

This week in history: January 11-17

10 January 2021

25 years ago: Hashimoto replaces Murayama as Japan's prime minister

On January 11, 1996, Ryutaro Hashimoto, leader of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), became prime minister of Japan. He succeeded Tomiichi Murayama after the latter's sudden resignation on January 5 opened a new stage in the breakup of the postwar political system in Japan.

Murayama was the leader of the Social Democratic Party, a minority partner with the LDP in a coalition government. He resigned in the face of extensive corporate criticism of his government's failure to halt Japan's five-year-long economic slump. The immediate trigger for Hashimoto's takeover was provided by the \$9 billion (685 billion yen) bailout of agricultural cooperatives that had provided credit to the bankrupt housing cooperatives.

Murayama said Japan needed "fresh leadership to tackle unsettled issues." The leadership shift followed closely the election of Ichiro Ozawa as leader of Shinshinto (New Frontier Party), the main opposition coalition. The two leadership changes brought to the fore the two politicians known most for their aggressive assertion of Japanese interests on a global scale. Both signaled that they would pursue "Japan first" policies and simultaneously unleash major attacks on the living standards, jobs and social conditions of the Japanese working class.

While Hashimoto publicly supported the post-World War II US-Japan alliance as the basis for Japanese foreign policy, he was one of Japan's most strident opponents of US trade demands. Backed by widespread promotion in the media, Hashimoto campaigned for leadership of the LDP in 1995 on the basis of his record of defying successive US administrations to make Japan pay for the loss of US economic strength. Hashimoto became a symbol of resurgent Japanese nationalism. He was head of the Japanese war veterans association, opposed any unilateral apology for the atrocities committed by the Japanese regime during World War II, and called for the amendment of the country's constitution which restricted the deployment of troops overseas.

Domestically, Hashimoto called for lifting all restrictions on hiring of temporary staff, which at the time allowed companies to hire temporary employees only in special work categories, making it difficult for them to eliminate the "lifetime-

employment" system.

Hashimoto was a product of the political machine of the LDP, which governed Japan from 1955 to 1992. Elected to parliament in 1963 in the seat vacated by his father, he rapidly rose through the party leadership, occupying ministerial positions in health and welfare, transport and finance.

50 years ago: Aswan High Dam officially opens

On January 15, 1971, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and Soviet head of state Nikolai Podgorny led the official dedication ceremony of the Aswan High Dam. The massive project to dam the Nile River had begun over a decade earlier, in 1960.

The construction was a collaboration between the Egyptian government and the Soviet Union, which provided nearly all the funding and key engineers for the dam. At the ribbon-cutting ceremony, flags of both nations were draped along the dam. Podgorny pledged continued Soviet assistance in building the networks required to transmit the dam's new electric energy to the Egyptian population.

The damming of the Nile served two key purposes. First, it solved a centuries-old problem of flooding and drought that stretched back to the first known Egyptian civilizations. Farmers could now regulate the amount of water that would flood into fields, instead of having crops destroyed by irregular flooding or drought. This greatly improved the capacity and reliability of Egyptian agriculture. Second, the Aswan dam was a hydroelectric plant that made electricity available to many Egyptians for the first time. When it reached its peak output of 2.1 gigawatts, the Aswan Dam produced about half of the electric energy for all of Egypt.

The ceremony had originally been planned to take place earlier. It was rescheduled after the unexpected death of Egypt's President Gamal Abdel Nasser in September 1970. As a tribute to the deceased nationalist leader, the opening of the dam was moved to his birthday on January 15.

Nasser had initially looked to the US for support in providing the required funding and scientific support in building the dam. However, after the nationalization of the Suez Canal sparked a war in 1956 with US allies Israel, the United Kingdom and

France, the possibility of a US-Egypt partnership in building the dam evaporated.

Nasser then turned to the Soviet Union for aid and resources. The USSR would provide over \$1 billion in funding for the Aswan Dam project, dwarfing the \$270 million that the US had previously proposed. The dam was designed by Soviet engineers at the Hydroproject Institute, with collaboration from Egyptian engineers headed by Osman Ahmed Osman, owner of the largest Arab contracting firm in the 1960s. The USSR also supplied the required heavy machinery to move the massive amounts of rock and clay used in the dam.

75 years ago: Hundreds of thousands of US meatpackers go on strike

On January 16, 1946, some 270,000 meat workers across the US walked off the job in an indefinite stoppage that was one of a series of mass strikes in key American industries following the end of World War II.

The strike had been called by the unions covering the sector, the United Packinghouse Workers of America and the Amalgamated Meat Cutters, in response to growing demands from workers for a substantial wage increase. The stoppage hit the six largest meat suppliers in the country, sparking warnings in the press of potential meat shortages.

The meatpacking dispute followed the launching of a strike by General Motors autoworkers in October 1945, to demand a 30 percent wage rise. The administration of President Harry Truman had responded nervously, and sought to broker a compromise between United Auto Workers union officials and GM. A government-convened special committee issued a report on January 11, recommending a 19.5 percent wage increase. The proposal was rejected by company management and the strike continued.

Truman backed similar intransigence on the part of the major meat corporations. On January 24, 10 days into the strike, he ordered the seizure of the affected packinghouses, on the extraordinary grounds that the stoppage was impacting the war effort, even though the conflict had ended months before. The unions, politically allied to the Democratic Party, did nothing to oppose the government attack.

Throughout the war, they had enforced a no-strike pledge and an effective wage freeze. From 1945 to 1946, inflation increased by some 16 percent, while the wages of industrial workers rose by just 7 percent.

This would spark a spate of significant struggles, with as many as 25 percent of unionized workers participating in strike action in 1946. They included 750,000 steelworkers, who walked out on January 21 and 174,000 electrical workers who went on strike the same month.

100 years ago: US protests shooting of naval officer by Japan

On January 13, 1921, the United States Department of State sent a diplomatic note to the Japanese government protesting the killing of Naval Lieutenant Warren H. Langdon on January 8 in front of the Japanese headquarters in the Russian city of Vladivostok.

Both Japan and the United States had intervened in Siberia to help suppress the young Soviet Republic at the outset of the Russian Civil War in 1918. While the United States had withdrawn its troops from Siberia in 1920, Japan remained in control of the port of Vladivostok, and in May, had installed a puppet anti-Bolshevik government in the city.

Langdon was shot by a sentry as he was returning to his ship, the cruiser USS Albany, in the dark and holding a lantern in front of him. Before he died, Langdon, who was in uniform at the time of the shooting, stated that he had identified himself as an American. Langdon had apparently then withdrawn his revolver and headed on his way. The sentry shot him after he did not respond to further requests for identification.

The diplomatic note demanded that American officials be free to investigate the killing. Despite expressions of regret, which included numbers of Japanese officers visiting the Albany to apologize, as well as the court-martial of the Japanese sentry, the Japanese government detained two American sailors again in Vladivostok in the following weeks.

In a Japanese response to the American note, the government denied reports in the Japanese press that suggested that the Japanese police had increased surveillance over Americans in Japan. The American press observed that the Japanese communication did not address the presence of its military in Siberia.

Behind the tensions between Japan and the US was the question of which imperialist power would dominate East Asia. While the US joined with the other imperialist powers in their effort to destroy Soviet Russia in the undeclared war of 1918-1920, US President Woodrow Wilson was also motivated by fear that Japan would gain an advantage on Washington. With these concerns in mind, Wilson had sent the American Expeditionary Force to Siberia in 1918.



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