

This week in history: March 9-15

9 March 2020

25 years ago: US Republicans push forward tax cut bonanza for the wealthy

On March 14, 1995, the House Means and Ways Committee voted to approve a Republican plan to cut federal taxes by \$189 billion over the following five years, and nearly \$700 billion over the following 10 years, with the majority of the cut benefiting the wealthiest individuals and families.

In a 21-14 party-line vote, the committee approved a bill that combined the tax provisions of four separate proposals in the Republican “Contract with America,” their political platform in the 1994 elections. The amalgamation had a clear political purpose: to conceal measures like a huge cut in the capital gains tax and more favorable depreciation rules for the rich, by focusing attention on tax credits for middle-income families and the elderly.

More than half the tax benefits, 51.5 percent, went to the wealthiest 12 percent of families, those making over \$100,000 a year, while fully 20 percent went to the top 1 percent, or those making over \$200,000 per year. Capital gains for individuals were indexed for inflation. Large stockholders only paid for capital gains which were higher than the rate of inflation for a given year.

The bill included a series of provisions which gave relatively small benefits to middle-income families, including a \$500-per-child tax credit for families with incomes up to \$200,000 a year; a \$500-per-person tax credit for taking care of an elderly relative in the home; and a \$5,000 tax credit for the cost of adopting a child.

These provisions were not refundable, meaning that the poorest sections of the working class—those who either paid no income tax or only a small amount—would not be able to collect the credit. The provisions were arranged so that the tax plan could be presented as a windfall for the middle class rather than for the capitalist class.

President Bill Clinton proposed his own, more modest, tax cut proposals, to be offset, like those of the Republicans, by massive social spending cuts. This only whetted the Republicans’ appetite. Led by Newt Gingrich, they forced federal government shutdowns in 1995 and 1996, with the outcome still more in tax cuts for the wealthy.

According to a 2008 study by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, the “drop in effective tax rates for the top 400 filers between 1995 and 2005 worked out to a tax reduction of \$25 million per filer in 2005, or to a total of \$10 billion in tax reductions for these 400 households.”

On March 11, 1970 the nationalist government of Iraq, represented by Vice President Saddam Hussein, signed a peace agreement with Mustafa Barzani, the leader of the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), which had been waging a war for Kurdish autonomy in Iraq’s northern region. The agreement brought an end to the First Iraqi–Kurdish War and granted some elements of self-government to Kurds.

The Iraqi-Kurdish Autonomy Agreement of 1970, as the treaty was known, provided that Kurds would be admitted to participate in the Iraqi government, including senior positions in the cabinet and the army, and in parliament. Along with political rights, the agreement provided that the Kurdish language would be an official language in areas of Kurdish majority and would be taught in schools alongside Arabic. In addition, those displaced in the war would be permitted to return to their homes.

The war began in 1961 after Barzani came into the leadership of the KDP, putting forward a nationalist program built around the strivings of the Kurdish bourgeoisie. He organized a military force called the Peshmerga to serve as the military arm of the KDP. Weapons were supplied by Iran, Israel, and the CIA, who believed a war between the Iraqi government and the Kurds would significantly destabilize the Baathist regime. As the Peshmerga waged a guerilla war on Iraqi positions, the Baathist government responded with a scorched earth campaign directed against villages and farms. This included the use of napalm, supplied by the United States in an earlier period, when it had supported the Baathists as a counterweight to the country’s massive Communist Party, which the CIA helped to physically liquidate.

The war was a deadly stalemate. Estimates place the number of casualties as 100,000 with an additional 80,000 having been displaced and forced to leave their homes. Only after a significant Kurdish victory in a 1966 battle near the city of Rawanduz did Iraqi leaders begin discussing the possibility of a settlement. However, instability within the Baghdad ruling circle, concluding in the 1968 coup that further deepened Baathist control of the government, stalled any agreement until the 1970 treaty.

The agreement did not last long, with the Baathist regime seeking from the beginning to weaken the Kurdish position. After a failed assassination attempt on Barzani in 1971, Kurds began rearming Peshmerga forces and preparing for a new struggle that would erupt in 1974.

