether they live or die, when the Congress is asked to appropriate more money to employ federal detectives." Lewis called for a \$60 per month government pension for the elderly.

Lewis called for a convention of the American Youth Congress, the NAACP, the American Negro Congress, agricultural organizations and the Townsend old-age pension group, under the leadership of the CIO and labor's Non-Partisan Political League. He criticized the disenfranchisement of blacks in the South through such devices as the poll tax.

Lewis never mentioned the formation of a Labor Party or a break with the Democrats either before the miners or before mass crowds of auto workers in Flint or Detroit and transit workers in New York which he also addressed. Lewis, no less than the other CIO bureaucrats, was bitterly opposed to any rupture with pro-capitalist politics. The industrial union movement, which had taken on near-insurrectionary dimensions from 1934 until 1937, remained subordinated to the Democratic Party. In the end, the most Lewis could muster was to endorse the Republican Party in the 1940 election.

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100 years ago: Militarist celebrations of Bismarck centenary in Germany

On April 1, 1915, German authorities organized major public commemorations of the centenary of the birth of Otto Von Bismarck, the longtime Prussian leader and architect of the German Empire.

The streets of Berlin and other major cities were decorated with hundreds of flags, and large ceremonies were held, in an attempt to sustain the climate of militarist nationalism that had

been used to dragoon German workers and youth into the world war that had erupted in August, 1914.

In a telegram to the German Chancellor, Bethmann Von Hollweg, Kaiser Wilhelm II declared that Bismarck was the "personification of German strength and determination."

According to historian Edgar Feuchtwanger, "The Bismarck cult was at its peak between his death and Germany's defeat in 1918. Bismarck monuments sprang up all over Germany and his name was invoked on innumerable occasions when Germans gathered to celebrate the greatness, power and future destiny of their nation."

Bismarck, who died in 1898, had been appointed Minister-President of Prussia by Kaiser Wilhelm I in 1862. An aristocratic junker (Prussian landowner), militarist and vicious opponent of the working class, Bismarck presided over German unification in 1871, and was appointed Chancellor of the new federated state.

In his famous "blood and iron speech" in 1862, Bismarck had outlined his support for the militarist unification of Germany, declaring: "The position of Prussia in Germany will not be determined by its liberalism but by its power. ... Not through speeches and majority decisions will the great questions of the day be decided ... but by iron and blood."

Bismarck had also been at the center of the attempts by the German state to suppress the mass socialist movement of the working class. In 1878, he instituted "anti-socialist laws" which effectively illegalized the rapidly growing Social Democratic Party—except for its parliamentary representatives in the Reichstag—and were only repealed in 1890.

While a proponent of militarism, Bismarck practiced balance-of-power politics, aimed at giving Germany a predominant position in European affairs, but avoiding the danger of a two-front war, with Russia in the East and Britain and/or France in the West.

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