

This week in history: December 23-29

23 December 2019

25 years ago: Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi resigns

On December 23, 1994, Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi resigned rather than see his government fall to a no-confidence resolution introduced by several opposition parties. Berlusconi's three-party coalition of his personal political party Forza Italia, the right-wing separatist Northern League, and the neofascist National Alliance, lost its majority in the lower house when Northern League leader Umberto Bossi announced he would introduce his own no-confidence resolution.

Berlusconi demanded that Italian President Oscar Luigi Scalfaro dissolve parliament and call new elections, but Scalfaro did not give an immediate public response. Bossi and his newfound allies in the Popular Party (formerly the Christian Democrats), and the Party of the Democratic Left, the former Communist Party, were opposed to new elections, seeking to cobble together a "center-left" coalition government excluding Berlusconi and the neo-fascists.

The final blow to Berlusconi's crisis-ridden seven-month regime was his interrogation two weeks earlier by prosecutors in Milan who spearheaded the corruption probe that implicated thousands of Italian corporate bosses and political leaders. The billionaire media boss was questioned about bribes paid by his Fininvest conglomerate to government tax auditors. The next day the Northern League broke with the coalition and joined with the PDS and the PPI to approve legislation to review Italy's broadcasting industry, the basis of Berlusconi's wealth.

There was widespread discontent in the Italian and international ruling class over the failure of the three-party coalition to push through draconian pension cuts, initially proposed by Berlusconi himself the previous summer. Smaller cuts were approved by parliament in a deal in which the three major union confederations called off a threatened general strike in return for a six-month postponement of the largest pension cuts.

Berlusconi remained prime minister for a month after his resignation announcement, before being replaced by Lamberto Dini, a key minister of the cabinet of the outgoing administration. Berlusconi's principal political service to the Italian capitalist class was to legitimize the neo-fascists and bring them into government for the first time since Mussolini's downfall.

50 years ago: Arab leaders hold tense talks on strategy towards US and Israel

Leaders of 14 Arab nations met in Morocco on December 23, 1969 for the fifth Arab League Summit. The goal of these summits, the first of which was held in 1964, was to establish a united policy against the Israeli expansion into Arab territories backed by the US and Britain. Several key Arab political figures were in attendance at the summit, including President Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, Muammar el-Gaddafi of Libya, and Yasser Arafat of the Palestine Liberation Organization.

Three of the countries represented at the summit, Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon, were actively fighting protracted military skirmishes with Israel at the time of the 1969 conference. These countries attended with the hopes of securing financial and military support from the richer oil-producing nations like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

The meeting was remarkably divisive on this issue. At one point Nasser walked out of the meeting after denouncing the representatives of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait who refused to pledge any additional support to the countries involved in the fighting against Israel. All of the other nations in attendance pledged support of some kind.

In his statement directed against Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, Nasser bluntly asked, "I want to know whether you want to take part in the battle." He continued, "I am prepared to offer you two alternatives: Either you fulfill your obligations to fight in the battle alongside the United Arab Republic [Egypt] or you announce publicly that you reject such a commitment."

The two oil-rich nations claimed domestic economic development plans had cost too much already, and that they did not have funds available to provide. In reality, their refusal was a political move to bolster ties to western nations and increase oil sales. By 1973 Saudi oil exports to the US would reach 744,000 barrels per day, before the 1973-1974 embargo went into effect. After the embargo ended, sales increased even more dramatically. In 1977 Saudi Arabia would sell as many as 1,716,000 barrels per day to the US, according to data from the Energy Information Administration.

In an interview the day after the summit, Arafat was asked by reporters if he was disappointed that the PLO did not receive the funds they were hoping to receive. "When we came to the summit conference we expected nothing," Arafat said. "Anything that you can get above zero is a victory for the Palestinian revolution. Revolutionaries do not expect victory to come from a meeting. Victory only comes by struggle and by arms."

