

# This week in history: January 23-29

23 January 2017

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## 25 years ago: World recession dominates G-7 meeting

The Group of Seven (G-7) failed to coordinate any joint economic policy during their seven-hour meeting in Garden City, New York on January 25, 1992. This was a clear signal that the major capitalist countries were powerless to halt the world economy's plunge into crisis.

An official communiqué issued by the finance ministers and central bankers of the US, Japan, Germany, Britain, France, Canada and Italy cited the growing worldwide slump. They declared their "concern that economic activity had weakened since their last meeting. In some countries, early signs of recovery had not been sustained, while other countries were experiencing a deceleration from high rates of growth, jeopardizing gains in employment achieved during the last decade and raising the danger of renewed protectionism."

By the standards of the normally glowing rhetoric of such G-7 summits, such an assessment was bleak. While the official communiqué vowed "cooperative efforts to improve the conditions for noninflationary growth," the reality was one of a world economy already split into hostile trading blocs and the breakdown of all of the old mechanisms through which world capitalism had attempted to mediate its crises over the postwar period.

The meeting was unable to agree on a coordinated policy on interest or foreign exchange rates. It put forward no joint policy in relation to the Uruguay Round of multilateral trade negotiations, under conditions in which the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade was being turned into a dead letter by mounting trade war and protectionism. It furthermore failed to approve any joint policy in relation to carrying through the restoration of capitalism in the former Soviet Union.

Economic slump gripped every one of the major capitalist powers. In Europe, unemployment rose over the previous 12 months from 8.4 to 9.3 percent. Britain registered an increase from 7.4 to 10.2 percent during the same period, representing a 40 percent growth in the ranks of the unemployed.

In Japan, government officials revealed that steel output was expected to plunge by 11.4 percent in the first quarter of 1992. Meanwhile, Japanese department stores reported zero growth in December, as compared to the previous year.

In the United States itself, the wave of mass layoffs, factory closures and bankruptcies was growing daily. The January 27

Chapter 11 bankruptcy filing by R.H. Macy & Co., the oldest and best known department store chain in the country, symbolized the catastrophic decline of American capitalism.

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## 50 year ago: Launchpad fire kills three Apollo astronauts

On January 27, 1967, three Apollo astronauts were killed by a fire on the launching pad at Cape Kennedy, in the first US space disaster. The dead were Air Force colonels Virgil I. Grissom and Edward H. White II, and Navy Lieutenant Roger B. Chaffee.

The astronauts were killed during a simulation of a scheduled February 21 launching in which they would orbit the Earth for 14 days. It was to have been the first trial of the giant spacecraft designed to carry out a manned landing on the moon. An electrical spark ignited the pure oxygen inside the cabin. Fifteen seconds separate the first transmission from Grissom noticing the fire, to the last transmission from White, a cry of pain. The men suffered extensive third degree burns, but cause of death was determined to be cardiac arrest caused by carbon monoxide poisoning.

The NASA review board reported that the fire probably originated from an electrical arc in the spacecraft wiring. The pure-oxygen, high-pressure atmosphere in the spacecraft—which had not been tested for fire—made material normally non-combustible erupt in flames. Apollo designers had made inadequate provisions for the escape or rescue of the crew in case of an accident. White was seen on the capsule's closed circuit television attempting to open the door, where his body was later found, but high pressure made it impossible. Further, the interior of the Apollo capsule was full of flammable materials and inadequate provision had been made to protect spacecraft wiring.

As a result of the Apollo disaster, no further manned flights were scheduled for 1967. A subsequent investigation of the tragedy exposed the negligence of NASA, under pressure from the Johnson administration to carry out an early manned landing on the moon as a demonstration of the technological power of the US in its Cold War "Space Race" against the Soviet Union, which had led the way in sending men into space.

Despite pressure to reach the moon by 1970, problems in the Apollo program had accumulated as the Johnson administration cut the space exploration budget in order to offset the cost of the war in Vietnam. In response to the cuts, NASA administrator James E. Webb said he believed the 1970 date could be met, but warned Johnson that there were not enough rockets for the usual

amount of testing.

