This week in history: November 4-10

4 November 2019

25 years ago: Republican Party wins control of US House for the first time in 40 years

On November 8, 1994, the Republican Party won majorities in both the US House of Representatives and the Senate in the midterm congressional election, picking up eight seats in the Senate and netting a gain of 54 seats in the House. It was the first time in 40 years that the Republicans had won control of the House, and only the second time Republicans controlled the Senate over that 40-year stretch of near-total Democratic Party domination of Congress.

The election signaled a major new shift to the right in the US ruling elite. The House of Representatives became the focal point of political reaction, leading to the 1998 impeachment of President Clinton. The Republicans' "Contract With America," devised by Georgia Congressman Newt Gingrich, the party leader in the House, two months before the election, championed tax cuts for businesses and the wealthy, deregulation of business, prohibition of welfare payments to teen mothers, and a ban on deployment of US troops under United Nations commanders.

Gingrich, a former history professor first elected to Congress in 1978, was the leading figure in the right-wing of the Republican House minority throughout the 1980s. Key to his ascendancy was heavy backing by big business. His GOPAC was one of the richest political action committees with a $1.9 million budget that year. Following the election victory, he addressed a business group and railed against "the Great Society structure of bureaucracy, the redistributionist model of how wealth is acquired and the counterculture values that now permeate how we deal with the poor." He proposed to "methodically reassert American civilization."

The response of the Democratic Party to the Republicans' victory was abject capitulation. They insisted the "voters have spoken" and pledged to cooperate with the incoming right-wing majority to further shift to the right domestic social policy. However, far from reflecting a popular mandate for the Republicans, the outcome represented a rejection of the right-wing policies of the administration of Bill Clinton, who had defeated the incumbent George H.W. Bush in 1992 through vague progressive appeals, particularly a promise to resolve the unaffordability of healthcare for masses of Americans. In office, Clinton failed to enact healthcare reform, carried forward the austerity policies of the previous Reagan-Bush administrations, and oversaw an aggressive imperialist foreign policy.

Disillusioned voters stayed away from the polls in 1994, when only 38.7 percent of those eligible turned out, up marginally from the record lows set in 1986 and 1990. The largest abstention was among youth aged 18-29, who made up 21 percent of the total voters in 1992 but only 14 percent in 1994. There was also a decline in traditionally Democratic inner city and working-class areas. The slight increase over the previous non-presidential federal ("midterm") elections was comprised of larger turnout by the suburban upper middle class, which swung heavily to the Republicans.

50 years ago: 150,000 General Electric workers continue strike, clash with police

The strike by 150,000 General Electric (GE) workers against the world's largest electronics company continued into a second week, marked by clashes between strikers and police, the mobilization of the National Guard in several areas, and court injunctions aimed at hamstringing effective picketing.

The workers were represented by the International Union of Electrical Workers, and the independent United Electrical Workers, along with 11 other smaller unions. They had four main demands in the strike: a wage increase, a cost of living escalator clause (COLA), a ban on GE breaking plants up into separate bargaining units, and a prohibition on GE locking out workers of one area if there is a strike in another. The demand for higher wages and the COLA clause came as workers had lost about $0.30 an hour to inflation over the life of the last contract.

The GE workers came up against various obstacles imposed on them by local governments. In various states, including Vermont, Virginia, and California, the courts issued injunctions that limited the number of strikers at a picket to just 10. The intention behind these orders was to allow for the company to send in strikebreakers to keep plants open. Workers defied these injunctions by calling mass pickets. In many areas the police, bolstered by the National Guard troops, attacked and arrested workers who blocked plant entrances. However, they failed to break up the pickets and production was severely constricted by the strike.

The *Bulletin*, the publication of the Workers League, wrote, "This is the first strike against GE, the world's fourth largest corporation, since 1946. But it is more. It is a showdown between the bosses and the working class in which GE is running interference for Nixon and the entire capitalist class. They will try to beat down the GE workers in order to beat down every member of every trade union in the country."

