

This week in history: November 26-December 2

26 November 2018

25 years ago: Belgium rocked by general strike

The biggest general strike in Belgium since 1936 paralyzed the country on Friday, November 27, as a wave of workers' struggles continues throughout western Europe. The strike was called by the social democratic and the Christian Union federations to protest the austerity measures adopted by a coalition government of Christian Democrats and social-democrats. The general strike was particularly effective in closing down all public transport. International trains had to be diverted. In most hospitals there was only emergency cover. The approach roads to Brussels airport were blocked and most flights severely disrupted. The port of Antwerp had already been blocked on Thursday.

Workers set up picket lines outside of major factories, as well as staging mass protests in Brussels and in regional centers like Charleroi, Liege, Limbourg and Antwerp. Many larger stores and schools were hit. Most newspapers failed to appear and the radio and television broadcast only a reduced service.

The cabinet of prime minister Jean-Luc Dehaene, a social-democrat, sought the unions' agreement to a "social pact" which contained proposals for a three-year wage freeze and massive attacks on social security and pensions. Among the measures was the introduction of means testing for family allowances and a provision that young workers must wait nine months instead of six months before they first become eligible for unemployment compensation, under conditions where unemployment has risen by 50 percent over the past two years.

Fearing they could lose control of the rank-and-file, the unions were unable to openly accept such an obviously anti-working-class package. They left the talks, calling a series of strikes, and the government announced it would push the package through unilaterally.

The "socialist" union federation FGTB/ABVV had made it clear that it was not trying to bring down the government. Union chief Robert Vorhamme said this would only open the door to the main parliamentary opposition, the right-wing Liberal Party, telling the press, "We explicitly say we are not striking to get the government replaced by another more conservative government. Certainly not! What we want is for the government to listen to what we are saying."

"We are prepared to do our bit in this operation," he continued. "We are prepared for the years 1995-96 not to get any wage increase. We are prepared for some cuts in social security. We are prepared to have measures to pay for unemployment, but against this nothing is put by the employers on the fiscal side. We find this unfair."

Other strikes and protests broke out in half a dozen European countries, including Spain, where hundreds of thousands marched in Madrid, Barcelona and other cities against austerity measures; Italy,

where railway station workers staged 24-hour strikes; France, where workers from 16 publicly owned companies, including Renault and Elf-Aquitaine marched against cutbacks and threatened layoffs; and marches and protests in Germany, Britain and Austria.

50 years ago: Romania's Ceausescu opposes "Brezhnev Doctrine"

On November 29, 1968, Romanian President Nicolae Ceausescu became the first Stalinist leader in Eastern Europe to come out against what became known as the Brezhnev Doctrine, the declaration that the Soviet Union and its allies in the Warsaw Pact had the right to intervene militarily in any Stalinist-ruled country that might be threatened with internal revolt. The policy had already been put into action with the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in August.

A few weeks earlier Leonid Brezhnev, the general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, had officially announced the doctrine as Soviet policy at the Congress of the Polish Workers Party. He claimed the right of military intervention where "forces that are hostile to socialism try and turn the development of some socialist country towards capitalism." But for Brezhnev and the rest of the Stalinist bureaucracy this meant intervening in any country that threatened to weaken the privileges of the local Stalinists and loosen their grip on the working class.

Ceausescu's opposition to the Brezhnev Doctrine was not a surprise, as he had already refused to send Romanian soldiers to assist with the invasion of Czechoslovakia. But he was opposed, not because of the violent repression of the working class, but because outside intervention threatened to interfere with his own nationalist course for Romania. Ceausescu argued, "The affiliation to the Warsaw Treaty Organization does not 'limit' in one way or another their state independence, but on the contrary, as the Treaty stipulates, is a means of strengthening the national independence and sovereignty of each participating state."

The danger of a Warsaw Pact invasion based on by the Brezhnev Doctrine caused Ceausescu and similarly minded Stalinist leaders to pursue foreign policies that would allow them to balance between Moscow and other power centers, including not only the Chinese Stalinist regime, but also the US and other western imperialist countries linked together in the NATO alliance.

