

This week in history: January 18-24

18 January 2016

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25 years ago: First week of bombing in US war against Iraq

On January 19, 1991, after two days of relentless air strikes on Iraqi forces during the “Desert Storm” operation, military analysts declared the Iraqi air force was so crippled that it could no longer “be regarded as any kind of a serious threat.” The expectation then was that the 2,000 daily sorties would continue indefinitely.

Maj. Gen. Robert Johnston, chief of staff of the US Marine Corps Central Command, told the press, “This is going to be a long campaign. ... It will be done with great caution and very professionally, and with the objective of minimizing our friendly casualties.”

While the first days of the air assault were targeted at incapacitating Iraq’s command-and-control system, press reports announced that “the killing is about to begin.” On the fourth day of the war, US Air Force commander Lt. Gen. Charles Horner ordered a shift in air targets to include attacks on Iraqi ground forces, using specialized planes such as the low-flying A-10 Warthog anti-tank plane.

The pro-war media gushingly promoted the high level of technically superior US forces, touting the “surgical” character of the air strikes. A January 19 article in the *Los Angeles Times*, opened with a breathless description of an F-111 fighter plane dropping a 2,000-pound laser-guided bomb with “pinpoint accuracy,” “blowing to smithereens” the headquarters of the Iraqi air defense, as “like a scene from ‘Star Wars.’”

The article went on, “For the first time in history, US forces are able to take advantage of their technological superiority to target enemy command and control systems at the outset of a war, a strategy that American commanders believe already has undermined Iraq’s ability to strike back.

“Throughout the ages, it has been a dream of military commanders to wage a quick and easy war by mounting a successful attack on enemy commanders operating behind the lines—leapfrogging the masses of enemy tanks, artillery and fortified positions that make traditional warfare such slow and bloody work.”

The story on the ground in Baghdad was very different. Almost immediately after the bombing began, with untold civilian casualties, a constant stream of thousands of fleeing refugees made their way toward Jordan.

Aside from the major strategic aims, one of the important

purposes of this war was to test out the weaponry which the US military had assembled. Along with the United States, virtually every imperialist power participated in the campaign, looking upon this murderous exercise as some sort of exciting experiment. They wanted to see whether it was possible to use this kind of advanced weapons technology to subdue millions of people. They wanted to see whether it was possible to launch a push-button war and annihilate hundreds of thousands, perhaps even millions of people, and render entire populations defenseless.

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50 years ago: Pentagon asks for more troops in Vietnam

On January 20, 1966, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara outlined Pentagon plans to more than double US troop strength in Vietnam during the year to over 400,000. In testimony before a Senate committee, McNamara asked for a supplementary military appropriation of \$12.3 billion. He said the request was based on the assumption that the war would continue through June 1967. McNamara proposed troops be added to all branches of the armed forces, including an entire new Marine Corps division.

The creation of the new division, he said, would avert the necessity of calling up any reservists. McNamara noted that ammunition for ground forces was being expended at the rate of \$100 million a month and that this would increase.

The cost of bombs and missiles used in the massive bombardment of Vietnam would increase from the current level of \$110 million a month, he warned. He also reported aircraft losses for 1965 of 275 fixed-wing aircraft and 76 helicopters. The defense secretary said this figure would rise substantially and therefore proposed the construction of an additional 900 fighters and 2,000 helicopters.

Senate leaders assured the Johnson administration that the request for additional military would be quickly approved.

The Stalinist bureaucracy in China meanwhile denounced the proposed massive new US military buildup, lamenting that it exposed the fraud of the recent “peace initiative” by the United States. In the face of the preparations for US escalation, China sent a squadron of 25 fighter planes to North Vietnam in an attempt to maintain credibility as defenders of the Vietnamese anti-colonial struggle.

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75 years ago: Churchill government crackdown on Communist Party

On January 21, 1941 Britain's Home Secretary Herbert Morrison ordered the suppression of the *Daily Worker*, newspaper of the British Communist Party. The crackdown was carried out because “of systematic publication calculated to foment opposition to prosecution of the war to a successful issue.” Scotland Yard followed up by raiding the *Daily Worker*’s offices and stopping publication of an issue that was just going to press.

The suppression of the British CP’s paper had nothing to do with its having a genuine internationalist opposition to British imperialism. The British CP had been loyally defending Stalin’s alliance with Hitler’s Germany against Britain. The British Stalinists’ flip-flop—from having called for the popular front alliance of the “democracies” with the USSR against Germany, to support for the Stalin-Hitler pact in 1939 when World War II broke out—had seriously undermined support for the British CP among workers and made them the most vulnerable target for suppression by the home secretary.

On the same day, the government of Prime Minister Winston Churchill called for legislation to provide for drafting workers into the defense industries. Because of a shortage of labor in the key industries and the widening of the conflict to defend Britain’s European and colonial interests, Churchill now wanted the right to conscript workers from non-essential industries into production of war materiel.

Churchill implemented these two measures only after he was assured that US President Franklin Roosevelt’s Lend-Lease legislation, which provided for large amounts of military aid to Great Britain, had sufficient support within Congress and no opposition from the AFL and CIO unions. Roosevelt had maneuvered the United States behind British imperialism against Nazi Germany on the basis that he was supporting “democracy” against dictatorship.

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100 years ago: British parliament introduces conscription

On January 24, 1916, the House of Commons, the lower house of the British parliament, voted overwhelmingly in favour of the Military Service Act, a bill to introduce conscription into the army for single men between 18 and 41 who did not have dependents. Dubbed the “Bachelors Bill,” it was subsequently passed by the House of Lords and entered into law on January 28, having received royal assent.

Under conditions of prolonged trench warfare on the Western Front following the initial battles of World War I in late 1914, and ongoing heavy casualties, a discussion had developed in British ruling circles over the necessity to boost the numbers of the armed forces.

In October, the “Derby Scheme,” named after Lord Derby, the

Director-General of Recruiting, was introduced. The scheme involved calling up military-aged men to “attest” to their willingness to serve with a view to subsequently enlisting them in the army. It was widely viewed as a failure, with some 2 million men failing to present themselves for “attestation.”

The Liberal Prime Minister H.H. Asquith had resisted calls for the introduction of conscription because of “the absence of general assent,” i.e., the widespread opposition to the proposal. A host of pacifist, religious, liberal and working class organizations had vocally opposed the prospect of enforced conscription from the outset of the war.

In late 1915, the radical Independent Labour Party held meetings throughout working class areas on the slogan “Stop Conscription.” In September 1915, the Trades Union Congress had passed a resolution opposing conscription. A Labour Party national conference in January opposed conscription by 1,766,000 to 219,000 votes. There were other displays of opposition, including a pledge by the South Wales miners federation to strike if the bill passed.

Expressing the fear of widespread opposition in the working class, the bill included a number of exemptions for ill-health or business difficulties. It also included an exemption for conscientious objectors, but they were to be hauled before a military tribunal which would adjudicate their cases. Conscription did not cover Ireland, where refusal to fight for British imperialism was a well-nigh universal sentiment.

Labour and the union leaders played the key role in suppressing opposition to the bill. They supported the Asquith government and held positions in its cabinet. Three Labour MPs who threatened to withdraw from the government remained when Asquith pledged not to introduce conscription for married men, a measure that was subsequently introduced in May.

Colonel Charles Repington, writing in the *Times*, the principal organ of the British establishment, hailed the role of the Labour Party, declaring, “we certainly owe much to the good sense and patriotism of Labour which has realised that there is no other means of reinforcing our heroes at the front adequately except by the passage of the Bill into law.”

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