

This week in history: January 16-22

16 January 2017

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

25 years ago: South Korean autoworkers seize giant Hyundai plants

On January 15, 1992, 15,000 autoworkers seized control of the massive Hyundai complex in Ulsan, South Korea. The occupation was part of a bitter strike against Hyundai, the biggest industrial conglomerate in the country, that began in December.

Hyundai management refused to negotiate, and on January 14 announced that it would close the company's five auto plants in the industrial city of Ulsan and impose a lockout. Fifteen thousand workers responded by seizing control of the plants, ejecting the bosses and barricading themselves inside. The workers armed themselves with pipes and other primitive weapons, and fought off an attempt by 1,000 foremen and managers to retake the factory by force on January 17.

The South Korean government of President Roh Tae Woo surrounded the factory complex with more than 12,000 heavily armed riot police, and announced a 5 a.m. deadline for the morning of January 18 for storming the barricaded plants from air, sea and land. The police were equipped with helicopters, naval vessels and 34 mobile tear gas launchers, as well as live ammunition, all in preparation for a military bloodbath. A few hours before the deadline, the 3,000 workers who were still engaged in the sit-down strike slipped out of the plants, vowing to continue their struggle.

Hyundai management and the police launched a ferocious witch-hunt against the strikers in the wake of the abandonment of the occupation. Dozens of union militants were arrested. Virtual police-state conditions reigned in Ulsan. According to one account, "The police have a list of all the wanted labor unionists. Those, especially men, who look anything like a car worker are being checked."

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50 years ago: Somoza massacres hundreds in Nicaragua

On January 22, 1967, hundreds of protesters in Nicaragua were gunned down by soldiers of the Guardia Nacional of military dictator Anastasio Somoza DeBayle, as they peacefully demonstrated in Managua in advance of a national election. No official death toll exists, but estimates range from 200 to 1,500. Thousands more were arrested.

The demonstration was called by a bloc of political parties calling itself the "Unión Nacional Opositor" party (UNO or United National Opposition). It had nominated Doctor Fernando Agüero Rocha to face Somoza in the 1967 elections.

At 5 p.m., as the demonstration made its way down Avenida Roosevelt toward the presidential palace, Guardia Nacional soldiers blocked its advance. At this point a lieutenant leading the soldiers, who were preparing to disperse the crowd with fire hoses and batons, was shot dead by an unknown assailant. The soldiers then opened fire on the crowd with automatic rifles.

Somoza "won" the May 1, 1967 elections, carrying on his family's political dynasty, which was from the beginning an American puppet regime. It was founded by Anastasio Somoza García (1896-1956), the US-educated son of a wealthy coffee planter. The US Marine Corps, after its two-decade occupation of Nicaragua that ended in 1933, created the Guardia Nacional and installed as its leader the elder Somoza, who ordered the murder of guerilla leader Augusto Sandino during peace talks that same year. Somoza's dictatorship, and that of his sons, Luis and Anastasio, who headed the Guardia Nacional from 1946 after completing his education at West Point, continued until the Sandinista Revolution of 1979.

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75 years ago: US social democrats endorse World War II

On January 17, 1942 the National Executive Committee of

the Socialist Party, the American social democratic organization, reversed its position on World War II and gave support to the Allied imperialist powers under the slogan, “A Democratic and Socialist Victory.” Defending the national interests of American capitalism, the social democrats embraced President Franklin Roosevelt’s characterization of World War II as a war of “democracy” against fascism and dismissed rousing working class opposition to the slaughter.

SP leader Norman Thomas, who had joined the America First Committee in 1940, working side-by-side with fellow pacifists, isolationist Democratic and Republican politicians and Nazi apologists like Charles Lindbergh, now declared, “Most of us believe that it is romantic to think that Hitler and the Japanese can be stopped today by some mass rising of the peoples outside of the organized military forces which are locked in combat.”

American Trotskyist leader James P. Cannon, in a statement issued after Pearl Harbor, denounced the claim that the struggle against fascism should be entrusted to the American and British imperialists and called on American workers to oppose the imperialist war.

“We were internationalists before December 8: we still are. We believe that the most fundamental bond of loyalty of all the workers of the world is the bond of international solidarity of the workers against their exploiters. We cannot assume the slightest responsibility for this war. No imperialist regime can conduct a just war...”

“In this dark hour we clearly see the socialist future and prepare the way for it. Against the mad chorus of national hatreds we advance once more the old slogan of socialist internationalism: Workers of the World, Unite!”

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100 years ago: Mass strikes and protests in Russia

On January 22, 1917, hundreds of thousands of Russian workers participated in demonstrations marking the anniversary of Bloody Sunday, the Tsarist regime’s brutal attack on a protest 12 years earlier, which had triggered the 1905 Russian Revolution.

The demonstrations took place amid an acute crisis of the Tsarist regime. Russian forces had suffered massive losses in battles across the eastern front of World War I, while the war effort was producing food shortages and intense social anger, expressed in a developing mass strike movement among the country’s highly concentrated industrial working class.

The Bolshevik Party of Vladimir Lenin, who was then still exiled in Switzerland, was in the forefront of calls for a mass turnout on the anniversary of Bloody Sunday. The Bolsheviks called meetings and issued leaflets making the case for a political strike. Their slogans included “Down with the Tsarist war!” and “Down with the Tsarist autocracy.”

The Okhrana, the regime’s secret police, responded with panicked reports that the idea of a general strike was being discussed throughout working class areas. The government initiated a wave of repression, arresting prominent Bolsheviks, including the organization’s entire Petrograd leadership. The demonstration nevertheless took place, and was attended by an estimated 150,000 in Petrograd, which constituted as much as half of the city’s working class.

Leon Trotsky, the Russian revolutionary leader, later wrote of the mood of the period in his *History of the Russian Revolution*: “Shliapnikov, a member of the Bolshevik Central Committee, himself a former metal worker, describes how nervous the workers were in those days: ‘Sometimes a whistle would be enough, or any kind of noise—the workers would take it for a signal to stop the factory.’ This detail is equally remarkable both as a political symptom and as a psychological fact: the revolution is there in the nerves before it comes out on the street.

“The growth in massiveness of the movement and in fighting spirit shifts the center of gravity from the textile to the metal-workers, from economic strikes to political, from the provinces to Petrograd. The first two months of 1917 show 575,000 political strikers, the lion’s share of them in the capital. In spite of new raids carried out by the police on the eve of January 9 [the date of the 1905 massacre in the Julian calendar then observed in Russia], 150,000 workers went on strike in the capital on that anniversary of blood. The mood was tense. The metal-workers were in the lead. The workers all felt that no retreat was possible. In every factory an active nucleus was forming, oftenest around the Bolsheviks.”

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