

This week in history: January 15-21

15 January 2018

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25 years ago: Bill Clinton sworn in as 42nd US president

On January 20, 1993, Democrat Bill Clinton was sworn in as the 42nd American president, following his victory in November 1992 over incumbent Republican George H. W. Bush and Reform Party candidate H. Ross Perot, a Texas technology billionaire.

Clinton ran on campaign slogans of “It’s Time to Change America” and “putting people first,” and, indeed, the 37.5 percent of the vote won by Bush—the lowest percentage of the vote by a sitting president since William Howard Taft in 1912—represented a massive popular repudiation of the 12 years of class warfare spearheaded by the Reagan-Bush administrations.

But Clinton had no intention of returning to the reform policies of Roosevelt’s New Deal or Johnson’s Great Society. A founding figure of the right-wing Democratic Leadership Council, Clinton’s aim was to adapt the Democratic Party to the policies of austerity and war put forth by the Republicans. No sooner had he won the general election, than Clinton and those pegged for top cabinet positions, including Lloyd Bentsen (Treasury Secretary) and Leon Panetta (Budget Director) began to speak of “sacrifice” and “tough choices” involving cuts to welfare, Medicaid, Medicare, and Social Security. In his inaugural speech, Clinton warned that working class Americans could no longer “expect something for nothing.”

A former Vietnam War protester, Clinton solidarized himself with the genocidal sanctions regime and bombing campaign against Iraq, where the US-engineered Gulf War of 1990-1991 had already killed tens of thousands of Iraqis. The day before Clinton’s inauguration, Bush ordered some 45 Tomahawk cruise missile strikes on the largely defenseless country, allegedly targeting “weapons of mass destruction,” but in fact crippling Iraq’s remaining industrial production at the Zaafaraniya complex near Baghdad. In

interviews before his inauguration Clinton said he stood with such attacks on Iraq “four square” and warned that US military action against Yugoslavia was imminent.

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50 years ago: Britain to withdraw from east of Suez

On January 16, 1968, Britain announced plans to withdraw all its military forces stationed east of the Suez Canal by the end of 1972. The proposal to drastically scale back British imperialism’s international role was made by Labour Party Prime Minister Harold Wilson in a speech before the House of Commons.

Wilson called for an end to the British military presence in the Persian Gulf and the closing of its bases in Singapore. Only a small garrison would be retained for the policing of Hong Kong. In a further effort to reduce military spending, Wilson called for the cancellation of a \$1 billion contract to purchase 50 F-111 fighters from the United States.

British imperialism’s withdrawal from its former colonial outposts was a desperate move to reduce the budget deficit and shore up its crisis-wracked economy. “Our purpose is to make devaluation work,” Wilson told parliament. In November, Wilson had been forced to devalue the pound after a run on the British currency in the world market. In a statement endorsing the pullback, Wilson’s finance minister termed the state of the economy “very serious.”

The financial crisis was the driving force for new attacks on the British working class. The military cuts were part of a package containing the imposition of fees on prescription drugs and a delay in plans to extend compulsory school attendance. One member of Wilson’s cabinet resigned in protest over the domestic cuts.

Conservative Party leader Edward Heath denounced the troop pullback as “dishonorable.” Responding to those who favored maintaining Britain’s colonial role, Wilson declared, “Because of our history this is a most difficult fact for Britain to accept about itself ... but there is no greater recipe for disaster than a persistent refusal to face

unwelcome facts.”

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75 years ago: Soviets establish land corridor to the besieged city of Leningrad

On January 18, 1943, as part of an offensive against the German military, the Red Army’s 372nd Rifle Division and 123rd Rifle Brigade established a land corridor that would provide some relief to the starving population of Leningrad. Coming just two weeks before the Red Army’s final victory at Stalingrad, which signified the beginning of the end of the Nazi Reich, the establishment of the land corridor marked a first major breakthrough in the fight against the Nazi siege of Leningrad. However, it would take one more year for the Soviet forces to finally end the longest siege of a major city in modern history.

The German Wehrmacht had encircled Leningrad since the fall of 1941. Adolf Hitler viewed the city of the 1917 working class revolution with particular hatred and had ordered it razed to the ground after capture. As part of the Nazi plan to murder some 30 million Soviet citizens, the Leningrad population was subjected to systematic starvation.

By early 1943, more than 400,000 people had already succumbed to starvation. Bombing raids on civilian and industrial targets claimed additional thousands of lives. Utilities, water, energy and food supplies were severely disrupted. When Leningrad was finally liberated on January 27, 1944, after 872 days of siege, a third of its pre-war population of 3 million had been killed, and one million Red Army soldiers had fallen defending the city.

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100 years ago: Bolsheviks dissolve Constituent Assembly in Russia

On January 19, the Russian Constituent Assembly, elected the previous November 25, convened in Petrograd. It was dissolved the same day by order of the Bolshevik-dominated Soviet Central Executive Committee.

In the period leading up to the October Revolution, the popular demand for the convocation of a Constituent Assembly was raised in opposition to the Kerensky government, including by the Bolshevik Party. However, after the October Revolution, leading Bolsheviks regarded

this demand as moot or worse, a step backwards from Soviet power, which expressed the democratic will of the oppressed masses for a dictatorship of the proletariat under conditions of civil war.

Owing to electoral lists drawn up before the October Revolution and prior to the split between Right and Left SRs, the conservatives, nationalists, and reactionaries enjoyed an exaggerated weight in the Constituent Assembly. Meanwhile, the Kadets, right-wing Socialist Revolutionaries, and other anti-Bolshevik forces rallied around the demand for all national power to vest in the Constituent Assembly, a demand the Bolshevik leaders rightly interpreted as a direct challenge to Soviet power.

“It is obvious that under such circumstances the remaining part of the Constituent Assembly could only serve as a screen for the struggle of the counter-revolutionaries to overthrow Soviet power,” Lenin wrote in a decree drafted on January 19 and published in *Pravda* on January 20.

“Accordingly, the Central Executive Committee resolves that the Constituent Assembly is hereby dissolved.”

Soviet troops permitted the Constituent Assembly to convene in Petrograd for one day—long enough for the deputies to elect Right SR Victor Chernov as Chairman—and then locked the doors to the building after the deputies left. The outraged deputies called for an insurrection against Soviet authority, but no mass uprising materialized.

Trotsky later commented:

“[The deputies] brought candles with them in case the Bolsheviks cut off the electric light and a vast number of sandwiches in case their food be taken from them. Thus democracy entered upon the struggle with dictatorship heavily armed with sandwiches and candles. The people did not give a thought to supporting those who considered themselves their elect and who in reality were only shadows of a period of the revolution that was already passed.”

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