Thus the Brezhnev Doctrine and the invasion of Czechoslovakia, far from strengthening the Moscow-led alliance, exposed the national tensions within the Warsaw Pact. As each national bureaucracy pursued its "own" path to socialism in one country they inevitably began to diverge in both economic and foreign policy.

There was nothing progressive or democratic in Ceausescu's opposition to Brezhnev. Within Romania, Ceausescu oversaw one of the most repressive regimes of the period. He ordered and oversaw the arrest of thousands of political dissidents, forced the creation of a massive cult of personality, and even instituted a program where women were forced into pregnancy in an attempt to increase the population.

75 years ago: Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt meet at Tehran

On November 28, 1943, Joseph Stalin, Winston Churchill and Franklin Delano Roosevelt met at the Soviet Union's embassy in Tehran, the capital of Iran. The Soviet dictator and the leaders of British and American imperialism were gathering to begin discussions on the geo-strategic relations that would be established in the aftermath of the Second World War.

The three-day conference took place two years after the successful Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran in late 1941. Allied forces, including British and Soviet troops, had ousted the government of Reza Shah, who had friendly relations with Germany, and installed his son, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, as ruler. This ensured their control over the country's oil fields and geo-strategically critical borders.

In the period prior to the conference, the Allies had secured a series of victories, raising the prospect of a defeat of the Axis powers. German forces had suffered colossal losses inside the Soviet Union, ending the prospects of a Nazi victory on the Eastern Front. They had also been driven out of North Africa and were facing a series of challenges in southern Europe, with Sicily and southern Italy now under control of US, British and Canadian forces.

Under these conditions, the Allied powers were increasingly preoccupied with ensuring their own interests would be advanced, against their nominal allies, at the conclusion of the war. At Tehran, Stalin pushed for Allied support for the Yugoslav partisans and a recognition of an expansion of Soviet borders into Poland. The demands were a precursor to the establishment of a Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe at the end of the war. The conference also discussed plans for an invasion of France, and for drawing Turkey, a neutral power, into the war on the side of the Allies.

The Tehran Conference would be followed by gatherings of the three leaders at Yalta and Potsdam in 1945, which served to establish the borders of the post-war world. Stalin, representing the interests of a privileged Soviet bureaucracy, and the representatives of British and American imperialism were united in their hostility to an emerging movement of the working class throughout Europe and internationally, which threatened bourgeois rule. They were determined to suppress developing revolutionary struggles and ensure the stability of capitalism.

100 years ago: Admiral Kolchak's troops begin westward drive against Bolsheviks

On November 29, 1918, the 1st corps of the Siberian Army, the largest military group of the counterrevolutionary Provisional All-

Russian Government, based in the Siberian city of Omsk, and under the control of the former Tsarist Admiral Alexander Kolchak, began its advance towards Perm in the Urals, a center of arms manufacture and coal production.

The goal of the Perm operation was not only to seize this strategic city but also to encircle Soviet-controlled territory in the Russian heartland from the east. In late 1918, the Red Army had pushed back the Whites in southern Russia along the Volga River, ousting the Komuch (Social Revolutionary)-controlled People's Army from Samara. Nevertheless, American, British, French, and Japanese interventionist troops, along with the Czech Legion and the White Russian armies they supplied, continued to threaten the Soviet power from the north and the south.

Kolchak had seized power in the Siberian counterrevolutionary movement on November 18, ousted the Right Social Revolutionaries and established himself as a Supreme Ruler who would work closely with the Allied imperialists. He was supported by local strongmen, often Cossack atamans, who enforced brutal and at times overtly sadistic rule in the rural areas.

The Bolsheviks led a revolt in Omsk on December 22, which was crushed by the White Guard who summarily executed 500 workers and leaders, not only Bolsheviks, but also leaders of the moderate socialist parties who had rallied to the anti-Bolshevik cause and had not participated in the rebellion.

By December 24 the Whites had captured Perm. The Red Army lost 18,000 men, and although the losses of the Whites were also considerable, a Bolshevik fact-finding mission headed by Felix Dzerzhinsky and Josef Stalin reported that Red Army troops retreated "in an absolutely disorderly flight of an utterly routed and completely demoralized army." By January 1919, Kolchak, facing a counteroffensive by the Reds, ordered the Siberian Army to cease its advance in the Urals and defend its gains.



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