

# This week in history: January 3-9

3 January 2022

## Milosevic rejects Serbia election results

On January 3, 1997, the government of Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic declared that it was rejecting the report of an observer group headed by former Spanish Prime Minister Felipe Gonzalez, which called for recognition of opposition victories in municipal elections in 19 of the largest cities in Serbia.

Foreign Minister Milan Milutinovic rebuffed the report, filed with the 54-nation Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, maintaining that the opposition Zajedno coalition had won only three smaller cities, as well as nine out of 16 district councils in Belgrade, but not the more powerful city council. The same day the regime ordered a rerun of elections in Nis, the second largest city, rather than concede its loss to the opposition.

Demonstrations continued daily against the Milosevic regime, despite a police order. Forty thousand people demonstrated in Republic Square the day the government announced it was rejecting the Gonzalez report. There was one suggestion of weakening in Milosevic's inner circle, with the report that Belgrade Mayor Nebojsa Covic had decided to resign rather than continue to stonewall against the election defeat in the capital.

The vote and the protests showed that social opposition was growing against Milosevic and his bankrupt Serbian nationalism, which descended from the Yugoslav variant of Stalinism. However, the Serbian opposition, as well as the European intervention led by Gonzalez, were entirely subordinate to the imperatives of imperialism and global finance—the same forces that had targeted Yugoslavia for destruction and led to its break-up in a series of fratricidal wars beginning in 1991.

## 50 years ago: UK miners begin national strike

On January 9, 1972, 280,000 coal miners throughout the United Kingdom began a two-month-long strike against the Conservative government of Edward Heath. This strike was the first national strike by UK miners since 1926, when a miners'

walkout had quickly spread to become a general strike that had threatened capitalist rule.

The main demand of the miners in the 1972 strike was higher wages. While in the 1950s and early 1960s the wage of a UK miner was still higher than the wage of an average industrial worker, over the course of the next decade that number had dramatically shifted, so that by 1970, miners' earnings were well below those of workers in other industrial sectors.

Coal production itself had become dramatically more efficient, and more exploitative. In 1956 700,000 workers were needed to produce the 207 million tons collected that year. By 1971, while only 280,000 mining jobs still existed, they produced 133 million tons of coal. In other words, by 1971 each miner produced on average one and a half times more coal than miners in 1956, but for less pay.

UK workers were intent to struggle against the Tory government and win. The recent passage of the Labour Relations Act threatened to criminalize strikes and jail workers. British workers by and large refused to recognize the law.

Jack Stone, a worker speaking to *Workers Press*, the newspaper of the Socialist Labour League (the UK Trotskyist movement at the time), said, "This strike is to see miners are given a fair share of the profits created and living standards comparable to other workers." Stone continued, "Our main enemy in this is the Tory government and our union leaders, national and area. Too many right-wingers [in the union leadership] have been prepared to sell. If they hadn't, we wouldn't be where we are now."

The strike immediately called to question not only the immediate living standards of miners but control over coal production itself. The government claimed that there was no money for miners' pay raises as the industry had only reported a profit of about £500,000 in 1971. This, however, was only after paying millions in compensation to the former mine owners.

While in 1946 the UK had nationalized coal mining, supposedly making the government the owner of coal fields, the agreement provided that the mine owners were entitled to receive large compensation payments, including in government coal stock. This essentially kept the wealthy capitalist mine operators in control over the mines, although reorganized under the National Coal Board, which determined miners' wages.

The strike had immense support throughout the entire working class, with many workers from different sections

refusing to carry any coal or otherwise scab on the striking miners. The intensity of the strike proved the determination and revolutionary potential of the working class.

Workers organized mass pickets that shut down every coal mine in the country. They picketed not only at their own work sites but at power plants and fuel storage depots where their coal was being used and held.

### **75 years ago: London lorry drivers launch wildcat strike action**

On January 6, 1947, some 5,000 lorry drivers in London walked off the job in an indefinite wildcat strike that erupted outside the control of the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU) and rapidly developed into a confrontation with the union-backed Labour government.

The stoppage was motivated by anger over a series of demands that had not been met during nine months of industrial negotiations. Chief among them was for a mandated 44-hour week, with many drivers being forced to work dozens of hours longer than that.

The Labour government headed by Clement Attlee had been swept to office at the conclusion of World War II in 1945, on a wave of working class determination that there would be no return to the social misery of the 1930s. It enacted a number of reforms, including the nationalization of the coal industry and several other essential sectors, and the creation of the National Health Service.

The government, however, was bitterly hostile to any movement of the working class. Shortly after the national election it had mobilized troops against striking dock workers. On January 11, the *Times* reported: "In spite of the fact that the Minister of Labour has intimated his intention to break the strike the men are dissatisfied that he has given no assurance to them that he will take steps to modify or in any way improve the negotiating machinery of the Central Wages Board, which the unions and the men agree is out of date and cumbersome."

On January 15, Labour followed through on the threat, dispatching hundreds of troops to the Smithfield Market and running scab operations. The attack provoked sympathy strikes among 10,000 dock workers, along with market workers throughout London, while the number of lorry drivers off the job grew to around 30,000.

Labour and the union bureaucracy, fearful of the growing movement, shifted tack. By this point, the strikers had established their own rank-and-file committee, while the capitalist press was warning that the Trotskyist Revolutionary Communist Party was winning a hearing among the workers. On January 15, Minister of Labour George Isaacs, with the support of the TGWU officialdom, activated a Joint Industrial

Council, which had lain dormant since its formation in 1945. The arbitration was used to diffuse the strike movement, which came to a halt. Drivers would be granted a number of their demands, including a reduction of hours.

### **100 years ago: French troops begin withdrawal from Turkey**

On January 3, 1922, French troops began to withdraw from the province of Mersin in the south of Turkey. The withdrawal from the region was complete by January 7.

The removal of French troops was a key provision of the Treaty of Ankara, signed in October 1921 by the Turkish National Movement led by Kemal Ataturk and the French government of Raymond Poincaré, which put an end to the Franco-Turkish war of 1918-1921. The French also withdrew from their positions in the Dardanelles, the strait that connects the Black Sea with the Mediterranean, in October 1922, which effectively marked the end of the Allied imperialist intervention in Turkey in the aftermath of World War I.

The French presence in Turkey began after the Armistice of Mudros in October 1918 that marked the surrender of the Ottoman Empire to French and British imperialism, ending hostilities in the Middle Eastern theater of World War I. According to the conditions of the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 between the British and the French (first made public by the young Soviet government), France was awarded territories in southern Anatolia (modern Turkey) in addition to the Ottoman territories that comprise modern Syria and Lebanon. French troops, primarily colonial units and the French Armenian Legion, occupied southern Turkey.

The primary strategic goal was the control of coal mines in the region. Along with the French, Italian and British imperialism also attempted to divide Anatolia up into spheres of influence, and the capital Constantinople was occupied by a coalition of imperialist troops. The imperialist powers and their Greek proxies were driven out by 1923 by the Turkish nationalist movement in the Turkish War of Liberation.



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