

This week in history: November 29-December 5

28 November 2021

25 years ago: Ceasefire in Guatemala

On December 4, 1996, a top Guatemalan general and other members of the government joined guerrilla leaders in signing a “definite ceasefire” in Oslo, Norway. “With this agreement, the weapons will be silenced forever,” declared Rolando Moran, a commander in the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Union, a coalition of three guerrilla movements.

The civil war in the poverty-stricken Central American nation had lasted, with varying degrees of intensity, for three and a half decades, costing over 100,000 lives. In addition to the death toll, an estimated further 40,000 were “disappeared,” and 1 million more were turned into refugees and exiles. The Guatemalan military was notorious for its torture and murder of thousands of political opponents and its indiscriminate killing sprees of poor peasants, particularly native people.

The “truth commission,” established as part of the peace process to investigate past violations of human rights, was denounced by human rights activists as a travesty. The commission’s final report would not name any individuals who violated human rights, and its findings could not be used to bring anyone to trial. The commission had only six months to investigate the decades-long war.

The agreement left Guatemala’s social structure, the fundamental cause of the bloodshed, totally untouched. The vast majority of the population was made up of poor peasants, living in rural villages and laboring in highly exploitative agricultural labor, while a tiny elite of wealthy families ruled in Guatemala City and maintained its monopoly of the country’s economic and political life.

The Accord for a Firm and Lasting Peace was formally ratified on December 29, 1996. Presidents of eight Latin American nations attended the signing event alongside United Nations Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali. Thomas F. McLarty, the Clinton administration’s representative and special envoy for Latin America and the Caribbean, attended on behalf of the United States, which held primary responsibility for the military coup of 1954 which set the stage for the eruption of civil war in 1960.

50 years ago: India and Pakistan at war

On December 3, 1971, India entered into the ongoing war between Pakistan and the Bangladesh (East Pakistan) national liberation forces of the Mukti Bahini. The war had begun in March 1971 after the central government in Western Pakistan blocked the Bangladesh Awami League from taking its seats in parliament after sweeping the 1970 all-Pakistan general elections.

The war threatened the balance of power in the Indian subcontinent. An independent Bangladesh, with a population 70 million people, drastically weakened Pakistan, which would lose the majority of its population. Simultaneously, a Bangladesh unification movement threatened to draw in the millions of Bengalis living in the Indian state of West Bengal.

Once the Bengali liberation war had begun, both Indira Gandhi, prime minister of India, and Yahya Khan, president of Pakistan, considered India’s entry into the war to be inevitable, and both countries began making preparations for war. Hoping to preemptively disable the Indian military on December 3, 1971, Khan ordered the bombing of several Indian military bases.

India immediately responded by launching a full-scale invasion into East Pakistan. With more than double the manpower of the Pakistan Armed Forces, the Indian military quickly surrounded Khan’s army and forced a surrender in 13 days. On December 16, 1971, Pakistan surrendered to India. Over 90,000 Pakistani military and government personnel were taken prisoner and removed from the now independent Bangladesh.

West Pakistan’s attempt to suppress the national liberation movement led to the war’s worst horrors. Mass killings were directed against armed Mukti Bahini liberation soldiers and civilian supporters alike. While the exact number of deaths is unknown, estimates of the Bengali deaths range from 200,000 to as many as 3 million. Millions more became refugees.

While Prime Minister Indira Gandhi insisted that India’s intervention in the war was purely to support Bangladesh’s independence, in reality, it allowed New Delhi to dictate the terms on which the new Bengali government would form and suppress the movement for a united Bengal, including in the territory comprising part of the Indian state.

A statement issued by the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL), the Sri Lankan section of the ICFI, titled “Long live the Bangladesh revolution! No compromise with the Hindu capitalists!” on December 8, 1971, explained the class interests involved in the Indian-Pakistan war and the efforts to suppress the revolutionary movement of the Bengali workers. It read, in part:

The Trotskyists, therefore, take their position firmly in support of the struggle of the E. Bengali masses for their legitimate aspirations and for an end to military and national oppression. We unconditionally support the right of the Bengali masses—of the West as well as of the East—to unite as a nation, ending the imperialist carve-up of 1947, and to secede from India and Pakistan if they so desire. The struggle to exercise this right by the Bengali masses becomes inevitably transformed into a revolutionary struggle, because it poses an end to the imperialist-designed status quo and to the rule of the parasitic Hindu and Muslim bourgeoisies. The Trotskyist movement calls upon the toiling Bengali masses to unite the struggle for national unification and liberation with the struggle for socialist revolution as the sole guarantee of victory.