75 years ago: US firebombing of Tokyo kills 100,000 Japanese

50 years ago: Iraqi and Kurdish leaders sign peace agreement

On the night of March 9, 1945, the US Air Force began firebombing Tokyo with a force of hundreds of bombers. The attack was a war crime, calculated to inflict maximum damage on civilian infrastructure and to incinerate the city's housing stock, largely built of wood. The planners of the bombing knew that the assault would result in mass civilian casualties, whose purpose was to terrorize the working class in Japan, throughout Asia and internationally.

Limited US bombing campaigns targeting Tokyo had begun as early as 1942. Planning for a full-scale offensive was escalated in February 1945, amid a crisis of the Japanese imperial army throughout the region, in line with the disintegration of the fascist regimes around the world.

The US had, in February, launched a massive assault on the fortified Japanese island of Iwo Jima, resulting in tens of thousands of military casualties and the destruction of a large part of the country's air force. At the beginning of March, it had secured control of Manila, the capital of the Philippines, in a bloody battle that took a major toll on Japanese forces.

The US air force had, over the previous two years, acquired hundreds of Boeing B-29 Superfortress bombers. The planes were capable of attacking from a higher altitude than earlier models, allowing them to drop their payloads from a height of 30,000 feet or more. This increased the difficulty of intercepting them.

On the night of March 9, 334 B-29s were dispatched, with 279 of them carrying bombs. They were equipped with 500-pound E-46 cluster bombs which released 38 napalm-carrying M-69 incendiary bomblets. Over the course of the night, 1,665 tons of the devices were dropped on the most densely populated areas of Tokyo.

They pierced the thin tin roofs that were common to homes throughout the city, or landed on the ground. Three to five seconds later, they exploded, emitting jets of flaming napalm. The initial party of 225 bombers rapidly overwhelmed Japanese defenses. Significantly, they targeted the most densely populated working-class districts near the docks in the Koto and Ch?? city wards. The bombardment resulted in a massive and uncontrollable firestorm.

The US and Japanese authorities estimated that the assault claimed 100,000 civilian lives. Recent estimates have suggested that the real toll may have been between 125,000 and 200,000.

100 years ago: German military stages unsuccessful “Kapp Putsch”

On March 13, 1920, elements of the German army staged a coup d'état, or *putsch*, against the Weimar Republic, at that time headed by the Social Democrat (SPD) Frederick Ebert.

On the orders of General Walther von Luetwitz, right-wing paramilitary units known as the Freikorps began to move into Berlin on the evening of March 12. By 1:00 a.m. Weimar Defense Minister Gustav Noske, a leading Social Democrat, summoned military leaders to a meeting. Officers refused to defend government buildings or to fire on the rebels.

The government cabinet met at 4:00 a.m. and issued a call for a

general strike by workers, but by 6:00 a.m. ministers were forced to flee to Dresden, and units of the regular army occupied the Reichs Chancellery.

The right-wing publicist Wolfgang Kapp, a monarchist and member of parliament, working with Luetwitz, declared himself Chancellor. Military leaders in a number of German states accepted the legitimacy of the Kapp regime, but the new government did not yet enjoy the support of significant sections of the state apparatus, such as civil servants, who refused to report to work, as well as elements of the judiciary.

The putsch quickly revealed the revolutionary potential of the working class. Over the next two days the call of the SPD for a general strike was joined by the Independent Social Democrats (USPD) and the Communists (KPD). Over 12 million workers struck against the coup and paralyzed the country. Essential services were stopped in Berlin. The putsch collapsed by March 17.

Luetwitz had been planning a coup for weeks but was forced to move early because of the threat by the government to disband units of the Freikorps. These paramilitaries had been used by the Ebert government to suppress the November Revolution of 1918 and to murder Communist leaders Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg in January 1919.

Adolf Hitler, who had recently founded the Nazi party, supported the coup and flew to Berlin. He was questioned by striking workers when he landed at an airfield but managed to escape in disguise and reach Berlin after the putsch had collapsed.



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