This week in history: February 10-16

10 February 2020

25 years ago: US House of Representatives moves to eliminate welfare

On February 15, 1995, the human services subcommittee of the Republican-led House Ways and Means Committee approved provisions to a draft Personal Responsibility Act that would abolish the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) programs and transform them into block grants to the 50 states. The bill would cut as much as $40 billion from welfare spending over five years.

This action came in conjunction with votes to approve $17 billion in spending cuts in the 1994 budget. The cuts eliminated all summer youth job programs for 1995 and 1996.

US President Bill Clinton had previously announced that he would sign whatever version of the anti-welfare legislation emerged, as part of his pledge "to end welfare as we know it," a centerpiece of his 1992 presidential campaign. Two leading Democratic senators, Joe Biden of Delaware and Tom Harkin of Iowa, also gave their support for the legislation, reversing their positions from the previous year.

Among the reactionary provisions of the welfare "reform" bill were requirements to cut off all benefits to the children of unwed teenage mothers, to the children of mothers who could not or did not prove paternity, to children born to women who were already receiving welfare payments, to the children of resident legal aliens, and to any children who received benefits for a cumulative total of five years.

The Republican leadership denied that they were eliminating welfare, food stamps and school lunches outright, claiming that state governments would continue the programs under block grants, saving money by eliminating a layer of federal bureaucracy. In eliminating the entitlement status of welfare, Congress set the stage for the exhaustion of funds in the next downturn of the capitalist business cycle. The shift from entitlements to block grants was part of a division of labor between the congressional leadership and state governors. Congress slashed the overall spending level while leaving it up to the states to implement the details.

50 years ago: US Senate debates school segregation amendment

The week of February 10 saw debates in the US Senate regarding a proposed amendment aimed at blocking efforts to withhold federal education funds from southern schools that had not yet been desegregated. The amendment, introduced by Democratic Senator John Stennis of Mississippi, a long-time defender of Jim Crow segregation, aimed to provoke a backlash against demands for racial equality.

The Stennis amendment mandated that desegregation guidelines "shall be applied uniformly in all regions of the US without regard to the origin or cause of such segregation." Segregationists like Stennis hoped to take advantage of " *de facto* " segregation in some northern districts, a product of racial housing patterns, whereas in the South the segregation had been " *de jure* ," a product of state laws overturned by the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964.

When the Stennis amendment was first introduced it seemed unlikely to pass as it was only supported by southern segregationists. However, support for the amendment picked up steam after Senator Abraham Ribicoff, a Connecticut Democrat, announced he would vote in favor, claiming that Stennis "wants to make honest men of us Northern liberals." This was a fraud, as Ribicoff and other northern Democrats were entering into a devil's pact with southern segregationists to undermine the first of the major civil rights laws of the 1960s

The Stennis amendment would pass the Senate by a vote of 56 to 36, but was subsequently removed in a Senate-House conference committee so that its imposition of funding cutoffs only applied to school districts where *de jure* segregation was found in defiance of the Civil Rights Act.

President Richard Nixon welcomed the controversy. The Stennis amendment's aim of provoking opposition in the North to the gains of the civil rights movement was consonant with his "southern strategy" of winning over to the Republican Party the most reactionary political elements of the formerly "solid" Democratic South.

75 years ago: Allies begin murderous firebombing of Dresden

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On February 13, 1945, British and American warplanes began a series of raids targeting Dresden, the densely populated capital of the German state of Saxony. The massive bombardment would result in the destruction of much of the city, after causing massive firestorms that tore through its primarily wooden structures. The enormous civilian casualties were entirely predictable and were in fact the purpose of the bombing campaign, which, as was commonplace among all the imperialist powers in World War II, targeted the working class.

The bombing operation was planned and launched amid an acute crisis of the Nazi regime. Allied advances in western and eastern Europe meant that a full-scale invasion of Germany was anticipated within months. The expulsion of Nazi forces from France had created a base for forward Allied operations targeting Germany proper. At the same time, German troops and civilians were carrying out a much more ferocious resistance to the advancing Soviet Red Army in Eastern Europe.

Dresden was targeted because it was thought to be the largest city that had not yet suffered any destruction as a result of the war. It was a center of industrial production, with over 50,000 workers employed in an estimated 110 factories. Some of them produced supplies for the war effort, including anti-aircraft and field guns, along with civilian supplies such as optics devices, gears and electric gauges.

The first of the British aircraft were dispatched on February 13, 1945, in a party of 254 Lancasters from Bomber Command's 83 Squadron. They carried 375 tons of incendiary material, designed to trigger unstoppable fires, and 500 tons of high explosives. On February 14, some 2,100 bombers from the US Air Force joined the assault, dropping hundreds of more tons of explosives and incendiaries. The bombardment continued the following day.

According to the Dresden police, the offensive resulted in a single massive blaze that engulfed the old quarter of the city and surrounding suburbs, destroying some 12,000 homes. Hundreds of factories, public buildings, schools and hospitals were also levelled.

Lothar Metzger, a civilian survivor of the attack, later wrote: "We saw terrible things: cremated adults shrunk to the size of small children, pieces of arms and legs, dead people, whole families burnt to death, burning people ran to and fro, burnt coaches filled with civilian refugees, dead rescuers and soldiers, many were calling and looking for their children and families, and fire everywhere, everywhere fire, and all the time the hot wind of the firestorm threw people back into the burning houses they were trying to escape from."

Modern estimates place the death toll from the three-day offensive at approximately 25,000. Many more suffered injuries ranging from severe burns to the effects of massive smoke inhalation.

100 years ago: Polish military celebrates outlet to Baltic Sea

On February 10, 1920, the military of the new nationalist regime in Poland performed a "wedding to the sea" ceremony in the Baltic Sea town of Puck to symbolize the acquisition of territory along the Baltic coast carved out from the territory of the former German Empire. The territory was later known as the "Danzig corridor," after German city adjacent to it (today's Gdansk), which became an independent "free city" under the protection of the League of Nations.

The ceremony was performed by General Jozef Haller, commander of the Polish Army's Pomeranian Front, who rode at the head of a cavalry to Puck from a nearby train station. He was met by a delegation of Polish civilians of Danzig, and a group of Kashubians, an ethnic group who spoke a language related to Polish and lived in the area. After a ceremony officiated by a Catholic priest, Heller threw two platinum rings into a hole cut in the ice, announcing, "In the name of the Holy Republic of Poland, I, General Jozef Haller, am taking control of this ancient Slavic Baltic Sea shore."

The Treaty of Versailles, under the auspices of the new League of Nations, had ceded Pomeralia, the eastern region of Pomerania, to the new Polish state. The region was a part of the Polish Corridor, which separated two regions of the new German Weimar Republic, East Prussia to the east and the main body of Germany to the west. Originally proposed by American President Woodrow Wilson in his Fourteen Points, the Polish corridor to the Baltic aimed to make newly created Poland a more viable state with naval and trade access to the sea, and thereby to create a barrier against the socialist revolution that had emerged in Tsarist Russia to the east, as well as against a potentially revanchist Germany to the west.

The abolition of Polish Corridor and the seizure of Danzig became key political goals in the German imperialism in the invasion of Poland in 1939. Then, after the defeat of Nazism in 1945, millions of Germans fled from the corridor, Danzig, and East Prussia. These regions became parts of the Stalinist Polish People's Republic in 1947 and remain a part of capitalist Poland today.

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