The Indo-Pakistani War brought to the surface political differences between the Trotskyists in the RCL and the Socialist Labour League in the UK, who were adapting towards Pabloism and supporting the Indian invasion. For further reading on these questions, see Documents of the Indo-Pakistani War of 1971 .

75 years ago: US ruling class attacks coal miners strike

On December 4, 1946, District Judge T. Alan Goldsborough found the United Mine Workers (UMW) and its leader John L. Lewis in contempt of court for defying a court order banning an indefinite stoppage throughout the US coal mines. Goldsborough fined Lewis \$10,000 and the union \$3.5 million, equivalent to over \$35 million today.

The judgment was part of a hysterical ruling class campaign against the stoppage. The third coal strike in little over a year, the walkout was called to demand a reduction to the minimum work week of 54 hours and other improvements to pay and conditions.

In addition to the disruption to an extremely lucrative industry, the official response expressed fears that the struggle by the miners, a strategic section of the working class, could become the focal point for a broader movement. In the course of 1946, some 5 million workers were involved in industrial actions in the largest strike wave in US history. The struggles were directed against rising inflation and stagnant real wages, and a great many were “wildcat” strikes, carried out in defiance of both employers and unions.

Bringing down his ruling against Lewis and the UMW, Goldsborough declared the continuing strike “an evil, demonic, monstrous thing that means hunger and cold and unemployment and destitution and disorganization of the social fabric ... if actions of this kind can be successfully persisted in, the government will be overthrown, and the government that would take its place would be a dictatorship...”

The Socialist Workers Party (SWP), then the American section of the world Trotskyist movement, responded to the onslaught by

insisting on the need for a unified movement of the entire working class. “How can organized labor meet and answer this tremendous propaganda attack?” the SWP asked, answering, “Only by mobilizing its own forces for a full-scale counter-offensive—only by showing the same unity in action as the capitalists are displaying.”

But the Trotskyists warned that the top AFL and CIO leaders were “too narrow-minded, too blinded by their own bureaucratic interests to take this imperative step on their own initiative,” meaning that the struggle would need to be spearheaded by the rank and file. In December, with the Supreme Court upholding a ban on the strike and the Democratic Party administration of President Harry Truman demanding that it end, Lewis instructed the 400,000 miners to return to work. The strike’s end paved the way for a massive reduction in the size of the coal mine workforce in the ensuing decades.

100 years ago: Mass workers protests in Vienna

On December 1, 1921, hundreds of thousands of workers rallied in front of the Parliament building in the Austrian capital, Vienna, to support a general strike called in the industrial district of Floridsdorf over the high cost of living and abolition of government food subsidies. Prices had risen 240 percent in the previous month. Workers sent a delegation to Chancellor Franz Schöberl of the Greater German People’s Party/Christian Social Party government. The workers’ representatives demanded abolition of the stock exchange and price controls. They received an evasive answer, and, as the demonstration broke up, crowds marched to seize the stock exchange.

Others broke off to attack cafes and began to harass well-to-do people in the upscale districts. According to the *New York Times*, shops were looted of luxury goods, and the main thoroughfares of the city were strewn with rubbish. Well-heeled matrons, including some American visitors, were robbed of their furs and jewelry.

Crowds broke into hotels and tossed furniture out of windows. Red flags, the symbol of socialist revolution, were raised. The *Times* noted that the police largely stood by. When one correspondent asked a squad of police who were standing by as a hotel was looted why they were not intervening, they replied, “We are tired of shooting and being shot. These people are hungry and desperate, and so are many of us.”

In the evening, a large force of mounted police was able to break up the crowds and drive rioters back to the working-class quarters.



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