

This week in history: April 6-12

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25 years ago: Reagan official convicted on Iran-Contra charges

Admiral John M. Poindexter was convicted on five felony charges of lying, conspiracy and obstructing Congress on Saturday, April 7, 1990, five weeks after his trial began. As national security adviser to President Ronald Reagan, Poindexter was at the center of the operation involving the sales of Hawk missiles to Iran for funds that were then illegally used to supply the counterrevolutionary Contra forces fighting the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua. He was forced to resign when the affair became public in November 1986.

The most serious count against Poindexter was conspiracy with his subordinate, Lt. Col. Oliver North, to destroy documents and deceive Congress about both the supplying of arms to the Contras and the sale of weapons to Iran. He was also charged with sending letters to Congress that fraudulently claimed that the Reagan administration was not helping the Contras and directing North to do likewise.

Poindexter's defense was that he was acting under the authority of the White House, but in videotaped testimony to the court, Reagan claimed memory lapses and said he didn't know about the diversion of funds. When asked if Poindexter should have informed him of any such activities, Reagan said, "Yes," adding, "unless maybe he thought he was protecting me."

Poindexter never took the stand in his own defense, likely to avoid facing perjury charges resulting from conflicting testimony he gave before Congress under a grant of immunity. He had admitted to personally destroying an official document signed by Reagan authorizing the arms sales to Iran. He also admitted to approving the diversion of funds to the Contras.

The jury deliberated over six days before convicting Poindexter on all five counts. Dan K. Webb, who prosecuted

Poindexter for the special prosecutor's office, cited a statement Reagan made in his videotaped testimony that he didn't believe his subordinates had broken the law. "There is no question," Webb said, "that Ronald Reagan was wrong and incorrect when he said that no one had committed any crimes."

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50 years ago: Longshoremen's union boycotts Alabama

Responding to the call by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. for an economic boycott against Alabama because of the state government's brutal repression of the civil rights movement, on April 9, 1965 the biannual convention of the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union voted to refuse to handle Alabama goods.

The unanimous vote by 309 delegates, representing 65,000 workers, approved a resolution that longshoremen would not move Alabama products "until the rights of all the people of Alabama are recognized and respected." It was introduced first in San Francisco Local 10 by ILWU President Harry Bridges, who had been the target of federal persecution because of his long association with the Communist Party.

The move was of little practical economic significance, since almost all of Alabama's seaborne commerce was handled out of Mobile Bay by the rival International Longshoremen's Association, which dominated the ports of the East Coast and Gulf of Mexico. The officials of the ILA, like much of the AFL-CIO bureaucracy, were tacitly opposed to the civil rights movement.

The overwhelming support of West Coast longshoremen revealed the potential for powerful support in the working class for the "freedom struggle" of black workers in the South. The boycott, however, left intact the ILWU's ties to the Democratic Party, which ruled over the state governments in the South, with the support of both the trade union officials and the leaders of the civil rights movement. King, Bridges, and the AFL-CIO leadership all opposed the building of an independent party of the working class.

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75 years ago: Germany invades Denmark and Norway

On April 9, 1940, German forces overran Denmark and invaded Norway in a race to prevent Britain from securing Norwegian ports on the North Sea from which it could bar the shipment of Swedish ore to Germany. Only one day before German troops landed on the Norwegian coast, the British Navy had laid a series of three mines near the port of Narvik in northern Norway to block the passage of ore ships.

In the early morning hours of April 9, German Panzer units rumbled through southern Denmark, while parachute units occupied the northern sector. Three small ships steamed into Copenhagen harbor and took the capital. All this occurred with little or no resistance. By 6 a.m. the King of Denmark surrendered to the Germans. The takeover of Denmark served as a means of controlling the straits between the Baltic and North Seas, which facilitated the maintenance of communication and supply lines between ports and bases in Germany and those being occupied by Hitler's forces in Norway.

The German invasion of Norway used ships and airplanes to dispatch a modest number of troops to occupy all major Norwegian cities and ports. Despite numerous indications of the German invasion, the Norwegian forces, besides being inferior to the Nazi "Blitzkrieg," had not been mobilized ahead of time. Norway's king and government, led by the Labor Party, panicked and fled from Oslo northward. Vidkun Quisling, a former Norwegian defense minister and leader of a small pro-Hitler party, took advantage of the political vacuum to proclaim himself prime minister on April 10.

In the first days of the invasion, the British and German navies confronted each other, with the inferior German Navy taking the worst of the engagement. But the audacity of the German move into Scandinavia caught Britain off guard, after six months of the so-called "phony war" that followed the German invasion and dismemberment of Poland.

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100 years ago: Socialist youth conference held in Bern, Switzerland

On April 7, 1915, an international meeting of young

socialists held in Bern, Switzerland concluded its proceedings. Despite the disapproval of the pro-war parties, the conference of young socialists had been held over the Easter period, with sixteen delegates from ten countries participating.

Youth organizations from Bulgaria, Germany, Denmark, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Russia, Switzerland and Sweden were all represented. Discussion at the conference, which was riven by sharp conflicts, centered on the nature of the war and also the role of the social democratic parties.

During the second day of the conference a resolution was presented on the war, which was sharply criticized by the Russian and Polish participants. While not present at the conference, Vladimir Lenin, the Russian revolutionary who was living in Bern at the time, collaborated closely with the Russian delegation.

Above all, they denounced the resolution for passing over in silence the need to make a complete break with the social chauvinism represented by the Second International. With the outbreak of world war in August 1914, nearly every section of the Second International had betrayed the program of socialist internationalism that they had previously upheld, supporting the predatory war efforts of their "own" governments.

The majority resolution, while making abstract criticisms of the war, avoided the question of revolutionary methods by which it could be opposed. Several delegates, including the Russians, voted against it.

On the final day of the conference an alternative resolution on war and the tasks of the socialist youth organizations, drafted by the Russians in conjunction with Lenin, was put to the delegates and was rejected by fourteen to four.

Later in 1915, Lenin wrote on the political character of the youth conference, and a similar women's conference that had been held in March 1915. According to Lenin, "These assemblies were inspired by the best wishes. But...they did not lay down a fighting line for internationalists. They did not point out to the proletariat the danger that threatens it from the social-chauvinists' method of 'restoring' the International. At best, they confined themselves to repeating the old resolutions without indicating to the workers that unless a struggle is waged against the social-chauvinists, the cause of Socialism is hopeless. At best they marked time."

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