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75 years ago: Report on conference of Trotskyists in Nazi-occupied Europe

On November 4, 1944, the *Militant*, the newspaper of the American Socialist Workers Party (SWP), then the US Trotskyist party, reported on a conference held by five European Trotskyist parties in France the previous February. The front-page report was published under the headline, "Inspiring news just received of February meeting in France under Nazi Terror."

In an indication of the immense challenges confronting the Fourth International during the Second World War, and repression from the fascist, democratic imperialist, and Stalinist regimes, it indicated that the SWP had only learnt that the meeting had taken place the previous month in a letter from the British Revolutionary Communist Party.

The *Militant* described the information as "news of the most inspiring character for class conscious workers in America" and proof of the "invincible power of the ideas and organization of Trotskyism." The conference revealed that "The European Trotskyist movement survived under the terrible blow of the Nazis. After four years under the Nazi terror, our European comrades and co-thinkers have broken through the iron wall of imperialist censorship…"

The six-day conference had involved Trotskyists from France, Spain, Greece, Belgium and Germany. It had resulted in the formation of a European executive committee and secretariat of the Fourth International, and had discussed the fight for a revolutionary, internationalist program in opposition to the preparations by the imperialist powers and the official resistance movements to re-establish bourgeois rule in the wake of World War II.

The letter from the British comrades noted that all of the national sections attending the meeting had been struck by Nazi repression, stating that dozens of Trotskyists had been shot in "France and Holland, Greece and Belgium. Hundreds of others were arrested and deported to Germany. Among the leading comrades: In France eight members of the leadership were deported to Germany; in Belgium, two, including the secretary of the party. In Greece, the secretary of the party C. Poulipoulos was shot, together with two other members of the leadership. Comrade Wintley, leading comrade of the German group in France, was recently murdered by the Gestapo."

The letter noted that the defeats of the Nazis had eased conditions for the Trotskyists. In France it pointed to a semi-insurrectionary movement of the working class, marked by factory occupations and strikes. It reported that in workers councils that a number of factory committees had been established, and stated that "At the head of most of these factory committees there are Party comrades," i.e., Trotskyists.

100 years ago: Palmer Raids begin against US immigrants and socialists

On November 7, 1919, after months of planning, agents of the Bureau of Investigation (later the FBI) and local police began a series of raids on the offices of the Union of Russian Workers in 12 American cities. In New York alone over 200 workers were attested at the Russian People's House. The raids were timed to coincide with celebrations of the second anniversary of the Russian Revolution. Police broke up a celebration of the anniversary sponsored by the Communist Labor Party.

The immediate goal of these attacks, known as the Palmer Raids, was to expel undocumented immigrant workers who were socialists or anarchists. Another series of raids would follow in January 1920. Thousands of immigrant workers were arrested under the Immigration Act of 1918, legislation that had specifically been aimed at deporting non-citizens with left-wing beliefs. Many of the deportation orders were later canceled by the Department of Labor, but 556 leftists were deported, including the anarchist leader Emma Goldman.

The Palmer Raids were a part of the first American Red Scare, endorsed by President Wilson and cheered on by the American press, including the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. The American bourgeoisie had every reason to fear that the working class was "turning Bolshevik." Earlier in the year, Seattle had seen a general strike and the raids of November 7 occurred during the Great Steel Strike and the strike of 425,000 coal miners, struggles that absorbed a good deal of Attorney General Palmer's attention.

The Palmer Raids marked the first concerted intervention of the American police-intelligence apparatus into the workers' movement in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution. In October, Palmer had told Congress that he had accumulated 60,000 names of left-wingers. Appointed to lead the January 1920 raids was the 24-year old head of the Bureau's General Intelligence Division or "Radical Division," J. Edgar Hoover, the future head of the FBI who played a pivotal role in fashioning the American state's secret police.

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