

This week in history: April 13-19

13 April 2015

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

25 years ago: Gorbachev prepares assault on Soviet workers

A high-level Soviet conference on economic policies began in Moscow on April 14, 1990, to prepare a full-scale onslaught against the living standards and jobs of Soviet workers. The objective of the weeks-long assembly was to draft a program for the new stage of the Gorbachev leadership's drive to restore capitalist relations in the Soviet Union and destroy the remaining gains of the October 1917 Russian Revolution.

One of the top Gorbachev aides participating in drafting the new economic plan, Pavel Bunich, gave a glimpse of the scale of the coming attacks on the working class. Bunich, an economist and member of the Supreme Soviet, told a news conference April 13 that 70 percent of the Soviet economy would be privatized, most prices raised by at least 100 percent and unemployment would rapidly rise to over 10 million workers.

The Stalinist bureaucracy was in an acute political crisis because it recognized that the next stage in Gorbachev's policy of *perestroika* meant a direct confrontation with the working class. The Moscow meeting of Gorbachev's Presidential Council coincides with an April 20 deadline set by oil workers for launching national strike action over poor housing and living conditions. The 700,000 oil workers in the Tyumen region produced the majority of the Soviet Union's oil, the largest single Soviet export.

As the strike deadline approached, the Kremlin reshuffled the leadership of the official trade unions, replacing Stepan Shalayev, 61, chairman of the All-Union Central Trade Union Council for the last eight years, with his deputy, Gennady Yanaev, a Gorbachev protégé even more distant from the working class, rising in the bureaucracy through law school and the state-controlled youth organization, rather than coming out of the trade unions.

A plenary meeting of the AUCTU leadership defined its role as an auxiliary force in the bureaucracy's policy of restoring capitalism, declaring that the task of the official unions was "helping the population adjust to a market economy."

Wall Street Journal commented at the time: "The greatest threat to the reforms is likely to come from Soviet workers. Even before they are faced with the prospect of unemployment, workers in many parts of the country are furious about dwindling supplies of food and consumer goods." [top]

50 years ago: First US demonstration against Vietnam War

On April 17, 1965, the first mass US demonstration against the war in Vietnam was held in Washington, DC, organized by the liberal Students for a Democratic Society. In line with their orientation to appealing to the Democratic Party and the Johnson administration, march organizers prohibited banners demanding the immediate withdrawal of US troops.

Protesters carried signs calling for a negotiated settlement in the war of national liberation being waged by the Vietnamese workers and peasants against US imperialism. They picketed in front of the White House before marching to the Washington monument to listen to speakers, including Democratic Senator Ernest Gruening of Alaska and liberal journalist I.F. Stone.

Gruening, one of the two US senators who voted against the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, called for a cessation of the bombing of North Vietnam. The marchers later walked to the Capitol to deliver a petition to Congress.

The protest march was far larger than organizers expected, reflecting the radicalization of layers of students as US imperialism escalated its intervention in Vietnam. SDS had supported the election of Lyndon Johnson in 1964 as the candidate of "peace" against Republican Barry Goldwater.

In 1962 the organization, which evolved out of the League for Industrial Democracy, a right-wing social-democratic group backed by a section of the trade union bureaucracy, adopted a reformist platform authored by Tom Hayden calling for the formation of a "New Left." It explicitly rejected the revolutionary role of the working class in favor of middle class radical protest.

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75 years ago: General Motors workers vote for CIO over AFL

On April 17, 1940, in an election supervised by the National Labor Relations Board, 150,000 auto workers at more than 50 General Motors plants voted by a three-to-one margin to retain the UAW-CIO over the UAW-AFL as their bargaining representative.

The AFL, which had for years cooperated with the bosses in opposition to the organization of the industry, won only five plants in their destructive faction fight against the CIO. Two of these, in Norwood, Ohio, had voted previously to affiliate with the CIO if it won an overall majority of plants in the election. The AFL was only able to retain auto representation in Kansas City, the home town of Homer Martin, the former UAW-CIO president who now led the AFL fraction.

Upon hearing the election results, workers in Flint, Michigan, called victory strikes and shut down assembly lines. The AFL shut down or evacuated its various headquarters that were used during the campaign. When a group of CIO men congregated around one AFL office still being occupied, Martin's representatives panicked and called the police for protection. The Michigan state government's reaction to the publication of the election results was to propose a change in the state's labor relations law to provide for a 10-day cooling-off period before a strike instead of the previous five-day period.

In the course of the election campaign, CIO leader John L. Lewis sought to win support among militant auto workers by denouncing the Roosevelt administration and the Democratic-controlled Congress and calling for a 30-hour week at 40 hours' pay. At the same time, he reassured GM that this was "only an aim for the future." Lewis attacked both capitalist parties, the Democrats and Republicans, but he refused to call for a Labor Party. And his opposition to having American workers "shed their blood in an imperialist war" was qualified by the statement, "If you want the workers to fight, first give them a chance to earn a living."

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100 years ago: Revolutionary socialists publish first issue of *Die Internationale* in Germany

On April 15, 1915, a small group of revolutionary socialists in Germany who had opposed the imperialist world war that began in August 1914 published the first and only issue of *Die Internationale* (The International). Led by well-known Marxists Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht, and Franz Mehring, the Gruppe International (International Group) opposed the betrayal of socialist internationalism by the German Social

Democratic Party (SPD), which had responded to the outbreak of war by supporting the military actions of its "own" government.

The newspaper was published under the most difficult of conditions. Luxemburg had been imprisoned on February 18, for her opposition to the war, while Liebknecht had been drafted into the German army in late March, in an attempt to politically silence him. The SPD leadership did nothing to oppose the attack on either revolutionary leader. When the paper was released, the German censor moved to confiscate all copies, and the Public Prosecutor charged those involved in its publication with high treason.

The paper featured Rosa Luxemburg's article, "The Rebuilding of the International," on the betrayal of the German social-democrats and the Second International, of which the SPD was the largest and most influential party. It declared:

"With the outbreak of the world war, word has become substance, the alternative has grown from a historical tendency into the political situation. Faced with this alternative, which it had been the first to recognize and bring to the masses' consciousness, Social Democracy backed down without a struggle and conceded victory to imperialism. Never before in the history of class struggles, since there have been political parties, has there been a party that, in this way, after fifty years of uninterrupted growth, after achieving a first-rate position of power, after assembling millions around it, has so completely and ignominiously abdicated as a political force within twenty-four hours, as Social Democracy has done."

Luxemburg declared that the alternatives facing the working class were, "either Bethmann-Hollweg (the German Chancellor) – or Liebknecht. Either imperialism or socialism as Marx understood it."

The issue also carried an article by Luxemburg, under the pseudonym "Mortimer," exposing the pro-imperialist character of SPD theoretical leader, Karl Kautsky's latest writings on the war, and his claim that "modern democracy" (i.e., bourgeois democracy) was the goal of the socialist movement.

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