

This week in history: January 1-7

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.

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25 years ago: Clinton impeachment trial opens

On January 7, 1999, the Senate trial to impeach US President Bill Clinton began in Washington D.C. The impeachment was the product of a right-wing campaign spearheaded by the Republican Party to remove a sitting president, shifting the entire political establishment to the right.

The proceedings exposed the extent to which the basic foundations of bourgeois democracy had been eroded in the US. A determined group of conspirators was able to leverage what was a purely personal episode in Clinton's life into an unprecedented political campaign to overturn the results of two elections.

The profoundly reactionary implications of the entire campaign found expression in the ceremony with which the impeachment spectacle began. Senator Strom Thurmond, who a half century prior ran for president as the candidate of the racist States' Rights Party, swore in William Rehnquist, an extreme right-wing Supreme Court justice, who had played a critical role in facilitating the conspiracy to overturn the Clinton administration, as presiding judge.

In spite of the midterm elections, which showed mass opposition to the Republican impeachment drive, and the opinion polls which registered even greater popular anger, neither the Democratic Party leaders nor Clinton appealed to the population for support against the conspiracy. Instead, all of the efforts of the White House and the Congressional Democrats were concentrated on finding a resolution to the crisis without exposing the neo-fascist forces that underlay the impeachment campaign. The Democrats' cowardice on Clinton's impeachment foretold their prostration before the theft of the 2000 election with the Supreme Court's notorious decision in *Bush v. Gore*.

The attempt to maintain the pretense that the impeachment trial was a legitimate constitutional process was a criminal fraud against the people. The Democrats knew that the trial was the product of a right-wing conspiracy involving fascistic elements, and that such elements exercised enormous influence within the Republican Party. The goal was not just the destabilization and removal of Clinton. The impeachment drive was ultimately a means of shifting the entire political framework in America much further to the right, and laying the groundwork for a government far more ruthless in its assault on the social conditions and democratic rights of the working class.

50 years ago: Navnirman Andolan protests begin in Indian state of Gujarat

On January 7, 1974, a strike across all universities and colleges in Gujarat, India began. Known as the Navnirman Andola, or reconstruction movement, the school strikes would rapidly move beyond the campuses and build into one of India's largest social movements. The strikes would eventually force the state government to disband.

In December, students at Lalbhai Dalpatbhai College of Engineering had begun protests against an increase in food prices and poor living conditions. On January 3 demonstrations with similar demands were called at Gujarat University. After the police intervened to crush the Gujarat University strike, students statewide responded with the mass walkout on January 7.

Though initiated by students and their demands for improvements to the campuses, the demonstrations took on a broader political character against inequality and corruption in the Gujarat state government and the Congress Party. The chief demand became the resignation of Gujarat's Chief Minister Chimanbhai Patel and the dissolution of the state assembly.

Throughout January, major demonstrations took place in over 40 towns in Gujarat with the largest marches taking place in the state's largest city, Ahmedabad. A general strike lasting two days was called in Ahmedabad and Vadodara.

The response by Patel and the state government was massive police violence. Over the course of the Navnirman protests the police would kill over 100 people and injure thousands more. At least 8,000 were reported arrested.

On January 25 a statewide general strike was launched that saw major participation in 33 cities. The government responded by imposing martial law and mobilizing the army to repress the protests.

The Navnirman Andolan movement was one of many examples of the international revolutionary potential that existed in the 1960s and 70s. Like the May '68 general strike in France, the Prague Spring, the British miners' strike, the US anti-war movement and many more convulsions, the demonstrations in India disproved the claim by the Pabloites that the international working class was incapable of revolution.

The contradictions of the post-war economic order, chiefly characterized by the breakup of the Bretton Woods system, were

compelling the working class into major struggles. The critical issue for the workers, however, was political leadership and perspective.

The Gujarat strikes succeeded in bringing down the state government. On February 9, Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi intervened and asked for Patel's resignation. The position of Chief Minister was left vacant for over a year, leaving Gujarat to be administered by president's rule.

However, even in a state of police rule, the Navnirman did not subside with Patel's resignation, and major strikes continued periodically until March 16 when the state assembly was dissolved, and new elections planned for June 1975.

