

This week in history: December 12-18

12 December 2016

25 Years Ago | 50 Years Ago | 75 Years Ago | 100 Years Ago
 25 years ago: US sanctions against Iraq kill 80,000 children

Iraq's emissary to the Arab League declared on December 17, 1991, that more than 80,000 children under the age of five had died as a result of US and UN sanctions imposed in the wake of the Persian Gulf War. The sanctions blocked Iraq's ability to pay for medicines and essential foods.

Nabil Nejm al-Takriti gave the Cairo-based league a list of urgently-needed medical supplies and declared, "The sanctions threaten further deaths among children, women and old people." He urged other Arab countries to send medicine, indicating that Iraq had run out of key drugs, including for cancer treatment.

The Iraqi government had ordered \$1.2 billion worth of drugs and equipment from Western firms in 1991, but their governments refused to release frozen funds to pay for the supplies.

In November, the Iraqi government said that 65,000 children had already died and that another 350,000 were at risk that winter. Iraq's Health Minister Abdel-Salem Mohammad Saeed challenged Western powers to live up to their supposed human rights ideals by unfreezing the country's assets.

The US and its allies refused to do so until Iraq agreed to a UN plan which would allow Iraq to sell a limited amount of oil under direct imperialist supervision. The Hussein regime in Baghdad said that the proposals would strip the country of its sovereignty and leave it, in any case, with only a few million dollars for relief supplies.

Another result of the barbaric saturation bombing of Iraq was the reappearance of polio among Iraqi children. An official of UNICEF reported that 15 to 20 children a month had contracted the disease.

Reports of the devastation, death and misery caused by the imperialist assault on Iraq did not deter Congressman Les Aspin from calling on the Bush administration December 12 to issue an ultimatum that it would resume the murderous air strikes, if necessary, to destroy supposed nuclear and chemical weapons projects.

A leading Democrat and chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, Aspin accused the Bush administration of being too soft and of carrying out a "threat and forget" policy. He urged the dispatch of more US warplanes to the Gulf region and the seizure of an Iraqi airfield as a base for armed escort inspections.

[top]

50 years ago: US bombs civilians in Hanoi

On December 13, 1966, the government of North Vietnam reported that American bombers hit working class neighborhoods in Hanoi, destroying homes and inflicting casualties on residents.

US planes strafed and bombed densely populated residential districts along the Red River, including areas inside the city limits of Hanoi. North Vietnam reported 100 civilians killed in two days of massive raids, which leveled the village of Cau Dat near Hanoi. US bombs also hit in the area of the foreign diplomatic quarters in Hanoi.

Reports of the civilian casualties forced representatives of US imperialism to concede for the first time that American planes were bombing targets inside Hanoi. Previously, government spokesmen denied reports of bombing attacks on the capital of North Vietnam. When confronted with evidence of the bombing raids, a State Department spokesman defended the previous lies of the Johnson administration, claiming that the government was not sure where the Hanoi city limits actually were. US imperialism continued to deny that warplanes were targeting civilians, cynically claiming that all bombs were being directed at military targets, despite the broadcast of film footage by the television networks and reports in the capitalist press internationally.

North Vietnam filed a protest over the attacks with the International Control Commission, the imperialist-sponsored organization set up in 1954 to oversee the partition of Vietnam after the defeat of French imperialism. Meanwhile, guerrilla attacks were stepped up against US forces in South Vietnam.

The imperialist bombing campaign against North Vietnam was mass murder, in which entire cities were being systematically obliterated in an attempt to terrorize the working class and peasantry.

[top]

75 years ago: Japanese rout Britain in Malay campaign

During the week beginning December 12, 1941, the imperialist war for control of the Pacific colonies intensified. At the Battle of Jitra and days later at the Battle of Gurun, both in present-day Malaysia, British troops were defeated by invading Japanese forces.

