

This week in history: December 7-13

7 December 2015

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25 years ago: Lech Walesa elected president of Poland

In the second round of the Polish presidential election, held December 9, 1990, Solidarity union leader Lech Walesa easily defeated businessman Stanisław Tymiński by a margin of 74 percent to 25 percent. Walesa was the vote leader in the first round, held November 25, but failed to gain the required majority, winning 40 percent to Tymsinski's 23 percent, 18 percent for a rival Solidarity candidate, Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki, and 19 percent for three other candidates.

Walesa succeeded his former jailer, General Wojciech Jaruzelski, who had been president for little more than a year since the position was revived as part of a political deal between the ruling Stalinist bureaucracy and its US-backed opposition. The Polish parliament, newly controlled by Solidarity, elected Jaruzelski president and Mazowiecki, a top Solidarity adviser, as prime minister, in a power-sharing arrangement to avoid any political instability during the transition from Stalinist rule in Poland. In January 1990, the Polish United Workers Party, as the Stalinist organization was officially called, disbanded itself.

Both the Stalinist bureaucracy and Solidarity leaders were agreed on restoring capitalism in Poland and withdrawing Poland from the Soviet-dominated Warsaw Pact military alliance, a program which Walesa proceeded to carry out once installed in the presidential palace. He appointed as his finance minister Leszek Balcerowicz, who directed the privatization of much of state industry and finance, with the slashing of millions of jobs, while the assets of the Polish state were handed over to cronies of the Stalinist party and Solidarity.

Walesa had considerable popularity in the working class at the time of his election because of his role as the leader of the shipyard strikes in Gdansk in 1980-81, which ushered in a nationwide rebellion of the working class against the Stalinist dictatorship, leading to the imposition of martial law by General Jaruzelski in December 1981. Walesa had always stood on the right wing of Solidarity, closely aligned with the Roman Catholic hierarchy and the Western imperialist powers.

Once in office, Walesa quickly lost support as capitalist restoration impoverished millions of workers and public social services were systematically slashed. He also provoked opposition through his backward and reactionary views on a wide range of social issues, and his support for right-wing authoritarianism. By

1993, he had formed his own political party modeled on that of Josef Pilsudski, the right-wing Polish dictator of the 1920s and 1930s, who was his personal hero. His poll numbers hit bottom in 1993, and he was narrowly defeated for reelection in 1995 by Aleksander Kwaśniewski, the leader of the former Stalinists, now renamed the Democratic Left Alliance.

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50 years ago: Johnson cuts social spending to fund Vietnam War

On December 10, 1965, US President Lyndon Johnson held talks at his Texas ranch with cabinet members and other government officials in which he approved, for the first time, major cuts to social spending, including in his own Great Society programs, in order to fund the war in Vietnam and other new military initiatives.

Present at the day of talks, in addition to Johnson, were Defense Secretary of State Robert McNamara, Deputy Defense Secretary Cyrus Vance, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Commerce Secretary John T. Connor, Agriculture Secretary Orville Freeman, and National Aeronautics and Space Administration chief James Webb, among others.

Connor announced after the meeting that Great Society programs, including a fund to help economically distressed areas, would fall victim to as much as \$200 million in cuts. Freeman said cuts to agricultural programs in his \$6.9 billion budget would be "substantial," and confirmed that the rollbacks were necessary to fund the Vietnam War. Webb said his proposals for increased funding to NASA's current \$5.2 billion budget would also suffer. Meanwhile, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara announced he would request \$1.75 billion in new funding to develop a nuclear-capable strategic bomber called the FB-111 to replace the Air Force's B-52 and B-58 bombers.

The Johnson administration's combined military and domestic spending, its so-called "guns and butter" program, was beginning to fuel inflation and accelerate the outflow of dollars from the US economy. Johnson moved to counter this at the expense of the working class.