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## 75 years ago: Irish protest US troops landing in Ulster

On January 26, 1942, the Republic of Ireland protested the landing of several thousand American troops in Northern Ireland, part of the United Kingdom. “The Irish government has not been consulted either by the British or the American governments with regard to the coming of American troops to the six counties,” declared Irish Prime Minister Eamon de Valera.

Patrick Maxwell, Nationalist member of the Northern Ireland Parliament, said, “So far as we are concerned, the landing of Americans in Northern Ireland is the same thing as the landing of Germans in Norway.”

The agreement between US President Franklin Roosevelt and the British government of Winston Churchill to land the troops amounted to US recognition of the 1921 British partition of Ireland. Roosevelt’s and Churchill’s action put the lie to their Atlantic Charter declaration a half-year earlier that pledged Allied war aims recognized “the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they shall live.”

The American Trotskyists, then organized as the Socialist Workers Party, denounced Roosevelt’s dispatching of troops to Ireland: “Advanced workers everywhere will recognize the right of the Irish people to decide for themselves the policies they wish to pursue toward the war and in their relations with other nations. It is an abrogation of the right of self-determination for America or any other powerful nation to impose its own policies on the Irish people.

“Only world socialism—by replacing imperialism with the economic cooperation and solidarity of all nations, and by abolishing the causes of war—will permanently safeguard the independence of small nations and bring them lasting freedom from war and invasion. The centuries-long struggle for Irish independence will be finally assured and guaranteed by the victory of world socialism.”

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## 100 years ago: US invading force withdrawn from Mexico

On January 28, 1917, thousands of US army troops began withdrawing from Mexico, after a pursuit of the Mexican revolutionary leader, Pancho Villa that had lasted for almost a year. The US forces completed their retreat in early February, having failed to kill or capture Villa, but having inflicted significant casualties against his military forces, including leading commanders.

The expedition into Mexico was launched by the administration of President Woodrow Wilson in March 1916. Its stated objective

was to capture or kill Villa, in response to a raid by the Mexican revolutionary’s troops on the border town of Columbus, New Mexico, which had resulted in the deaths of eight soldiers and ten civilians.

Villa’s troops had also seized ammunition, machine guns and other loot, provoking a wave of hysteria in the American press, and calls for brutal retaliation. At least 67 of the Mexican rebels died in that attack. The raid followed a number of incursions by Mexican forces over the preceding two years.

The US ruling establishment had viewed the outbreak of revolutionary upheavals in Mexico in 1910 with fear and hostility, and intervened to buttress the landowners and propertied classes from the outset. In 1913, Washington played a central role in the coup that ousted the liberal government of Francisco Madero, under conditions of mounting opposition from the peasant armies of Villa and Emiliano Zapata and a strike movement in the working class. US authorities backed the coup by General Victoriano Huerta and the murder of Madero, in a bid to crush the growing movement.

Over the ensuing years, Zapata’s and Villa’s armies would secure a number of significant victories. By the end of 1914, they controlled the bulk of the country. However, without a clear social or political program, they were unable to put forward a coherent alternative to the parties of the bourgeoisie, with whom they had entered into alliance on a number of occasions.

The US expedition, commanded by Brigadier General John Pershing, contributed to a growing crisis of Villa’s forces, inflicting severe casualties in a number of battles, and forcing Villa to repeatedly retreat into mountainous terrain. At its height, the invasion force consisted of over 10,000 troops and was at times aided by aircraft. It heightened tensions between the US and the Mexican government of Venustiano Carranza. In April 1916, troops loyal to Carranza had clashed with a section of the US expedition near the town of Parral.

Negotiations between Carranza and the Wilson administration over the expedition continued throughout 1916. The decision to withdraw coincided with mounting indications that the US was preparing to directly enter World War I, and followed the consolidation of the Carranza government’s rule.

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