

This week in history: December 5–11

This column profiles important historical events which took place during this week, 25 years ago, 50 years ago, 75 years ago and 100 years ago.

4 December 2022

25 years ago: New Zealand Prime Minister Jim Bolger ousted

On December 8, 1997, New Zealand's Prime Minister Jim Bolger was toppled in a big business-backed coup within his own National Party and replaced by Jenny Shipley, known as a hard-line right winger. Bolger had been in office since 1990 when the previous Labour government was thrown out in a landslide after carrying through drastic cuts to government spending and the wholesale privatization of public services.

The National Party government was reduced to a parliamentary minority at elections just over a year prior, and had survived through a coalition with the New Zealand First, a populist and nationalist formation headed by Maori politician Winston Peters, which had campaigned against the government. Media opinion polls showed the government falling to record levels of unpopularity as it had imposed drastic cuts in social spending. At the same time, business had denounced it for backing away from even more draconian measures.

As Social Security Minister in the first Bolger government, Shipley enforced a 25 percent cut in the level of many pensions and welfare benefits. Her agenda included further privatizations, spending cuts and big business tax concessions. She organized Bolger's ouster while he was away on a two-week foreign trip, and he was confronted with the loss of his support in the National Party caucus at a meeting on November 3, where he agreed to resign by the end of the year.

New Zealand First won significant support in the 1996 elections based on a right-wing nationalist agenda. Peters had attacked the National Party government and indicated that he would never form a coalition with then Prime Minister Bolger. After the elections, however, New Zealand First did an abrupt about face, joined with the National Party, and was jointly responsible for continuing the assault on living standards—resulting in a rapid loss of support and an opening of divisions within the party. This political instability remained through Shipley's tenure.

50 years ago: Last manned mission to the Moon

On December 7, 1972, the Apollo 17 lunar mission was launched from the Kennedy Space Center on Merritt Island, Florida. The three astronauts onboard, Gene Cernan, Harrison Schmitt and Ronald Evans, would be the last to make the journey to the Moon, with all subsequent manned space missions remaining in Earth's orbit.

NASA prioritized collecting as much scientific knowledge as possible as opposed to setting new spaceflight or travel distance records, which always carried more political significance than scientific value in the Cold War against the Soviet Union. This shift was reflected in part by the selection of Schmitt as part of the mission crew. Schmitt was a geologist and to date is still the only scientist to walk on the Moon. All other lunar astronauts had their background as pilots in the US military.

Accompanying the astronauts on their journey was a host of new equipment for conducting scientific experiments on the Moon's surface. The crew conducted tests of the heat flow from the Moon's interior, surface gravity, atmospheric composition and seismic activity. To stimulate potential seismic activity and study its effects on the Moon, the astronauts placed a series of explosives on the surface that were detonated after their departure.

The test equipment was designed so that it could be left on the Moon and continue to conduct tests after the Apollo team had departed. The plan worked and the experiments remained active until 1977 when budget cuts to the space program forced their shutdown.

After the scientific equipment had been set up, Cernan and Schmitt spent the majority of their three days on the Moon using the Lunar Rover to travel to new types of terrain not previously investigated by earlier missions. Along the way Schmitt collected geological samples for further study once returned to Earth.

The Apollo astronauts were also joined by five mice who were implanted with radiation monitors to test whether they

would be negatively impacted by cosmic rays. Though one of the mice died from unknown causes, the others lived, showing no signs of damage from radiation. As the conditions for the experiment required the mice to stay aboard the Command Module rather than travel down to the surface in the Lunar Module, the mice share the record for the longest amount of time in lunar orbit and most lunar orbits with Evans, who remained on the Command Module.

On December 14, once the scientific operations had been completed, Cernan and Schmitt launched from the Moon's surface and reunited with Evans in the Command Module before all three returned to Earth, touching down in the Pacific Ocean on December 19.

75 years ago: General strike in Rome, Italy

On December 11, 1947, Rome was paralyzed with more than 600,000 workers joining a general strike. Significantly, the stoppage was called over demands broader than the wages and conditions of the workers involved. Strikers demanded Christmas bonuses and increased relief for the unemployed and called for police who had fired on a demonstration the week before to be arrested and prosecuted.

The strike involved the broadest sections of the working class, including clerical workers, public transit employees, newspaper staff and factory workers and laborers. Shops were closed throughout the city.

A contemporaneous Reuters report pointed to the tense atmosphere. It stated: "Police reinforcements in jeeps patrolled the streets. One group of police carrying gas masks used truncheons and arrested several strikers who were demonstrating in the business area. With tension increasing, troops have been confined to barracks and plainclothes police have been issued with rifles and armlets. The Vatican Guard has been augmented."

The right-wing Christian Democratic Prime Minister Alcide De Gasperi had summoned a midnight meeting of police chiefs and his cabinet to discuss combating the strike and maintaining "public order."

The stoppage continued for two days, but was ended by Communist Party-controlled unions on December 13. They did so on the basis of government promises to boost unemployment payments over the holiday season.

The hasty conclusion of the strike was another expression of the opportunist maneuvering of the Stalinist Communist Party. In the immediate aftermath of World War II, it had joined bourgeois governments and collaborated with the political establishment, including the Christian Democrats, to stabilize capitalist rule. Earlier in 1947, however, De Gasperi had moved against the Communist Party, in line with his support for the

US-led Cold War against the Soviet Union.

The Communist Party responded with a campaign of protests, strikes and even armed actions. All of them, however, were ultimately aimed at pressuring De Gasperi and the ruling elite to strike a deal with the Stalinists.

100 years ago: Japan returns territory to China

On December 10, 1922, Japanese imperialism returned Jiaozhou (Kiao-Chao) Bay in Shandong Province to the Chinese government in Beijing. The Japanese had seized the area from the Germans in 1914 in the Battle of Tsingtao at the outset of World War I. Germany had leased it from China since 1898, as part of the "Unequal Treaties" forced on Beijing by the imperialist powers.

Jiaozhou Bay was the location of a naval base at Qingdao (Tsingtao), which had originally been constructed by the Qing Dynasty in 1891, but heavily fortified by the Germans after they seized it in the aftermath of the Boxer Rebellion.

The Germans invested tens of millions of dollars in Qingdao. It was a colony in all but name, with official representatives of German banks and firms conducting the city's affairs. The Japanese simply replaced the Germans after 1914, treating it as spoils of war. Under the pressure of Allied imperialism, however, they were forced to relinquish military control.

The Chinese official, Chengting T. Wang, who accepted the turnover, had been one of the diplomats in Paris in 1919 who had refused to sign the Treaty of Versailles because it had granted Japan German territory in China, which led to the first modern political protests in China and the formation of the anti-imperialist May Fourth Movement, whose leaders later were among the founders of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921.

The Japanese failed to supply the new Chinese police force with weapons it had promised and left the area ridden with bandits, whom they had deliberately refused to suppress. The Chinese government was eventually forced to integrate groups of bandits into the local police force.

Despite the military withdrawal, Shandong province contained at least 20,000 permanent civilian Japanese residents. The Japanese military would launch a series of interventions in the province after 1927 and would seize Jiaozhou Bay again in 1938.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact