

This week in history: January 25-31

24 January 2021

25 years ago: Dozens killed in Colombo suicide bombing

On January 31, 1996, a suicide truck bomb carrying 440 pounds of explosives blew up in the downtown center of Colombo, killing nearly 100 people. Many victims were severely burned, leaving relatives identifying bodies with great difficulty.

The number of seriously injured victims exceeded 1,200, overwhelming the city's emergency facilities, despite the efforts of doctors and nurses who diligently attended to those injured. About 20 more people died in the hospital and 70 more were permanently blinded. Even more were disabled from their injuries.

Scores of bodies were believed to be trapped under the debris resulting from the collapse of a part of the Central Bank building, which was the main target of the bombing. Many other high-rise buildings in the surrounding area caught fire when the bomb exploded. It was only the spontaneous intervention of people in the vicinity, who rushed to help, that prevented the death toll from climbing much higher.

The Tamil separatist movement, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), was responsible for the attack, whose victims were mostly Sinhalese workers. The bombing strengthened reaction by casting the Tamil struggle against national oppression as a communo-ethnic conflict and thus assisted the efforts of the Sinhalese chauvinists to drive a wedge between Sinhalese workers and Tamil workers.

The Central Bank workers, under the leadership of the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, had a long history of opposing the racist war of the Colombo regimes. Members of the RCL worked there and held leading positions in the Central Bank Employees Union (CBEU). Several members of the RCL were wounded by the blast and one, Palangasinghe, was killed.

The *International Workers Bulletin*, a forerunner of the *World Socialist Web Site*, published a message of condolence from the Workers League (forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party in the US), written by David North on behalf of the ICFI.

"It is a tragic fact, and irrefutable testimony to the reactionary politics of the LTTE, that its bomb killed and injured scores of militant workers in the CBEU who had been at the forefront of principled and militant opposition to the Sri Lankan government and its war against the Tamil people. Far from delivering a blow against the Sinhalese bourgeoisie, the LTTE has done it a service by murdering Palangasinghe and many other class-conscious and socialist opponents of the PA regime."

50 years ago: Idi Amin takes power in Uganda

On January 25, 1971 Idi Amin, commander of the Ugandan Army, launched a coup d'état to oust the president, Milton Obote, from power and install himself as military dictator. The coup was launched while Obote was on a diplomatic visit to Singapore. After Amin took power Obote went to Tanzania where he remained in exile until 1979.

Obote was elected Uganda's first prime minister after independence from England in 1962. He assumed office under conditions of fierce divisions among the ruling parties. Obote's faction, the federalist Uganda People's Congress (UPC), was bitterly opposed to the semi-monarchist rule of the Kabaka, the traditional ruler of the Baganda people of Uganda.

The power struggle came to a head in the 1966 "Baganda crisis," when Obote declared a state of emergency, removed the Kabaka monarch and asserted federal rule over the Baganda region. Amin, who was previously a deputy commander, was promoted to commander-in-chief of the armed forces and carried out the attack on the Kabaka's palace.

In 1967 the parliament, now stacked with Obote loyalists, passed a new constitution that formally handed all power to Obote, abolishing the monarchy but creating a presidential dictatorship. In 1969, following an assassination attempt, Obote banned all political opposition. His secret police viciously persecuted his rivals.

During Obote's presidency a break emerged between him and Amin. In October 1970, Obote had Amin demoted from commander-in-chief of the full military forces to commander of the Army. Obote had by then begun implementing his so-called "move to the left" program of economic reforms and limited nationalizations of the banks and corporations, many of which were owned by foreign capital.

Amin, who had been trained by British military officers, began receiving backing from Great Britain and Israel to oust Obote and establish a government more friendly to imperialist interests. While Obote was abroad, Amin assumed total control of the military and carried out his coup, arresting and executing Obote's supporters.

In power, Amin oversaw a brutal military dictatorship. Within the military there were constant purges of those suspected of disloyalty and mass killings carried out against political opponents. An estimated 300,000 to 500,000 people suspected of political opposition were killed by the Amin dictatorship. In 1972 Amin expelled over 60,000 people of South Asian ancestry living in Uganda, seized their property and turned it over to his supporters.

