

This week in history: December 20-26

19 December 2021

25 years ago: Strike wave in South Korea

On December 26, 1996, workers in South Korea launched the largest strike wave in the country's history, which lasted through January 1997 in defiance of threats by the government of President Kim Young-sam, demanding repeal of legislation passed earlier in the month which made it easier for employers to carry out mass layoffs and replace strikers.

The legislation was passed at a pre-dawn parliamentary session from which opposition legislators were excluded. The bill also postponed legal recognition of the outlawed Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) for three years and gave security agencies increased powers to spy on and jail political opponents.

The Hyundai shipyard in Ulsan, the world's largest, was shut down by the walkouts, as were all of the country's sub-plants, including Hyundai, Daewoo, Kia Motors, Asia Motors and Ssangyong. Tens of thousands of workers and students staged demonstrations in January in Seoul, Kwangju, Pusan and the port city of Incheon. Riot police fired tear gas at workers assembled outside the main cathedral in downtown Seoul, where strike leaders took refuge in fear of arrests.

Officials of the KCTU said that the walkout would spread to hospitals, public transportation, broadcasting, and the banking and securities industries. There was a brief hiatus of the strikes during New Year holidays, but most auto plants resumed strikes by January 3 and the general strike continued by January 6.

The government took a hard line, formally implementing the new law by a cabinet decree December 30, then threatening "legal countermeasures" against the workers. In a televised speech the same day, Prime Minister Lee Soo-sung said the law was necessary to keep South Korea competitive with other countries where employers had greater freedom to discharge workers.

The government ordered 20 union leaders to report to the public prosecutor's office for interrogation, but they refused, expecting to be arrested. The employers federation announced it would sue the KCTU for damages from the strikes, seeking a crippling \$400 million legal judgment against the federation.

The officially recognized Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU), which initially authorized the strikes in unprecedented joint action with the KCTU, sought to take advantage of the

New Year holiday to engineer an end to the protests, calling for a suspension of the strikes until January 11, which was ignored by workers.

50 years ago: Nixon commutes Jimmy Hoffa's prison sentence

On December 23, 1971, US President Richard Nixon commuted the prison sentence of former Teamsters President Jimmy Hoffa. Nixon allowed Hoffa's release on the condition that he not be engaged in the "direct or indirect management of any labor organization" until the remaining time on his 13-year prison sentence had passed.

At the time of his release Hoffa had served about a third of his sentence, which would have ended in March 1980. He had been convicted on charges of pension fraud and jury tampering. His arrest and conviction in 1964 was the result of the years-long "get Hoffa" campaign initiated by Robert Kennedy, then US attorney general.

Hoffa, in his role as a Teamster bureaucrat, was an immensely corrupt figure with deep ties to organized crime. In addition, he played a leading role in the anti-communist purge of the Trotskyist-lead Teamsters Local 544 in Minneapolis that had waged the massively successful 1934 general strike. In 1941 Hoffa, at the direction of then-Teamster President Daniel Tobin, went to Minneapolis to force out the socialist leadership. Hoffa and Tobin fully cooperated with the Roosevelt administration's persecution of the Trotskyists under the Smith Act as the government prepared for entry into the Second World War.

The campaign to arrest Hoffa two decades later was not waged on behalf of the rank-and-file workers, who suffered the most from intimidation from Mafia thugs who regularly beat back opposition to Hoffa and the other Teamsters bureaucrats. Rather it was an attempt by the state to break apart and demoralize workers by decapitating the union and appointing its own representatives in the organization who would be more reliable in suppressing the growing strike wave amid the inflation crisis.

In the preceding decades, the Teamsters had grown into a massively important organization with a reputation among

workers for carrying out an aggressive fight for better living standards. For this reason, it was targeted by successive presidential administrations.

Commenting on Hoffa's release, the *Bulletin*, the US predecessor to the *World Socialist Web Site*, wrote, "The jailing of Hoffa was actually the first shot in this attack by the bosses on the American workers, which takes the form today of the wage freeze, the Pay Board and the devaluation."

Hoffa's release by Nixon was intended to placate workers who increasingly saw his arrest as a political attack and were seeking out a political response. In addition, in recent years Teamsters officials had sought out an alliance with Nixon. The Teamsters bureaucrats who sat on Nixon's wage-freezing Pay Board were known to be the most active contributors to its attacks on wages. Hoffa's release was a reward to this layer for their obedience to the Nixon administration's attacks on strikers and defense of capitalist profits.

75 years ago: Major earthquake, tsunami hit southern Japan

On December 21, 1946, southeastern Japan was hit by a major earthquake which triggered a devastating tsunami. At least 1,362 were killed, another 100 were missing, never found, and some 2,600 more suffered injuries.

The quake, measuring between 8.1 and 8.4 on the moment magnitude scale, struck the Nankaido region in the early hours of the morning. It leveled an estimated 36,000 homes in the south of Honshu, Japan's largest island, and on the nearby Shikoku island. Another 2,100 homes were washed away within hours, as a 16-20 foot tsunami battered the eastern coast of Honshu, Kii Peninsula and the southern coast of Shikoku.

The affected region is particularly prone to earthquakes, sitting on the Nankai Trough. The trough marks the subduction of the Philippine Sea Plate beneath the Eurasian Plate. It has been the site of powerful megathrust earthquakes, where one tectonic plate is forced beneath another.

Two years before the 1946 quake, the Tōhankai earthquake struck the same region. It also measured 8.1 on the magnitude scale, making it the strongest quake anywhere in the world in 1944. Tōhankai also flattened thousands of homes, caused 3,358 casualties and triggered a tsunami.

The December 1946 earthquake occurred little over a year after the US dropping of nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, part of a criminal scorched-earth policy pursued by American imperialism in the final phases of World War II. Much of the country's basic infrastructure was still yet to be rebuilt, while there was widespread popular anger over chronic food shortages, excessive prices and the authoritarian rule being consolidated by the occupying US army.

100 years ago: Eugene Debs released from prison

On December 25, 1921, at 11:30 a.m., Eugene V. Debs, the socialist leader and most prominent class-war prisoner in the United States, was released from the federal penitentiary in Atlanta after President Warren G. Harding commuted his sentence to time served.

Debs had been sentenced to 10 years in prison under the Espionage Act—the same reactionary law that Julian Assange will be tried under if he is extradited to the United States—for making an anti-war speech in Canton, Ohio, in June 1918. It was the high point of government witch-hunting against socialists and others who opposed American entry into the First World War.

He began serving time in April 1919. In the 1920 election, he ran for president from prison, receiving 919,799 votes, over 3 percent of those cast.

As Debs left the prison, the *New York Times* reported, "a roar of cheers swept out from the prisoners. Debs raised his hat in one hand, and his cane in the other and waved backed at them. He continued to wave while they continued to cheer him until he reached the gates."

Debs then went to the rail station where he refused to travel to his home in Terre Haute, Indiana, in a luxurious Pullman car, but instead took more modest accommodations. He donated the difference in the fare to a fund for the relief of the famine in Soviet Russia. At the terminal he told the press, "I left 2,300 men back there, and they should all be given their liberty."

En route to Terre Haute he stopped in Washington D.C., where he was greeted at the White House by President Harding. Upon arrival in Terre Haute, he was greeted by a crowd of 50,000.

Debs's health, however, had been broken by his confinement and he struggled to regain it, dying only five years later in 1926.



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