Lacking a genuine socialist leadership in the major working class organizations, the middle class radical elements succeeded in electing the Janata Morcha, a "People's Front" coalition of various bourgeois middle class parties. The Janata Morcha government in Gujarat lasted only 268 days until it was undemocratically removed from power during Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's reactionary state of emergency declaration.

75 years ago: Dutch troops massacre civilians at Rengat

On January 5, 1949, Dutch troops carried out one of the worst mass murders of their counter-insurgency campaign directed against Indonesian independence. They massacred men, women and children in the Sumatran town of Rengat, in an unprovoked onslaught.

The attack was part of a broader Dutch offensive, launched the previous month. The offensive ended a tenuous power-sharing arrangement with conservative nationalist leaders, including Sukarno, and was aimed at asserting untrammled Dutch control over the resource-rich and geo-strategically critical archipelago, which before World War II had been a colonial possession of the Netherlands.

The attack on Rengat began with a massive aerial bombardment early in the morning. A young Indonesian soldier later recalled: "They dropped bombs on the streets, the market square where people gathered, and on people's houses. They even shot at people standing on the ground." Shortly after the bombing began, there was an artillery barrage, with Dutch soldiers shooting wildly from their low-flying planes, targeting everyone they could see.

The aerial attack was the prelude to a ground invasion. Dutch troops were airdropped near the town, and then entered it in groups. Some, including Indonesian Ambon forces fighting with the Dutch, wore camouflage.

A later Indonesian account stated: "The paratroopers wiped out everything that moved. Soldiers and civilians who were hiding under culverts or waterlogged ditches were shot dead. The murky ditch water turned red."

The Dutch operation appears to have been motivated, in part, by the presence of a strong Indonesian military base near Rengat, as well as a weapons factory. The tactics used, however, pointed to counter-insurgency calculations of terrorizing an entire population to enforce an occupation. The mass murder presaged similar actions, including by US troops in Vietnam.

The Dutch authorities described the massacre as an "incident," and claimed that the civilian death toll was around 80. Local Indonesian officials and witnesses stated that as many as 2,000 people may have been killed, with thousands more injured.

100 years ago: Eugenics Committee urges US immigration quotas on southern and eastern Europeans

On January 4, 1924, the Eugenics Committee, an organization with close ties to the political establishment, issued a proposal that quotas on immigration to the United States be set on the basis of the 1890 census, which showed a far lower number of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe than the subsequent 1910 census did. The Committee also proposed that selection of immigrants be performed at American consular offices overseas.

Among the targeted groups were Italians, Jews, Poles, Ukrainians, Russians, Hungarians, Finns, Lithuanians, Greeks, Yugoslavs, Bulgarians and Slovaks. These "new immigrants" had played a prominent role in the great strike wave of the period and had also demonstrated an attraction to communism and the Russian Revolution. For these reasons, decisive sections of capitalism shifted against America's relatively open immigration policy toward Europe—and elevated the eugenics movement to establishment status.

The proposal, reported in the *New York Times* and other press outlets said, "On the whole, immigrants from Northwestern Europe furnish us the best material for American citizenship and for the future upbuilding of the American race." A percentage limitation based on the census of 1890, "would also greatly reduce the number of immigrants of the lower grades of intelligence and of immigrants who are making excessive contribution to our feeble-minded, insane, criminal and other socially inadequate classes."

The chairman of the Eugenics Committee at the time was Madison Grant, a lawyer, conservationist and anthropologist who played a key role in the modern eugenics movement. He viewed the "Nordic race" potentially as endangered as some species of natural wildlife and was the author of the 1916 racist tract, *The Passing of the Great Race: Or, The Racial Basis of European History*, which posited the superiority of the Nordic "races" to other "races." He also played a role in the passing in 1924 of Virginia's Racial Integrity Act, an anti-miscegenation law.

Another member of the Eugenics Committee was Albert Johnson, a Republican congressman from Washington and chairman of the Committee on Immigration and Naturalization. Johnson would be one of the authors in May 1924 of the Immigration Act (also known as the Johnson-Reed Act) that put the committee's recommendations into practice and severely restricted quotas for immigrants from eastern and southern Europe and shifted selection of immigrants to overseas offices. The act created the Border Patrol and was passed with the Asian Exclusion Act, which completely stopped immigration from east Asia.



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