Amin would go on to break with the western imperialist countries and form alliances with Muammar Gaddafi in Libya and the Soviet Union who helped prop up Amin's crisis-ridden government with financial and military support. Amin remained in power until the 1979 Uganda-Tanzania War when an alliance between Tanzania and exiled Ugandans ousted his regime and returned Obote to power.

75 years ago: Norwegian Social Democrat Trygve Lie elected first UN secretary general

On January 19, 1946, Trygve Lie, a long-time Norwegian Social Democratic leader, was unanimously elected to be secretary general of the United Nations (UN) by the organization's Security Council, dominated by the Allied powers that had been victorious in the Second World War.

Preparations for the formation of the UN had been initiated by the United States, Britain and the Soviet Union, in the latter stages of the war, as it became clear that Nazi Germany and Japan would shortly be defeated. Meetings in 1944 were followed by the UN Conference on International Organization in April 1945, as the successful Allied invasion of Germany was under way.

The central purposes of the new organization were to assist in the establishment of a new international order mapped out by the Allies and aimed at ensuring their dominance. This was to entail the regulation of the inter-imperialist conflicts that had led to the Second World War, and the restabilization of capitalism throughout Europe, amid mass working class struggles that threatened social revolution. Lie's election reflected the central role of the Social Democrats internationally in these efforts.

Lie was a compromise candidate. His selection was aimed at preventing a breach between the Soviet Union and the other Allied powers. Soviet representatives had expressed their hostility to moves for the installation of a politician from Britain or the US, fearing that this would be used to undermine the Stalinist bureaucracy in Eastern Europe and elsewhere. Media speculation had suggested that Anthony Eden, war-time foreign minister of the United Kingdom, and General Dwight Eisenhower, the US general and supreme commander of allied forces in Europe, had been under consideration.

In his tenure, from 1946 to 1952, Lie would faithfully serve the imperialist powers. This included his advocacy for the creation of Israel as an imperialist beachhead in the Middle East and support for the US-led war in Korea.

As Minister of Justice in Norway's then Social Democratic government, Lie had permitted exiled Russian Marxist leader Leon Trotsky to enter the country in June 1935. Under pressure from the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union, Lie oversaw the imposition of increasingly onerous conditions on Trotsky, including effective house arrest. This prevented Trotsky from replying to the first of the frame-up Moscow Trials launched by the Stalinist bureaucracy. In late 1936, Lie instructed Trotsky to leave the country.

The Social Democratic government fled the country when Norway was invaded by the Nazis in 1940, without mounting any serious military struggle, much less mobilizing the country's working class.

100 years ago: Play *R.U.R* first performed in Prague

On January 25, 1921, the play by Karel Čapek, *Rossum's Universal Robots* (Czech: *Rossumovi Umělí Roboti*), usually abbreviated as *R.U.R*, was first performed at the National Theater in Prague, in what was then Czechoslovakia.

The play is best known for adding the word "robot"—from the Czech word *robata*, ("forced labor" or "serf")—to the world's languages and for first elaborating the concept of artificial— but humanized—workers to world literature.

In the play, a scientist named Rossum begins to manufacture artificial workers in a factory in the South Pacific. These artificial worker-slaves look like human beings and can think. Eventually the roboti rebel and destroy the human race. Tragically, because the human scientists are gone, the roboti do not know how to reproduce themselves.

The play became an international sensation. It was performed in New York in 1922 (where actor Spencer Tracy made his Broadway debut in the play) and London in 1923 and many times throughout the 1920s and 1930s. The concept of artificial, autonomous human beings, while not an invention of Čapek, entered into 20th century literature through his play, and had a substantial influence in the development of science fiction.

American playwright Arthur Miller said of the author, "I read Karel Čapek for the first time when I was a college student long ago in the Thirties. There was no writer like him ... prophetic assurance mixed with surrealist humor and hard-edged social satire: a unique combination ... he is a joy to read."

Čapek was a liberal, and while the play does not contain explicitly socialist themes, it is clearly a product of the tumultuous class struggles in Central Europe after the First World War. Later in life Čapek became well known for his anti-fascist views and was hated by the Nazis, though he died before the German invasion of the Czech-speaking parts of Czechoslovakia in 1939. His brother, the painter and writer Josef Čapek, was murdered by the Nazis in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in 1945.



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