

This week in history: April 19-25

18 April 2021

25 years ago: Stalinist-led coalition in Italy

On April 21, 1996, general elections in Italy brought the rebranded Italian Stalinists into government for the first time in nearly 50 years. Reflecting the confidence which big business placed in the post-Stalinists, the Milan stock exchange soared 4 percent the day after the vote.

The Stalinists who transformed the old Communist Party of Italy into the Party of the Democratic Left (PDS) in 1991, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, now had control over the largest bloc of seats in the ruling Olive Tree (Ulivo) coalition. A left-talking minority faction that rejected the total repudiation of any connection to socialism founded the Rifondazione Comunista (Refounded Communist Party). It played a key role in forming the new government, giving its votes to the Olive Tree, which won a majority over the right-wing Freedom Alliance coalition.

There was no popular mandate in the voting for either of the two coalitions, which ran on virtually identical capitalist programs of austerity and budget cutting. The PDS and the two parties which made up the Freedom Alliance coalition, the Forza Italia party of billionaire Silvio Berlusconi and the neofascist Alleanza Nazionale (National Alliance), received votes similar to those in the 1994 election, which led to Berlusconi forming a government.

The swing from “center-right” to “center-left” was accomplished by the shifting of figures from the old Christian Democratic Party, who had supported or participated in Berlusconi’s government, over to the side of the PDS.

Romano Prodi, a capitalist technocrat, took the post of prime minister in the PDS-led government. Lamberto Dini, Berlusconi’s finance minister and successor as prime minister, also ran as a candidate in the Olive Tree coalition.

The election of the PDS was not a blow against the fascists and the right-wing. The fascist AN increased its overall vote by more than 2 percent to 15.7 percent and became the largest party in Rome, where they received nearly one-third of the votes. The right-wing populist Northern League, which advocated the autonomy or independence for the industrialized north of Italy, also saw its vote rise to 3.7

million.

50 years ago: “Papa Doc” Duvalier dies, leaving 19-year-old son as Haiti’s dictator

François Duvalier, the US-backed dictator-president in Haiti, died on April 21, 1971. “Papa Doc,” as Duvalier was known, was succeeded by his 19-year-old son Jean-Claude Duvalier—“Baby Doc”—who became Haiti’s new ruler. Both Duvalier dictatorships oversaw regimes of immense political terrorism, characterized by vicious anticommunism.

Duvalier first came to power in 1957, winning election in part by promoting racial resentment of Haiti’s black majority against its mixed-race elite. Once in office, Duvalier immediately began building a police state that brutally upheld capitalist property relations, in which political dissenters were arrested, exiled or summarily executed.

Initially, the United States opposed Duvalier and supported a failed coup attempt against him in 1958. However, Duvalier’s police state proved to be a reliable asset to the US in smashing any support for socialism among the impoverished masses of Haitians. Particularly after Fidel Castro came to power in Cuba in 1959, the United States began providing support to Haiti. Duvalier was more than willing to receive the financial backing of the US to help prop up his unstable rule. With his position in Haiti strengthened by US dollars, a massive repression was unleashed on the population.

Duvalier formed the Tonton Macoutes secret police force who carried out terrible crimes against the population. The Tonton Macoutes committed assassinations, kidnappings and public executions in which bodies would be left on display as a warning to political opponents. In 1969 Duvalier announced an attempt to rid Haiti of all supposed communists. The self-declared “president for life” killed as many as 60,000 in this act of political genocide.

Taking power after his father’s death, the young Jean-Claude Duvalier inherited and continued the operations of

the police state. His regime was marked by blatant corruption that surpassed even that of his father, including syphoning funds of the Haitian treasury into personal offshore accounts.

75 years ago: German Stalinists and Social Democrats form Socialist Unity Party

On April 21, 1946, the Socialist Unity Party (SED) was formed in the Soviet-occupied sector of Germany through a merger of the Stalinist Communist Party (KPD) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD).

The new entity was established on rotten foundations. It brought together the Social Democrats, who had broken with the perspective of socialism decades before, beginning with their support for World War I, and the Stalinists, who advanced a nationalist perspective in line with the interests of the parasitic bureaucracy that had usurped political power from the working class in the Soviet Union.

The formation of the SED took place amid the political breakdown triggered by the Allied defeat of the Nazi regime in May 1945. Both the Social Democrats and the KPD, basing themselves on the deal struck between the Soviet bureaucracy and the imperialist powers in the latter stages of the war, were committed to restabilizing the global capitalist order by playing their part in suppressing the class struggle in Soviet-occupied eastern Germany, whose largest city was the divided former capital, Berlin. The crimes of the Nazis had discredited capitalism in the eyes of millions of workers and the end of the war had been accompanied by the establishment of workers councils and other forms of struggle throughout Europe.

The reformed SPD central committee was established when the Nazis were defeated. Jockeying for control of the reestablished organization, which had been smashed under fascism, they rapidly proposed a unity deal with the Stalinists. This was directed against the SPD leadership-in-exile and a group led by Kurt Schumacher in Hanover. The KPD, which was only beginning to construct its own apparatus, initially rebuffed this overture.

By April 1946, however, the Stalinists were prepared for a unification. The Berlin leadership of the SPD rapidly agreed. Schumacher and the rest of the SPD leaders who resided in the sectors of the country controlled by Britain, France and the US, opposed the deal from the standpoint of open anticommunism, fearing that it could cut across their orientation to the imperialist powers.

As the WSWs has explained, the SED represented a

“fusing of two bureaucracies.” This was possible because the SPD and KPD agreed on the fundamental political questions: the suppression of the political independence of the working class and the establishment of a bureaucratic state.

100 years ago: US pledges to dominate Latin America

On April 19, 1921 President Warren G. Harding pledged to go to war if necessary “for the historical principle of the Monroe Doctrine,” at a ceremony dedicating a statue to the Lattin American bourgeois nationalist leader of the early 19th century, Simon Bolivar. The statue had been given to the United States by the government of Venezuela.

The Monroe Doctrine was pronounced during the administration of James Monroe (1817–1825). It was initially directed against European efforts to impose new colonies after the breakup of the Spanish Empire. But by the early 20th century it had been transformed into a doctrine that upheld the “right” of the United States alone to the imperialist domination of the people and resources of Latin America.

In a testament to hypocrisy, Harding declared, “The history of the generations since that doctrine was proclaimed has proved that we never intended it selfishly: that we had no dreams of exploitation.” The 20th century would, in fact, be characterized by the brutal realization of US imperialism’s dreams of the domination of Latin America both economically and militarily.

Harding continued, in a reference to the American intervention in Europe during the First World War, “The history of the last decade must certainly have convinced the world that we will stand to fight, if necessary, to protect this continent and these sturdy young democracies from oppression and tyranny.”

During the Harding administration, US troops were deployed in Haiti, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Panama and Costa Rica, and had only been recently withdrawn from Mexico, Guatemala and Honduras.

Most of the Latin American states had sent representatives to the ceremony unveiling the statue of Bolivar. They enthusiastically applauded Harding’s remarks.



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