

This week in history: December 7-13

6 December 2020

25 years ago: Galileo spacecraft reaches Jupiter

On December 7, 1995, the spacecraft Galileo reached Jupiter in a stable orbit around the giant planet, demonstrating the extraordinary capabilities of science and technology.

Galileo completed a 2.5 billion-mile flight from Earth, overcoming an array of problems, and became the first manmade craft to orbit one of the four giant outer planets of the solar system. A probe launched by Galileo provided the first direct measurements of the electrochemical characteristics of Jupiter, relaying data to the orbiting spacecraft for 75 minutes until it was destroyed—either crushed by pressure or incinerated by the heat of the Jovian atmosphere.

At a total 20-year cost of \$1.3 billion—less than the Pentagon squandered on a single Trident nuclear submarine in 1995—the landmark mission revolutionized man’s understanding of the giant gaseous planets—Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune—which comprised the bulk of the solar system outside the sun itself.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, and amid the media’s relentless praise of capitalist competition as the high-point of civilization, the Galileo mission showed quite the opposite—a striking vindication of highly organized and consciously planned cooperative human activity.

The initial conception of the Galileo mission was developed by NASA during the Ford administration, and many of the scientists and engineers devoted 20 years, virtually their entire careers, to the effort. More than 10,000 scientists were employed on Galileo and at critical moments were mobilized round-the-clock to solve problems which threatened the project. The 1986 Challenger disaster pushed back the launching of the spacecraft and forced a complete redesign of its flight path, since it was considered dangerous to carry out the original notion of lifting a Centaur rocket booster into orbit around the Earth that would have blasted Galileo directly towards Jupiter. A new path was designed, making use of the gravitational pull of other planets to sling the craft into its correct trajectory.

Galileo was launched in 1989. It spent a total of eight years in the Jovian system, mapping the complex of satellites, which includes the four “Galilean” moons, visible to the great Italian astronomer through his early telescope, and dozens of smaller ones. The mission was terminated on September 20, 2003, by sending Galileo into Jupiter’s atmosphere at a very high speed to incinerate it and prevent potential contamination of other moons in the solar system by bacteria from Earth.

50 years ago: Democratic Congress outlaws US rail strike

On December 10, 1970, American rail workers went on strike after federal rules that made strikes by railway workers illegal expired. Contract negotiations between the Brotherhood of Railway and Airline Clerks and the railroad owners had stalled, with the Democratic-controlled Congress backing the railroads by continually extending the anti-worker laws.

The moment the rule expired, at 12:01 a.m., hundreds of thousands of rail workers walked off the job and brought over 150 rail lines to a standstill. The strike threatened to paralyze the US economy. The railway shutdown would have affected the transportation of over 600,000 daily commuters, the distribution of coal for electricity production, and 98 percent of all other freight carried by rail.

The major issue in the strike was wages. From 1969, when the negotiations began, workers demanded an increase in pay of between 40-45 percent over the next three years. In addition, workers called for increases in vacation days and limiting the distance that train crews could travel in one day.

A settlement between the unions and the railways was attempted in September 1970, but also failed. Knowing that they had the support of the federal government to crush a strike, the railway owners refused to meet any demands. Workers went on strike at three railroads on September 15, but a federal court quickly declared the strike illegal and ordered workers back on the job.

Afterwards, President Richard Nixon and Secretary of Transportation John A. Volpe created an emergency mediation board to oversee the negotiations and present a report to the White House. Under the Railway Labor Act, workers cannot strike for 30 days after a presidential mediation board issues its report. The December 10 strike came at the end of this “cooling off” period.

When the strike began, Congress convened in an emergency late-night session to pass legislation that would declare the workers’ action illegal. Democrats held large majorities in both houses: 243-192 in the House of Representatives and 58-42 in the US Senate. In just a few hours the bill had passed through both houses of Congress and was signed by Republican President Nixon shortly after 2:00 a.m. In a statement after signing the anti-strike law, Nixon said a strike would “impede an orderly economic expansion” and that strikers must “immediately return to work.”

Even after the law was passed, workers remained determined to fight for improvements in their conditions. When asked if he would defy the law passed by Congress or order the strike to end, president of the Railway Clerks, C.L. Dennis said, “The chances are, regardless of what I did, that members of our union will

strike.”