Located at the foot of the Malaya Peninsula, including the island of Singapore astride the strategically important Strait of Malacca, the British colony of Malaya was also endowed with rubber plantations and tin mines, making it a key battleground. Sir Shenton Thomas, the British governor of the colony, described

Malaya as the “dollar arsenal of the Empire.” Like the oilfields of the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia), Malaya represented a high priority for Japanese imperial designs.

Since the beginning of December, a state of emergency had been declared in Singapore, where the Royal Navy had built a large and modern naval base. Coastal batteries covered the island’s approaches, but in late 1941 the base was virtually empty. Naval commitments in the Atlantic and Mediterranean and a need to protect Arctic convoys to Murmansk in the Soviet Union had left British naval forces overstretched. As a result, the British had no battle fleet in the eastern theatre and its Far East Command lacked modern aircraft, tanks, and fighting equipment.

The British commander in Malaya, Lieutenant General Arthur Percival, had nearly 140,000 troops, among them Indian, Australian, and New Zealand colonial conscripts, but fewer than 60,000 were front-line troops. Almost none had any jungle warfare experience and the Indian and Commonwealth troops were virtually untrained.

Japanese forces advancing south through Thailand since the invasion on December 8 attacked towards northwest Malaya. They rapidly destroyed two British battalions in quick succession before advancing upon Jitra from the north and also from the south at Kroh. After 15 hours of bitter fighting, the Japanese took Jitra from the British on December 13. They then advanced rapidly another 50 kilometers south upon Gurun, where the British troops had retreated, and inflicted another defeat on December 16 that cost a British Indian Division heavily in troops and leadership, effectively finishing it as a fighting force.

By the conclusion of the Malayan Campaign, British forces had suffered a total defeat, losing almost all of their 140,000 soldiers, upwards of 100,000 of whom were taken prisoners of war. Japan lost approximately 10,000 soldiers—killed, wounded, or captured.

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100 years ago: British Labour Party and unions agitate in favor of war

This week in December 1916, representatives of the British Labour Party and the major trade unions issued a series of bellicose statements demanding a continuation of the imperialist bloodbath of World War I, which had already claimed millions of workers’ lives.

They were responding to a peace note issued by the German government of Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg on December 12, making a vague offer of negotiations with the Allies. No specific conditions or demands were stated and the main purpose of the note seems to have been an attempt to keep America neutral.

Serious divisions existed within the German ruling class over the possibility of victory in the world war. Facing a working class at home increasingly hostile to the war and a blockade that was strangling the German economy, and concerned that unrestricted submarine warfare that could break the military stalemate might also bring the US into the war on the side of the Allies, Bethmann

Hollweg devised the peace note as an attempt to resolve these deepening contradictions.

The British Labourites bitterly denounced the prospect of a negotiated end to the slaughter, making clear that they were a pro-imperialist tendency within the workers movement. They pledged their loyalty to Lloyd George’s coalition government which they had helped vote into power.

Lieutenant Colonel John Ward, a Labour MP for Stoke-on-Trent, made a particularly jingoistic statement to the press. “The whole country is opposed to anything in the shape of a premature and inconclusive peace, and would make short work of any man or any ministry which proposed it,” he said. “We have laid down certain conditions which must be fulfilled before we sheathe the sword. Until we get them we shall go on fighting, if it takes 20 years to do it. That is the spirit of the people as I have found it. It is only when I come to the House of Commons that I hear any talk about peace. We shall never get a satisfactory peace until the enemy is beaten. Until that happens nothing else matters.”

John O’Grady, chairman of the General Federation of Trade Unions, put sole blame on Germany for the war. “The only possible terms with which the British workman, Socialists and trade unionists would agree, even as a basis for negotiations for peace, are the complete restoration and reparation of Belgium, Serbia, Romania, Montenegro, Poland and France, with full compensation for all the evils inflicted upon them by the hordes of the Central Powers,” he said.

“Germany and her allies must understand further that apart from the question of compensating the Powers which have been so fully wronged, Great Britain and France, as the two great democratic powers of Europe, are fighting to smash utterly the Prussian military machine and all it stands for.”

[top]



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