

This week in history: March 14-20

14 March 2016

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

25 years ago: Sweeping price increases announced in USSR

On March 19, 1991, the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy headed by President Mikhail Gorbachev announced plans for sweeping price increases, just one day after it claimed victory in a March 17 referendum on the “preservation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.”

Published details indicated that the price of staple foods such as bread and meat would triple when the measure went into effect on April 2. The price of milk and sugar was to approximately double. Meanwhile, state price controls would be lifted on approximately 30 percent of all consumer goods, allowing them to rise according to market rates.

In an attempt to contain the opposition of the working class to these drastic new attacks on its living standards, the bureaucracy indicated that it would raise wages by 80 percent before the imposition of price increases—an amount that would not begin to compensate for the sweeping price increases.

In a separate measure, the Kremlin bureaucracy also announced that it had begun slashing subsidies to state-owned factories in an attempt to force the liquidation of a wide range of “unprofitable” industries.

Spokesmen for the regime insisted that what was being carried out was not the kind of “shock treatment” which devastated the conditions of life for workers in Poland and other parts of Eastern Europe, but a more controlled and gradual process.

Proponents of a more rapid drive to capitalist restoration denounced the new measures as inadequate, calling for the immediate lifting of price controls on all goods and services.

Soviet economist Anatoly Komin, a top Gorbachev adviser and one of the architects of the current plan, apologized to these elements, but added that the “social-political situation in the country” made Polish-style shock treatment untenable. In other words, the Gorbachev bureaucracy feared that its restorationist measures would provoke an uprising by the Soviet workers.

Meanwhile, the strike by Soviet miners continued to spread. Leaders of the strike claimed that 300,000 of the country’s 1.2 million miners joined the strike, which spread to virtually all of the main coalfields.

In addition to calling for a large wage increase and the fulfillment of the bureaucracy’s commitments, the leadership of the miners strike raised the demand that Gorbachev resign and that

the Congress of People’s Deputies be dissolved.
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50 years ago: Suharto completes Indonesia power grab

On March 16, 1966, CIA-backed Indonesian military strongman Suharto placed under house arrest the vice premier of Indonesia, Chairul Saleh, accusing him of being a communist sympathizer. One month later Saleh was put in prison, and within a year he was found dead under mysterious circumstances.

The imprisonment of Saleh and the deposition of the entire cabinet of President Sukarno, who remained the nominal head of government, came four days after the official banning of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), once the largest communist party outside of the Soviet Union or China. Hundreds of thousands of PKI supporters had already been murdered when Suharto, with the full complicity of the US, completed his power grab.

Elite troops were sent in to occupy Djakarta, as the moves to force out Sukarno’s cabinet were completed. The ouster was preceded by two weeks of anticommunist demonstrations by Islamist students against the dismissal of Suharto’s associate, Gen. Nasution, as chief of the armed forces and defense minister, in a last-ditch bid by Sukarno to maintain a semblance of power.

Virtually unknown until the previous year, Suharto assumed the leadership of the anti-communist pogrom which followed the assassination of six top military leaders on October 1, 1965. After securing the support of the leaders of the military, Suharto gave Sukarno an ultimatum to dismiss his foreign minister and other cabinet ministers accused of being “communist sympathizers.” Sukarno was forced to hand over all political power to General Suharto, while retaining the nominal title of president.

While Sukarno refused to officially ban the PKI, he never denounced the bloodbath, only mildly criticizing “excesses” by the right. A bourgeois nationalist who made use of anti-imperialist rhetoric, Sukarno declared himself president-for-life in 1963, with the support of both the military and the three-million-member PKI. The alliance of the Stalinists with Sukarno served to paralyze the militant working class while the military butchers carried out their work almost without resistance. With the crushing of the PKI, the Indonesian bourgeoisie and their imperialist masters concluded that the time had come to dispense with the “great leader of the revolution.”

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75 years ago: Roosevelt acts to quell US defense strikes

On March 19, 1941 President Franklin Roosevelt announced the formation of a war labor mediation board which aimed to quell the growing number of strikes sweeping the defense industry and hindering US efforts to prepare for entry into World War II.

The War Department cited 20 strikes that directly threatened war production. Sixteen of the strikes involved a total of 23,000 workers and affected \$60 million in defense contracts. Strikes also disrupted production in basic steel and coal, as well as auto, textiles, electronics and agricultural equipment.

The 11-member labor board was comprised of four corporate heads representing oil, publishing and basic industry; four labor bureaucrats, including Philip Murray, president of the CIO, and George Meany, secretary-treasurer of the AFL; and three representatives from the “public,” that is, retired businessmen and government bureaucrats, giving an automatic anti-labor majority.

In a national radio speech, Roosevelt declared that his recently passed cash-and-carry legislation to supply war materiel to Britain as well as arm the US “must not be obstructed by unnecessary strikes of workers.” Roosevelt peddled the lie of equal sacrifice between workers, whose hours would be increased while wages were held down, and bankers and manufacturers, who would rake in superprofits from military contracts.

The key element in Roosevelt’s policy was to obtain the collaboration of labor bureaucrats in alliance with big business in order to suppress strike action. “Wise labor leaders and wise business managers will realize how necessary it is to their own existence to make common sacrifice for this great cause,” he said.

The function of the labor bureaucrats on the war labor mediation board was best summarized by the business publication Kiplinger’s *Washington Letter*, which stated that the plan “would put labor chiefs into government and give them governmental authority which they could use on the unions in case of strikes and disturbances which are not controllable.”

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100 years ago: German revolutionary Karl Liebknecht denounces militarization of education

On March 18, 1916, Karl Liebknecht, the German revolutionary socialist and opponent of World War I, delivered a series of remarks in the German Reichstag, or parliament, denouncing the militarization of education and the glorification of war taking place in schools across the country. Liebknecht’s speech was one of a series in which he defied the Social Democratic majority, which had betrayed socialist internationalism by supporting the German war effort, and spoke out against the imperialist slaughter.

Liebknecht stated, “The ideal of classical education lies in the spirit of independence and humanity.” Addressing the government, and all of the pro-war parties, he said, “Your ideal of classical education is the ideal of the bayonet, of the bombshell, of poison

gas and grenades, which are hurled down on peaceful cities, and the ideal of submarine warfare.”

He declared, “The higher schools are also used as practical helpers in the service of the present war. A systematic propaganda is conducted in them for the war loans, and gold is collected in them. ... The schools are converted into training stables for the war. The physical upbuilding of the youth is encouraged now to attract new material for the Moloch, Militarism. Strengthening especially human health has thus as its aim the destruction of human life.”

He denounced the war propaganda promoted in schools, which focused exclusively on the crimes committed by Britain, France and the other Allied powers, and painted the actions of German imperialism in the brightest colors.

“In school must be taught, how this war arose, not only that the abominable murder of Sarajevo was an incident to inspire horror, but also the fact that the crime of Sarajevo was looked upon in many circles as a gift from Heaven, serving them as a war pretext,” he said. His reference to the fact that sections of the ruling elite had welcomed the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand by a Serbian nationalist, seeing it as an opportunity to launch longstanding military plans, provoked outraged howls from the Conservative and opportunist Social Democratic deputies to the Reichstag.

Amid repeated interruptions, Liebknecht concluded with a call for a revolutionary struggle against the German government and the imperialist war, declaring, “To action! Those in the trenches, as well as those here at home, should put down their arms and turn against the common enemy, which takes from them light and air.” The president of the Reichstag called Liebknecht “to order” for the third time, and asked the deputies whether he should be allowed to continue to speak. Only a handful of socialist opponents of the war voted in favor.

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