

This week in history: May 18-24

18 May 2020

25 years ago: Clinton and Republicans move forward with historic budget cuts

On May 18, 1995, the United States House of Representatives passed its version of the deficit reduction plan by a vote of 238 to 193, with eight Democrats joining the Republican majority. The Clinton administration had been moving forward with the plan for unprecedented cuts to federal spending, wiping out social programs and destroying jobs. The campaign to destroy social programs was conducted by both parties under the banner of “deficit reduction” and the need to balance the federal budget.

Clinton endorsed all but \$1.5 billion of the \$16.5 billion in cuts passed by the Senate but had threatened to veto the first specific spending bill from the Republican-controlled Congress. The maneuver allowed Clinton to posture demagogically as a defender of education programs while bargaining cuts with Newt Gingrich, speaker of the House of Representatives, and Robert Dole, Senate majority leader.

The Senate voted May 25 to approve a seven-year budget blueprint drafted by Senate Budget Committee Chairman Pete Domenici. All 54 Republicans were joined by Democrats Robert Kerrey, Sam Nunn, and Charles Robb to provide the 57-42 margin. A conference committee of Democrats and Republicans from both houses was appointed to work out a consensus budget bill after recess.

The House plan called for a \$350 billion tax cut, heavily weighted to the wealthy through cuts in capital gains, more favorable depreciation write-offs, and other loopholes. The House plan also provided for \$43 billion more in military spending than the Senate’s.

Both plans cut more than \$1 trillion in projected spending on Medicare, Medicaid, federal entitlement programs for the poor like AFDC and food stamps, and other domestic programs ranging from agriculture to mass transit to NASA.

The Senate plan cut \$256 billion from Medicare and \$175 billion from Medicaid, while the House version cut \$283 billion and \$187 billion, respectively. Both eliminated Medicaid as a federal entitlement program, transforming it into a block grant provided to the states.

The Clinton administration had repeatedly signaled it was ready to work out a budget-cutting deal with the Republicans, though an impasse in negotiations between Congress and the White House would lead to the government shutdown between November 1995 and January 1996.

50 years ago: East and West German leaders hold summit

On May 21, 1970, Chancellor Willy Brandt of West Germany and Premier Willi Stoph of East Germany met in Kassel, a city in the West German state of Hesse near the border with East Germany. Stoph was the first East German leader to visit West Germany since the country had been divided by the Soviet Union and the imperialist powers of the US, UK, and France following the defeat of Nazi Germany at the end of WWII into a capitalist German Federal Republic (BRD) and a Stalinist German Democratic Republic (DDR).

Brandt presented a 20-point proposal for how the states should go about normalizing relations. The proposal, more rhetoric than policy, included language regarding respecting human rights, freedom of movement, and non-interference in domestic affairs between the East and West. Brandt also made comments insisting that, if adopted, the points would be initial steps to reunification.

Stoph, however, rejected the proposal, emphasizing his desire for a treaty that would give East Germany international recognition as an independent state. West Germany, backed by the United States, treated East Germany as an illegal government. Only the other Warsaw Pact countries and a handful of Arab nations had officially recognized the DDR. Stoph charged Brandt with subordinating the West German government to “the global strategic aims of American foreign and military policy.”

Rival demonstrators, some from the neo-Nazi National Democratic Party, others from the West German Stalinist party, the KPD, clashed during Stoph’s visit. As part of the trip’s agenda, Stoph had planned to travel to lay flowers at the site of a memorial to the victims of Nazism. Right-wing protesters had gathered in large numbers to block his entrance and shouted death threats at the East German leader.

The newly organized German Trotskyist group held a meeting in Kassel which provided the only serious political analysis of the Brandt-Stoph summit. They explained that while Brandt supported capitalism in both the West and the East, the Stalinist program in East Germany had abandoned even building socialism in one country and had settled for less than half a country while banning any socialist organization that advocated an alternative program.

