This week in history: October 12-18

12 October 2015

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

25 years ago: Gorbachev unveils program for capitalist restoration

On October 16, 1990, Soviet Stalinist leader Mikhail Gorbachev unveiled plans for the dismantling of the planned economy and nationalized property relations established in the October 1917 Russian Revolution and their replacement with a capitalist "market" economy.

The plan, entitled "The Main Directions for Stabilization of the People's Economy and the Transition to a Market Economy," was the fourth such program to be presented to the Soviet parliament since the previous December and expressed, above all, the crisis of the Stalinist bureaucracy and its mortal fear of the working class.

Gorbachev gave his seal of approval to a plan which eclectically combined features of previous blueprints submitted by rival cliques within the bureaucracy. It was characterized principally by its vagueness on such issues as the timetable for the privatization of state property and the immediate fate of major enterprises deemed "unprofitable."

This vagueness was entirely deliberate. The new program announced by Gorbachev was designed to conceal the implications of capitalist restoration from the workers while granting the bureaucracy room to maneuver as it sought to transform itself, or at least a decisive section of its ranks, into a new class of capitalist exploiters.

The day before the plan's release, Gorbachev was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. The prize amounted to partial payment for invaluable services rendered by capitalism's faithful lackey in the Kremlin. In awarding the prize, the Nobel Committee credited Gorbachev for what it characterized as a world situation in which "confrontation has been replaced by negotiations"—a thinly-veiled praise for the direct collaboration of the Moscow bureaucracy in the imperialist war buildup in the Persian Gulf.

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50 years ago: Democrats drop "Right-to-Work" repeal

On October 12, 1965, the Democratic Party dropped half-hearted attempts to repeal Section 14(b) of the anti-labor Taft-Hartley Act, which allows states to enact so-called right-to-work laws prohibiting union shop contracts. The decision was announced by Democratic Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield after the decisive rejection of an attempt to cut off a filibuster led by Republicans and Southern Democrats.

The Democrats could only muster 45 votes in favor of closure, with 47 voting against. They needed a two-thirds majority. Many supposedly "pro-labor" senators skipped the key session or voted with the Republicans against the cutoff of debate. A total of 21 Democrats voted against limiting debate, thus killing any chance for the bill to be brought to the floor for consideration.

Following the vote, AFL-CIO President George Meany issued a brief statement full of false indignation and bureaucratic doubletalk. His remarks graphically exposed the reactionary character of the trade union bureaucracy's support for the big business Democratic Party. Meany angrily denied any suggestion that the failure of the Democrats to nullify the right-to-work laws, despite overwhelming majorities in both houses of Congress, would in any way lessen the support of the AFL-CIO for this capitalist party.

While Lyndon Johnson pledged to support repeal of Section 14(b) during the 1964 presidential campaign, as a token gesture to labor, the Democrats remained staunchly in support of the reactionary Taft-Hartley Act as a whole. During the Senate debate, the liberals remained silent while supporters of the right-to-work laws carried on an uninterrupted tirade denouncing the union shop and upholding "state's rights."

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75 years ago: Protests against Jim Crow in the US military

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On October 12, 1940, black leaders denounced US President Franklin Roosevelt for falsely claiming they had approved his policy of maintaining racial segregation in the armed forces.

Roosevelt claimed that segregation in the military had "proven satisfactory" and asserted that a committee of black leaders had endorsed his policy, The committee of three, A. Philip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and T. Arnold Hill and Walter White of the NAACP, called the White House statement a "trick."

They denounced the War Department policy that barred blacks from becoming officers, from learning skilled trades, from becoming pilots or serving in the marines, air corps, tank corps, signal corps, coast guard or chemical warfare service, and forcing blacks to serve in different units than whites. Despite their passing the same mental and physical tests as whites, blacks enlisting in the armed services were refused equal rights in choosing their branch of service.

After three months of basic training, whites would automatically be given a raise in pay to $36 a month. Blacks were maintained for a full year at $21 a month, and even then there was no guarantee of a raise. The regimen of a black man in the military consisted of serving officers' meals, cleaning their rooms, shining their shoes, cleaning their laundry and running errands. The duty of the black labor battalions was to dig trenches and latrines and build fortifications.

One week before the denunciation of Roosevelt, 25 black naval mess attendants aboard the USS Philadelphia issued an open letter. It read in part, "With the treading on and kicking around we receive here, every last one of us becomes bitter ... We sincerely hope to discourage any other colored boys from joining the Navy and making the same mistake we did. All they would become is sea-going bell hops, chamber maids and dish washers."

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100 years ago: Mass demonstration of striking garment workers in Chicago

On October 12, 1915, 15,000 striking garment workers marched through the streets of the Loop District of Chicago in a mass demonstration, carrying signs and banners proclaiming their cause. A total of 20,000 workers, members of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA) union, and led by socialists, had gone on strike several weeks before, seeking more pay and shorter hours.

Their demands included an across-the-board 25 percent increase in wages, overtime to be paid at time and a half, a 48-hour work week, the abolition of the fining system, and union recognition. Garment workers—both women and men and largely Jewish, Italian, and eastern European immigrants—were among the most exploited sections of the working class. One worker, a corner maker who showed his pay envelope to the press, earned just $3.01 for 40 hours work. A finisher earned as little as $2.65 for 35 hours.

More than 70 firms reached agreements with the union within four weeks and 5,000 workers returned to work. The 70 largest firms, however, held out and employed scab labor, protected by the Chicago police who were accused of harassing, beating up and arresting any strikers seen in the neighborhood of the affected shops. Four hundred workers were arrested within a single week for attempting to establish a peaceful picket.

The garment workers had to contend with the open hostility of Samuel Gompers, and the American Federation of Labor (AFL) leadership, which issued an order forbidding any of its member unions to support the strike. The head of the ACWA, Sidney Hillman, had acquired a reputation as a militant, after opposing the attempts of the United Garment Workers (UGW), an affiliate of the AFL, to end a major strike in 1910 with a sell-out deal. The ACWA had withdrawn from the UGW and declared its support for industrial unionism at its first convention in December 1914.

The convention had proclaimed: "Along with the industrial form of organization we must develop the industrial spirit, which means the general enlightenment of the working-men, and particularly the teachings of universal working class solidarity and abolition of the wage system. When that will be accomplished, our organization will become a mighty, militant and invincible power."

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