The strike continued for one day, ending in the evening of December 10. After workers refused to recognize the law and to go back on the job, the federal courts intervened and issued a fine of \$200,000 per day on the unions until the strike was called off. Dennis complied with the courts and called off the strike. The law passed by Congress was in effect until March 1, 1971, at which time it would become legal for workers to strike again.

75 years ago: Stalinists betray Italian workers

On December 10, 1945, Alcide De Gasperi, leader of the right-wing Christian Democracy party, was installed as prime minister in an effective national unity government supported by the entire Italian political establishment and the Allied imperialist powers, Britain, France and the United States.

The deal hinged on the support of the Soviet Union and the Stalinists of the Communist Party of Italy. The establishment of the government was a desperate attempt to shore up capitalist rule amid the social and political upheavals accompanying the defeat of the fascist forces at the conclusion of World War II. In Italy, the workers and peasants, having done most of the fighting against the fascist regime of Benito Mussolini, had power literally in their hands.

The Stalinists joined De Gasperi’s government in line with the agreement struck between the ruling bureaucracy in the Soviet Union and the Allied imperialist powers. This provided for the establishment of capitalist governments throughout Western Europe in exchange for a Soviet sphere of influence in the east of the continent. It entailed the Stalinists joining forces with openly right-wing forces in the suppression of revolutionary struggles of the working class throughout Europe.

From September 1943, the northern half of the country had been ruled by Mussolini’s supporters and occupying German troops, while an unstable regime aligned with the Allies was created in the south. As the fascist forces were defeated in April, Mussolini was executed by Italian partisans, many of whom were intent on settling accounts with the Italian ruling elite as a whole. The Allies, including the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union, did everything they could to prop up the Italian bourgeoisie, discredited by its support for fascism. This included the entrance of the Communist Party into De Gasperi’s government, which was also joined by the Italian Socialist Party of Proletarian Unity, the Labour Democratic Party and the Liberal Party.

De Gasperi had come into conflict with Mussolini in the 1920s, as the latter consolidated a one-party dictatorship. De Gasperi was protected by the Catholic Church. Despite his clashes with Mussolini, throughout the 1930s De Gasperi declared that the principal conflict was between Christianity and communism, and defended the Church’s alignment with the Nazis in Germany. In the latter stages of the war, he played a central role in forming the Christian Democracy party, which jockeyed against socialist-minded forces for control of the partisan movement.

100 years: British burn Irish city of Cork

On December 11, 1920, in a coordinated action, British troops and police auxiliaries known as the Black-and-Tans set fire to residences, businesses and municipal buildings in the city of Cork in the southwest of Ireland.

At 9:30 p.m. truckloads of soldiers and Black-and-Tans arrived at the neighborhood of Dillon’s Cross. The soldiers began expelling civilians from their houses in the area and set fire to six houses. Civilians who attempted to interfere were beaten and shot.

Dillon’s Cross was the area where, earlier in the day, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) had attacked a convoy of Black-and-Tans escorting a British intelligence officer as they left a nearby British barracks. In that action, the IRA had killed one soldier and wounded 12 Black-and-Tans.

Streetcars in other parts of the city were stopped by Black-and-Tans, and riders were ordered out, to be beaten and robbed. Some streetcars were set on fire.

On St. Patrick’s Street, in the city’s main commercial district, witnesses reported seeing soldiers and Black-and-Tans pouring oil on buildings and throwing incendiary bombs into them. Others smashed shop windows and fired their weapons indiscriminately. When firefighters arrived they were prevented from quelling the blaze. Black-and-Tans fired on them and cut up and flattened hoses.

The fires spread around the city into the early morning of December 12. At about 4:00 a.m., an explosion was heard in the center of town and the Cork City Hall went up in flames. The nearby Carnegie Library also burned, resulting in the loss of thousands of public records.

All told, the British imperialists burned over 300 residences and 40 businesses. Thousands were left homeless and jobless. Over the course of the conflagration, the Black-and-Tans killed two IRA soldiers and the IRA killed one Black-and-Tan. Men believed to be British agents summarily executed two brothers who were involved in the original attack on the British convoy.



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