

This week in history: November 5-11

5 November 2018

25 years ago: Castro speech, “We are becoming bourgeois”

In a speech to an audience of foreign businessmen on November 6, 1993, Cuban President Fidel Castro declared that his government was learning the ways of the capitalist world but still had extensive work to do in enforcing discipline on the Cuban working class. “We are becoming bourgeois,” he told his approving audience at an international trade fair in Havana, “not because we are getting rich as people, but because we are learning to do business. We are doing many new things with your experience.”

Castro acknowledged that the Cuban government needed to correct certain “defects,” chief among them, the “undisciplined” character of the Cuban labor force. “It’s necessary to impose discipline, to be more demanding, if we want productivity and efficiency.”

The Cuban regime was facing increasing economic difficulties because of the collapse of its principal trading partners and financial sponsors, in the Soviet Union and the Stalinist bureaucracies in Eastern Europe, exacerbated by the tightening US economic embargo of the island country.

The Castro government responded with an unprecedented opening to foreign capital, mainly from Spain and other Western European countries. It legalized private possession of foreign currency for the first time in 30 years, and sought to encourage both foreign tourism and increased travel to the country by Cuban exiles and their descendants.

Castro sought to cover up these openings to the imperialist rivals of the US, like Spain and France, with demagogic speeches pledging his endless devotion to “socialism.” A few days after his overture to the foreign capitalists, he told a meeting of the Cuban Communist Party leadership, “Nobody in the world should be confused and think we are renouncing socialism because we are setting up mixed enterprises, foreign investments, corporations, and we authorize work for one’s own account, because this *is* socialism.”

The Castro regime was never socialist, but represented the most radical form of bourgeois nationalist opposition to imperialism under conditions of a US blockade and constant threat of invasion. After coming to power at the head of a petty-bourgeois guerrilla movement based in the rural areas, with little support in the working class, what Castro defined as “socialism” was the unchallenged domination his political clique.

His speech was a warning that to preserve its political rule, the Castro regime was prepared to make continued inroads into the social gains of the Cuban workers and peasants after the 1959

revolution, essentially offering the Cuban working class as a tightly policed source of cheap labor for the multinational corporations, on the model of China.

50 years ago: Nixon wins US presidential election

Republican nominee Richard Nixon won the US presidential election held on November 5, 1968, with only a narrow margin in the popular vote, but with a comfortable margin of 301 to 191 in the Electoral College. Nixon received 31,783,783 votes overall, while Democrat Hubert Humphrey received 31,271,839 votes. George Wallace, a third-party candidate and segregationist, received 9,901,118 votes and carried five southern states, winning 46 electoral votes

Leading up to Nixon’s victory was a series of events that contributed to popular disaffection with the Democratic Party, which controlled both houses of Congress as well as the White House, the most central of these issues being the Vietnam War, launched, escalated and defended by successive Democratic Party administrations.

Support for the Democrats fell to a low point after the 1968 Democratic National Convention. As Humphrey was being nominated inside the convention hall, Chicago police were mobilized to violently suppress anti-war demonstrations outside.

For much of the campaign, Humphrey lagged far behind Nixon in the polls. But as support for George Wallace faded after his running mate suggested using nuclear weapons in Vietnam, Humphrey began to close the gap with Nixon. In particular, Humphrey sought to promote himself as the candidate for peace in Vietnam. He called for the bombings of North Vietnam to stop and supported the peace talks that opened just before the election. But Humphrey never called for an immediate end to the war.

Nixon’s election strategy was to make a limited appeal to antiwar sentiment—or at least seek to neutralize the issue—by claiming to have a “secret plan” to end the war. In response to Humphrey’s surge in the polls with the prospect of a negotiated settlement in Vietnam, Nixon worked behind the scenes to sabotage the peace talks with the North. He made a deal with the South Vietnamese government to block negotiation. In return, Nixon promised the South better concessions than they would get from the Democrats.

On domestic policy, Nixon sought to co-opt the ultra-right program of Wallace, appealing to right-wing sentiments with the slogan of “law and order,” claiming to represent the “silent

majority” that opposed student demonstrations, urban riots, and social protest in general. While ceding the Deep South to Wallace, Nixon carried the rest of that region, including Texas, Florida and the Border States, with his less brazen appeal to white racism. He was developing what came to be known as the “southern strategy,” in which the Republican Party sought to recruit white Democratic Party officeholders and activists throughout that region on the basis of a tacit appeal to racism.