The Trotskyists issued a series of demands, among them, full trade union rights, including the right to strike, in both east and west; the legalization of the KPD in West Germany and of all socialist and working-class parties in East Germany; and unrestricted right to travel between East and West Germany, in preparation for the reunification of Germany on a proletarian and socialist basis.

75 years ago: British wartime coalition government ends

On May 21, 1945, the British Labour Party voted to withdraw support for the Conservative Party government of Winston Churchill, ending a *de facto* wartime coalition. The move prompted Churchill's resignation on May 25, at the request of King George VI, and his formation of a caretaker ministry that would govern the country until elections were held on July 5.

The Labour Party action was a response to mounting social expectations within the working class after years of Depression-era conditions and the privations of the Second World War. Labour withdrew its support from Churchill only after the effective victory of Britain and the Allied powers in the European conflict, with the surrender of Nazi Germany just weeks before.

Previously, Labour had supported Churchill's repressive measures, including bans on strikes and industrial action, enforced with the backing of Labour and the Stalinist Communist Party, and the attacks on the Trotskyist movement. Labour had done nothing to oppose raids on the London headquarters of the Revolutionary Communist Party, British section of the Fourth International, in April 1944. Its leaders were charged with illegal striking, incitement, and conspiracy offences in the first use of the Trades Disputes Act after it was introduced following the 1926 General Strike.

Labour's support for the Conservative government also implicated it in such crimes as the Allied bombing of densely populated civilian centers in Germany, such as Dresden, which constituted a war crime aimed at intimidating the European working class. Earlier in 1945, Labour had supported Churchill's brutal suppression of anti-fascist partisans in Greece, who were attacked by British troops seeking to ensure the restabilization of capitalism in territories formerly occupied by Nazi Germany.

The Labour leadership feared a growing popular radicalization and recognized that it needed to separate itself from Churchill in order to capture and contain the leftward movement of the working class. This shift to the left was reflected in the July election, which Labour won in a landslide, securing 393 seats compared to the Conservatives' 213 and forming a majority government for the first time. In office, Labour would implement a series of social reforms, including the establishment of the National Health Service, amid the post-war boom of capitalism and the suppression of the revolutionary struggles of the working class throughout Europe.

100 years ago: Battle between coal miners and company thugs in Matewan, West Virginia

On May 19, 1920, in what has come to be known as the Battle of Matewan, West Virginia coal miners confronted agents from the

Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency who had been hired by the Stone Mountain Coal Company to evict miners and their families from company housing.

Police chief Sid Hatfield and miners whom he had deputized attempted to arrest the agents at the train station as they sought to leave town, including Albert Felts, the brother of Baldwin-Felts co-owner Thomas Felts.

Albert Felts claimed he had an arrest warrant for Hatfield. Miners then brought in the mayor, Cable Testerman, who had earlier refused bribes from Baldwin-Felts to allow them to set up machine-gun nests in town. Testerman told them, "This is a bogus warrant."

An exchange of fire followed immediately. Testerman was killed. Hatfield shot Albert Felts, who also died. Altogether, ten men died, three from the miners' side and seven Baldwin-Felts thugs.

The successful defense by miners of their rights in the face of company violence sent shockwaves throughout the coal field and strengthened union support.

The Battle of Matewan was a key event in the West Virginia Coal Wars that lasted from 1912 to 1921, essentially a sporadic civil war fought between miners and the coal operators in a period of mass working class struggle.

In November 1919, some 400,000 coal miners had struck in the American coalfields, in a movement that began with a defense campaign for jailed socialist leader Tom Mooney. The Great Steel strike occurred that year in the United States, part of a global upsurge of the working class that included the Russian Revolution of 1917.

The Battle of Matewan and the other episodes in the Coal Wars represent one of the most heroic periods of the struggles of the international working class. Filmmaker John Sayles effectively portrayed the events of May 19, 1920 in his 1987 movie *Matewan*.



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