A day before meeting his cabinet, on December 9, 1965, Johnson delivered an 11-minute telephone speech to the annual convention of the AFL-CIO, being held in San Francisco, in which he appealed to the assembled labor bureaucrats to tamp down against workers' wage claims in order to fight inflation, which Johnson

referred to as the “price-wage spiral.” A week earlier, the Federal Reserve Board had raised interest rates in order “to reinforce efforts to maintain price stability.”

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75 years ago: Italian debacle in North Africa

On December 11, 1940, British forces delivered a devastating blow to the Italian army in northwest Egypt, a military defeat resulting in a mass surrender, with the balance of Italian forces being driven back into Libya.

The British army in Egypt, comprised of tank and infantry units totaling 30,000 men, carried out a three-day attack against some 80,000 Italian troops established in fortified camps near Sidi Barrani. British armored units passed through a gap in the chain of Italian camps and attacked them from the rear. Forty thousand Italian soldiers were taken prisoner, along with 400 guns. The remnants of the Italian forces escaped to Libya only because the British command, not aware of the totality of their victory, withdrew their infantry unit and dispatched it immediately to the Sudan to halt the march of Italian forces there.

The disastrous events in Egypt came on the heels of the collapse of Italy’s invasion of Greece, which led to a retreat by Italian forces back into Albania. The British had also bombed the Italian fleet at Taranto, resulting in a shift in the balance of naval power in the Mediterranean in favor of Great Britain.

The Italian military debacles unleashed a crisis in the military high command and the fascist party of Benito Mussolini. The Italian general in charge of operations in Albania resigned and the head of forces in North Africa threatened the same. At the Palazzo Venezia, leading party members had to be placed in separate rooms to avoid brawls.

Mussolini immediately dispatched an ambassador to Nazi leader Adolf Hitler begging for any aid the German Fuhrer could spare in order to stem the retreat by Italian forces in Greece. The defeats doused any illusions in Mussolini’s promise of short war that would bring rewards to the Italian masses. From this point on, Mussolini’s regime began to lose its grip on power.

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100 years ago: Yuan Shikai proclaims himself Emperor of China

On December 12, 1915, Yuan Shikai, China’s ruling warlord, “accepted” an invitation from a handpicked “Representative Assembly” and proclaimed himself Emperor of China. The move was aimed at consolidating his autocratic powers and intimidating any opposition.

Yuan had been a prominent member in the Qing dynasty, and had been closely identified with a pro-foreign faction in the

Imperial Court. He secured loans from abroad in order to expand the Beiyang Army, which he controlled, into the most powerful force in China.

His rise came in the context of growing nationalist and anti-colonial sentiment. In October 1911, an uprising of soldiers in the city of Wuchang, in China’s Hubei province, broke out and spread rapidly leading to the overthrow of the sclerotic and widely hated Qing dynasty and the proclamation of a republic in February 1912. It was led by Sun Yat-Sen’s Kuomintang, a bourgeois organization that was incapable of addressing the needs of the country’s millions of peasants and the urban poor, instead leaning on disaffected sections of the military and the state bureaucracy.

As the military strongman, Yuan held the balance of power between the revolutionaries and the Qing dynasty. He played a key role in the negotiations between the dynasty and Kuomintang (KMT) and was made president of the newly formed republic of China. He quickly assumed dictatorial powers, including revising the constitution.

Tension increased between the KMT and Yuan’s government in February 1913, when the KMT achieved a significant victory in parliamentary elections, winning a majority of seats. KMT leader Song Jiaoren sought to curtail the influence of the office of the president on China’s parliament. In response, Yuan ordered the assassination of Song and other figures in the KMT. In July 1913, the KMT launched a rebellion, dubbed the “second revolution,” which was rapidly crushed by Yuan’s forces.

Using the military as his base of power, Yuan formally dissolved the Chinese parliament in January 1914 and instituted constitutional changes that gave him virtually unlimited power.

With his power base secure, Yuan and his followers began to advocate for a revival of the monarchy arguing that China’s political situation demanded a stability that only a monarchy could ensure. On November 20, 1915, Yuan held a specially convened “Representative Assembly” made up of his hand-picked representatives which voted unanimously to offer Yuan the throne.

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