This week in history: December 14-20

13 December 2020

25 years ago: Workers inquiry issue findings in the death of Joy Gardner

On December 14, 1995, the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International issued the findings of the Workers Inquiry into the death of Joy Gardner, a 40-year-old immigrant from Jamaica and mother of two who died as the result of a July 1993 police raid on her home in London.

The ICFI initiated the inquiry in June 1995 during the trial of three members of a special police unit, the Alien Deportation Group, who had participated in the raid. The official trial was part of a cover-up by the government, the police, and the legal system

The ICFI convened the Workers Inquiry on November 4-5. It heard detailed evidence demonstrating that Gardner died as a result of oxygen starvation caused by the police use of body belts and a gag made from 13 feet of adhesive tape.

Among the witnesses was Gardner's mother, Myra Simpson, who focused on the fatal events of July 28, 1993, and refuted the attempts of the police and the media to brand Joy as violent and responsible for her own death. The Inquiry also took testimony from the relatives of other individuals murdered by the police.

The Inquiry found that Gardner's murder was part of an attack on democratic rights and the build-up of state repression against all workers. The inquiry stressed that the defense of immigrant workers was central to the defense of democratic rights of the working class as a whole. It called for the unity of all working people against the state and its repressive apparatus and warned that this could be achieved only in opposition to the Labour Party and trade union bureaucracy.

50 years ago: Poland strike wave threatens Stalinist bureaucracy

On December 14, 1970, Polish workers in the port city of Gdansk walked off the job protesting the announcement by the Stalinist government, led by W?adys?aw Gomu?ka, that there would be a major increase in food and fuel prices. The strikes quickly spread to other areas throughout Poland, but were strongest in the northern port cities including Gdansk, Gdynia, Elbl?g, and Szczecin.

The rapid growth and widespread support for the strikes threatened the Stalinist bureaucracies in Poland and throughout Soviet bloc. Gomu?ka responded with brutal repression. Tanks, armored cars, and more than 30,000 soldiers and police forces were deployed to suppress the strikes and head off an all-out uprising by the Polish working class. Some 3,000 arrests were made, more than 1,000 injuries were reported, and at least 44 workers were killed by the police forces.

In the single bloodiest moment, on "Black Thursday," December 17, soldiers were ordered to fire their guns into a crowd of workers as they emerged from trains on their way to a major demonstration in the Gdynia shipyards. Among the several killed was an 18-year-old shipyard worker named Zbyszek Godlewski. Surviving workers carried Godlewski's body on a door through the streets of Gdynia to show other workers what had occurred, drawing thousands more into the demonstrations.

Infuriated with the brutal response by the Stalinist bureaucracy, workers fought with police in the streets and burned down party office buildings. In Gdansk, the Communist Party leadership surrendered to workers, flying a white flag out of their office window, and walking out of the building with their hands in the air.

Contrary to reports in the capitalist newspapers at the time, the demonstrations were not anti-communist but were anti-Stalinist. When the strikes began in Gdansk, workers marched out of the docks singing the "Internationale." Slogans chanted by strikers and written on walls included "We want food" and "We are workers, not roughnecks." In Szczecin, workers formed a city soviet to coordinate strikes among hundreds of

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workplaces.

Realizing the revolutionary potential of the situation, the Stalinist leaders called an emergency meeting in Warsaw. With the approval of Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev, it was determined that the only way to avoid losing power was to offer concessions.

By December 20, Gomu?ka had announced his resignation as First Secretary of the Polish Communist Party and his retirement from political life for “health reasons.” His replacement Edward Gierek promised that the price increases would be rescinded and that there would be wage increases for workers in the major industries. However, this did not go into effect until after a new strike wave broke out in ?ód? in February 1971, demanding the immediate reversal of the price increases.

75 years ago: Stalinists install Social Democratic government in Austria

On December 20, 1945, a new Austrian government composed of the country’s Social Democratic and Communist parties was formally established, following the defeat of the Nazi regime in May.

The composition of the government was the same as a provisional administration that had been set up in April, when Soviet troops ousted the Nazis from Austria. Longtime Social Democratic leaders Karl Renner and Adolf Schärf were installed as president and vice-chancellor, while Leopold Figl of the People’s Party became chancellor.

Renner had made a career out of betraying the working class. He had a hand in all of the Social Democratic Party’s treacheries, including support for the imperialist First World War and the violent suppression of the 1918-19 revolutionary upheavals that followed it. He had previously worked to stabilize capitalist rule amid mass working class opposition, as Austrian chancellor from 1918 to 1920. Renner had also advocated a “yes” vote in the 1938 referendum to ratify Hitler’s Anschluss, or annexation of Austria into Nazi Germany.

Under the Renner government, Austria would remain occupied by the Allied powers until 1955. The government sought to prevent any challenge to capitalism. It rejected calls for compensation to be paid to Jewish victims of the Nazis, allowed fascist collaborators to remain in civil offices, and repressed a significant strike movement in 1950.

The Stalinist bureaucracy in Moscow effectively handed Austria over to the imperialists after the Red Army had liberated the country from the Nazi regime. Though ostensibly “neutral” in the Cold War, in reality Austria fell solidly into the imperialist camp. This outcome was in line with the deal struck between Moscow and its imperialist allies during World War II. In exchange for establishing bourgeois governments throughout western Europe, the Stalinists were provided with a sphere of influence in the east of the continent.

100 years: Earthquake in China kills hundreds of thousands of people

On December 16, 1920, an earthquake that measured 8.5 on the Richter scale struck Haiyuan County, in what is now the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region in northwest China, an area inhabited predominantly by the Muslim Hui people. Over 70,000 people are believed to have died in the initial quake in Haiyan, almost half of the population.

The quake and aftershocks initiated a series of landslides that killed thousands more people in seven neighboring provinces. Over 600 large landslides created more than 40 new lakes. A landslide completely buried one town, Sujiahe, in nearby Xiji County. Tens of thousands more died in neighboring provinces. Some recent estimates have put the death toll as high as 273,000.

Relief efforts were scanty. Migrants from the region living in Beijing organized aid and the Kuomintang Muslim warlord Ma Fuxian, the defense minister of Ningxia, undertook some assistance as well. Although Haiyuan is mostly arid, peasants constructed traditional domiciles out of caves in the rich soil spread by the Yellow River in the northern part of the province, which were susceptible to collapse. With their structures destroyed, many died of exposure in the region’s harsh winter.

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