75 years ago: Churchill arrives in Athens to oversee

suppression of anti-fascist partisans

On December 25, 1944, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden arrived in Athens to oversee personally the suppression of anti-fascist partisans, who had been locked in a bitter conflict with Allied troops for the preceding four weeks.

After the defeat of the German occupiers in October, at the hands of Greek partisans and mass working class opposition, the British swiftly moved to install a right-wing government headed by George Papandreou. They promulgated an order for the disarmament and disbanding of the anti-fascist militia dominated by the Communist Party, the Greek People's Liberation Army, in early December.

This provoked widespread outrage, with workers and youth viewing it as an attempt to prevent any genuine reckoning with the fascist collaborationist forces within Greece. On December 3, a mass demonstration in Athens opposing the order was attacked by British soldiers and Greek police, leading to dozens of civilian casualties. The unprovoked massacre set off weeks of low-level guerilla warfare between the Greek partisans and the Allied authorities.

Demonstrating that the British occupation of Greece had nothing to do with bringing democracy to the country, the Allies imposed martial law on December 5, and even began aerial bombardments of working class neighborhoods. As anthropologist Neni Panourgia later wrote: "British and government forces, having at their disposal heavy armament, tanks, aircraft and a disciplined army, were able to make forays into the city, burning and bombing houses and streets and carving out segments of the city ... The German tanks had been replaced by British ones, the SS and Gestapo officers by British soldiers."

Churchill organized a conference of all of the major Greek political parties, including the Communist Party. Churchill declared that his government wished to resolve the de facto civil war "with political means," but that it was prepared to launch a massive military assault if this failed. Over the following days, representatives of the Communist Party clashed with other political representatives, over the terms of an end to the conflict. The Communist Party eventually agreed to the appointment of a regent in place of a king. In early 1945, they would accept the terms of a ceasefire.

Thousands of anti-fascist partisans would be detained, with many sent to detention camps in the Middle East. This was the outcome of the program of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union, which had brokered a deal with the imperialist powers for the carve-up of Europe, based on its role in preventing the mass anti-fascist movements from developing into a revolutionary confrontation of the working class with capitalism. The pathetic consequences of this policy were summed up by a fawning request from the Greek Communist Party leaders to hold a private meeting with Churchill, which he rejected.

100 years ago: French premier declares determination to crush Bolshevism

On December 23, 1919, the French Chamber of Deputies voted to endorse Premier Georges Clemenceau's declaration that France would support military agreements with the United States and Britain to hem in the young Soviet republic. "We will not only not make peace, but we will not compromise with the government of the Soviets," he said. He proceeded to tell the chamber that France would join the other imperialist powers in surrounding Russia with an armed cordon, with Poland and Romania as the key bulwarks.

French imperialism had troops stationed in the new capitalist states of Eastern Europe that had emerged out of the collapsed Romanov, Hapsburg, and Hohenzollern dynasties—and in opposition to the Russian Revolution of 1917. By the end of 1919, however, these were used primarily to keep the peace during inter-ethnic and national conflicts, operating at the behest of the newly formed League of Nations.

France's direct intervention against the Soviets had suffered a debacle in April when much of its Black Sea fleet had mutinied, and, in some cases, refused to fight the Red Army in Crimea.

By December 1919, the Red Army and armed workers had repelled an attack on Petrograd by the White Guard armies, armed and supplied by the imperialist powers, and were conducting an offensive against the counterrevolutionary army led by General Anton Denikin in Ukraine.

At the outset of the Ukraine offensive in late November, Leon Trotsky, the Soviet People's Commissar of War, had issued an order to the Red Army which enjoined troops entering Ukraine: "By defeating Denikin's bands, you are freeing a fraternal country from its oppressors ... Keep this firmly in mind: your task is not to conquer Ukraine but to liberate it. When Denikin's bands have finally been smashed, the working people of liberated Ukraine will themselves decide on what terms they are to live with Soviet Russia. We are sure, and we all know, that the working people of the Ukraine will declare for the closest fraternal union with us."



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