This week in history: December 19-25

19 December 2016

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

25 years ago: Hawke ousted as Australian prime minister

Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke was ousted as prime minister of the Labor government, in a 56-51 parliamentary caucus vote on December 19, 1991, that installed former Treasury Minister Paul Keating as his successor.

The removal of Hawke represented a turning point in the crisis of Australian capitalist rule, coming after a long leadership battle and growing unemployment and a deepening social crisis.

Hawke led the Australian Congress of Trade Unions for over a decade before being installed as Labor leader in a backroom coup against then-leader Bill Hayden in February 1983. He was prime minister for nearly nine years, winning four general elections during this period.

Hawke's service to the ruling class consisted in ensuring a "consensus" with the trade union bureaucracy. This alliance was used first to suppress the mass movement that had erupted against the big business Liberal Party, which had been forced to call a general election on the same day Hawke won the Labor leadership, and then to drive down wages and conditions and inflict a series of defeats on the working class.

The linchpin of the Hawke government since 1983 was the Prices and Incomes Accord with the trade union bureaucracy. This program, however, completely exhausted its usefulness for the bourgeoisie, which drew the conclusion that it must rapidly intensify its class war onslaught against the working class.

The election of Keating was one clear sign of this shift toward stepped-up class war policies. The treasury minister was dubbed the "Finance Minister of the Year" by *Euromoney* magazine in 1984. He served under Hawke for eight years, winning the praise of international finance capital for his ruthless attacks on social spending. Keating had received considerable backing from big business in his first leadership challenge to Hawke the previous June, which Hawke won by the narrow margin of 66-44. Keating then resigned as minister, going onto the parliament backbenches, awaiting the next opportunity to win the leadership.

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50 years ago: Soviet Union lands Luna 13 on Moon

On December 24, 1966, the Soviet unmanned spacecraft Luna 13 landed on the Moon, the same day gathering data demonstrating the feasibility of landing manned missions on the lunar surface. It was the fifth launching in the Luna series during the year, all from the main Soviet launch center at Baikonur, and the fourth to successfully reach lunar orbit.

The third spacecraft to achieve a soft landing on the Moon, after the Luna 9 and the American Surveyor 1, both of which accomplished the same feat earlier in the year, Luna 13 achieved far more scientifically than its predecessors. The 113-kilogram vessel landed in the region of Oceanus Procellarum, between the craters Seleucus and Krafft, at 9:01 p.m. Moscow time. Within minutes, antennae began to transmit data back to Earth. An accelerometer on the unit's lander measured the effects of the craft's impact to discern the soil's character to a depth of nearly one foot.

One of two spring-loaded booms deployed a penetrometer powered by a small detonator, which was used to assess the force required to break through the lunar regolith, the loose rocks lying above the bedrock. The other used a backscatter densitometer to estimate the density of the regolith. Four radiometers determined that radiation levels would not be dangerous to men. The lander used a television system to send back to Earth five Moonscape panoramas.

Contact was lost on December 28 at 9:13 a.m. after Luna 13's batteries were depleted, and its mission was successfully completed.

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75 years ago: French exile forces seize control of St. Pierre and Miquelon

On December 24, 1941, a small force of French exiles loyal to General Charles de Gaulle landed on the tiny islands of St. Pierre and Miquelon, a French possession off the coast of Newfoundland, and deposed the Vichy administration in a bloodless coup. One day later the few thousand inhabitants voted in a referendum to reject Vichy and adhere to de Gaulle.

The French island possessions, which were administered by the pro-Hitler Vichy government in southern France, had been broadcasting Vichy propaganda as well as weather reports and secret signals locating Allied shipping that could benefit German submarines. There were also charges that German U-boats were docking and taking on supplies.

On the surface of things, the small action was reported as an advance in the war by US imperialism and its allies against Hitler and the Axis. But behind the scenes the incident was greeted with hostility by the Roosevelt administration. Secretary of State Cordell Hull denounced it as "an arbitrary action," taken "without the prior knowledge or consent in any sense of the United States government," and considered in violation of the Monroe Doctrine.

Just one week earlier, President Franklin Roosevelt had vetoed De Gaulle's offer to put the St. Pierre radio transmitter out of commission and instead directed the Canadian government to carry out the job without De Gaulle's consent. De Gaulle then ordered his forces to beat Canada and the US to the punch by occupying the islands "which has become indispensable in order to preserve these French possessions for France."

De Gaulle hoped to set a precedent with these small islands for re-enslaving France's vast colonial empire in Africa and Asia at the end of the war, while US imperialism looked to displace the former colonial powers, Britain and France, and seize control of their overseas possessions.

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100 years ago: Ottoman troops defeated at Battle of Magdhaba

On December 23, 1916, British troops successfully defeated a contingent of Ottoman troops in the Battle of Magdhaba, as part of a push by Allied troops to secure the Sinai peninsula in modern-day Egypt. The battle underscored the crisis-ridden character of the declining Ottoman Empire, which was increasingly under fire on every front and unable to defend its long-held territorial possessions.

During most of 1916, amid heavy fighting on the Western Front in northern France and Belgium, Britain had maintained a policy of defensive operations in other theaters of battle and had avoided major confrontations. In October, as the Battle of the Somme in France entered its final stages and it became clear that a decisive victory was unlikely, this policy changed. The move coincided with the replacement of H.H. Asquith as prime minister by Lloyd George.

In the weeks prior to the battle, British forces, including a large contingent of Arab troops, intensified their construction of railway lines to transport troops and supplies across the inhospitable terrain of the Sinai. In August, Allied troops successfully repelled the last ground attack by the Central Powers on the Suez Canal in the Battle of Romani.

On December 20, British troops began their advance, occupying the town of El Arish two days later. On December 23, Allied forces launched their attack on Magdhaba. They encountered machine gun fire from entrenched Ottoman forces. The Ottoman troops commanded five redoubts and a system of trenches. Allied troops effectively encircled the town, attacking from multiple sides and making use of new military technologies, including aerial reconnaissance and bombardment, enabling them to overwhelm the Ottoman defenses.

The day's fighting resulted in around 600 Ottoman casualties, including 300 dead. Over 1,200 Ottoman troops were taken prisoner. Allied forces lost just 22 men, with another 124 wounded. Over the ensuing weeks, British troops worked to rapidly fortify the town. The success on the Mediterranean coast enabled the opening of new supply lines. Supplies began arriving on the coast near El Arish by the end of the year. Over the course of the Sinai-Palestine campaign during World War I, Britain established its dominance of a strategically critical region of the Middle East, creating the conditions for a new imperialist carve-up at the end of the war.

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