75 years ago: Soviet Red Army liberates Kiev

On November 6, 1943, the Red Army took control of decisive sections of Kiev, Ukraine’s capital, amid heavy fighting with German forces which had occupied the city for the previous three years. The liberation of Kiev was a major strategic and political blow to the Nazi regime, and restored to the Soviet Union its third-largest city.

Soviet troops had succeeded in encircling Kiev over the preceding two months as part of the Battle of the Dnieper, a broader offensive aimed at recapturing the bulk of Ukraine. The advances they made came at a heavy cost, with an estimated 450,000 casualties.

Early on November 3, Soviet forces launched a massive artillery and aerial bombardment, directed against Germany’s 4th Panzer Army, which was in occupation of Kiev. Over the following three days, Soviet troops moved en masse into the city. They encountered strong resistance, and were forced to engage in close combat to take key positions. German forces carried out a scorched earth policy, setting fire to much of the city, and destroying its critical infrastructure, as they were forced to retreat.

The Soviets then sought to use the city as a base from which to launch an offensive aimed at recapturing other Ukrainian towns, including Fastov, Zhitomir, Korosten and Berdichev.

Hitler responded by releasing the 48th Panzer Corps and launching a counter-offensive, which retook cities earlier captured by Soviet forces, including Zhitomir and Brusilov. By early December, after the 48th Corps began making significant eastward advances, the Soviets dispatched tank and infantry reinforcements, which successfully repelled the German invaders.

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Kiev had been the scene of horrific crimes by the Nazis and their local collaborators in the Ukrainian fascist organisations. In two days, from April 29-30, 1941, they murdered an estimated 34,000 Jews at the Babi Yar ravine in the city. Throughout the German occupation, between 100,000 and 150,000 Jews, Soviet prisoners of war, Roma and communists were killed by the Nazis at the site.

100 years ago: Germany signs armistice with Allies, ending the First World War

On November 11, 1918, the German government, now a republic led by Friedrich Ebert, a Social Democrat who had supported the war aims of German imperialism, capitulated to the overwhelming power of an Allied offensive on the Western Front and signed a formal surrender.

The signing took place in a railroad car in the forest of Compiègne about 37 miles north of Paris, with the leader of the Catholic Center Party, Matthias Erzberger, leading the German delegation and Marshall Ferdinand Foch, supreme commander of the Allied military, leading the Allied delegation.

While the Allied offensive had driven back German forces all along the line from Switzerland to the English Channel, the decisive event was the eruption of revolution in Germany, beginning with a mutiny by sailors at the end of October. The German high command placed the Social-Democrats in power to take responsibility for Germany’s military defeat and to organize the suppression of the revolution. The Kaiser abdicated on November 9.

Germany’s allies, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Turkish Ottoman Empire had already signed their own armistices with the Allied imperialists by the end of October.

Fighting was to cease within six hours of the signing. The Armistice gave highly unfavorable conditions to Germany. Within two weeks German troops were to evacuate France, Belgium, Luxembourg, and Alsace-Lorraine (a border area historically contested by Germany and France), Romania, Africa, and areas that belonged to the Ottoman Empire, including what is now Syria. The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with Soviet Russia was declared invalid and German troops were to evacuate the Ukraine, although the Allies continued to support German-sponsored anti-Bolshevik armies.

The Germans were to turn over thousands of heavy weapons, aircraft and warships, and the Allies were to occupy Germany’s most important industrial center, the Ruhr valley. Allied prisoners of war were to be repatriated much sooner than their German counterparts, and the Allies did not agree to immediately lift their naval blockade on Germany. It was agreed that the Germans would pay war reparations, but the exact terms of these were not worked out until the Treaty of Versailles in 1919.

The Armistice ended the deadliest war in history until that time. Approximately 9-10 million soldiers had died since August 1914, among all the warring countries, and 8 million civilians. About 23 million soldiers were wounded, some so seriously that they could not resume normal life.

In the immediate aftermath of the war, a wave of workers’ revolutions would sweep central Europe.



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