

This week in history: January 6-12

6 January 2014

This Week in History provides brief synopses of important historical events whose anniversaries fall this week.

25 Years Ago | 50 Years Ago | 75 Years Ago | 100 Years Ago

25 years ago: Sri Lankan Trotskyist murdered by fascist JVP

On January 6, 1989, the press of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) reported the murder of a longstanding member of the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL). P.H. Gunapala, 39 years old, was killed by fascist thugs in the city of Kandy. The RCL was the Sri Lankan section of the ICFI, later to become the Socialist Equality Party.

Gunapala's murder on the evening of December 23, 1988 was a political assassination by a band of Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) killers who waylaid him on his way to his quarters at Perednaya University and shot him twice in the heart at close range. He was the second Trotskyist to be slain by the JVP in a matter of weeks. R.A. Pitawala, aged 36, who had been an RCL member for 14 years, was shot in the head and hung by a JVP gang on November 12.

Gunapala was a member of the executive committee of the United Workers Union and had been in the forefront of the struggle to prevent the liquidation of the union by the JVP. The January 6 report commented, "The JVP assassination squad left a note behind, declaring that it had murdered Comrade Gunapala because he had been disrupting their 'patriotic work'—by which they meant he had opposed their attempts to subordinate the organizations of the working class to their racist anti-Tamil program."

The United National Party (UNP) government of Junius Jayawardene had been in deep crisis for years. In 1983, pogroms against the Tamil minority triggered a guerrilla struggle that developed into civil war, creating a situation of intense instability for bourgeois rule on the island.

Jayawardene signed a military alliance with India in 1987, in an attempt to shore up the UNP's rule, bringing Indian troops into the north of the country to wage the war against the bourgeois-nationalist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). At the same time, he cultivated relations with the Sinhala-chauvinist JVP, which engaged in violent attacks on

opponents of the regime.

The RCL had been campaigning for a United Front of all working class organizations against the Indo-Lankan Accord and the chauvinist and anti-working-class campaign by the UNP government against the liberation struggle of the Tamil minority. On this basis, in June of 1988, the RCL won the leadership of an important section of the Sri Lankan working class organized in the Central Bank Employees Union (CBEU). As a result, the RCP confronted police raids and arrests as well as JVP attacks.

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50 years ago: Dozens killed in anti-US riots in Panama Canal Zone

Anti-US riots erupted in Panama's Canal Zone on January 9, 1964, after zone police tore up a Panamanian flag in the area of US control. Three days of street fighting in and near the US-controlled Canal Zone left 21 Panamanians and four US soldiers dead.

The nation state of Panama had been created by US imperialism, carved out of Colombia in 1903 as a more manageable political unit after American policymakers determined to build the canal, which was completed in 1914. The Panama Canal was indispensable to the emergence of the US as an imperial power in the wake of the predatory Spanish-American War, in which the US wrested Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines. The canal would link the US East and West coasts, and provide a more direct link to the Hawaiian Islands, the Philippines, and China.

As a condition of independence from Colombia, Panama ceded the canal to the US "in perpetuity" in the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty, making the Canal Zone effectively US territory. By late 1963, a separation fence had been created between the Zone and Panama; the inhabitants of the Zone, "Zonians" as they were sometimes called, were overwhelming US citizens with ties to the large military establishment and defense contractors.

In early 1963 Panama Canal Zone Governor Robert J. Fleming, Jr. ordered that US flags no longer be flown outside of Canal Zone public buildings. Angered right-wing Zonians retaliated by launching demonstrations with the US flag. Among them were students at Balboa High School,

who walked out of class and raised the flag on its pole. In response, a crowd of perhaps 200 Panamanian high school students marched on Balboa High School behind the Panamanian flag. They were driven away by Zone police and civilians, and in the process the Panamanian flag was torn.

This event provided the trigger that unleashed pent-up Panamanian anger toward the US colonizers. Spontaneously crowds gathered along Panama City's border with the Canal Zone, at various places storming the fence. Zone police used live ammunition and tear gas. As the crowds of Panamanians swelled into the tens of thousands, the US Army joined the police in suppressing the demonstrations. Businesses associated with the US were attacked in the city; the torching of the Pan American Airlines building resulted in the deaths of six Panamanians. Rioting also took place in Colón, Panama's second largest city. Three US soldiers were killed there by snipers.

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75 years ago: Tom Mooney given a full pardon

On January 7, 1939, class-war prisoner Tom Mooney was given a full pardon by California Governor Culbert Olson. A militant worker, socialist and editor of *The Revolt* newspaper, Mooney had served 22 years in prison on frame-up charges of detonating a bomb on "San Francisco Preparedness Day" in 1916, as the business elite of the West Coast city sought to prepare the population for entry into WWI. He became a powerful symbol of class oppression, as workers in the US and around the world rallied to his cause.

The bombing killed 10 people and wounded 41 more. Mooney had previously warned trade union workers to be wary of the parade, as a disturbance might be used to attack opponents of entry into the war.

There was little evidence to convict Mooney, or his co-defendant, Warren K. Billings, but there was even less chance that they would receive a fair trial in the atmosphere of war hysteria whipped up by the administration of Woodrow Wilson. Mooney and Billings were sentenced to death. As protests around the world mounted on Mooney's behalf, including in Petrograd, Wilson himself became concerned, and intervened to have the sentence commuted to life in prison.

In issuing his pardon, Olson, a liberal Democrat, pleaded with Mooney to speak out against "the futile and inhuman chaos of bloodshed and revolution." Ever class conscious, Mooney did no such thing. He instead announced that he would dedicate the rest of his life "to building a new and better social order." On his release, he marched along the route of the 1916 parade at the head of a hundred longshoremen, brandishing their hooks.

Mooney came out of prison a sick and elderly man. He died in 1942. The California Federation of Labor rejected a proposal to pay for his hospital treatment, branding his politics too radical.

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100 years ago: Turkish army reorganized

On January 6, 1914, Colonel Enver Bey, also known as Enver Pasha, appointed himself chief of the general staff of the Ottoman army just three days after being assigned the war ministry by the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) cabinet. He immediately carried out a far-reaching reorganization of the armed forces, described by some as a "bloodless coup." In all, 1,300 officers were forcibly retired, including a handful of marshals and generals, while the Council of Military Affairs, a potential check on Bey's control of the army, was liquidated.

The crisis of the Ottoman Empire, expressed most sharply by the crushing defeats in the Italo-Turkish war of 1911-12 and the Balkan war of 1912-13, was invoked to justify the move. Bey claimed that those removed "had failed in the Balkan War, were inefficient, or too old." In addition to ousting political opponents of the CUP, the purge was accompanied by appeals to the youth, aimed at shoring up Bey's base of support within the army, and fostering a militaristic culture in anticipation of new conflicts.

Bey's attainment of unrivaled control over the army consolidated the power of a military triumvirate composed of Bey, Mehmed Talaat as minister of the interior, and Ahmed Djemal the naval minister. The three had been the chief political benefactors of the coup of January 1913, led by Bey. The Turkish Grand Vizier Kamil Pasha was ousted on the suspicion that he was preparing to end the Balkan war by conceding Ottoman possessions to the Balkan states and the major powers.

Bey continued the close collaboration with the German military mission to the Ottoman Empire that had begun during October 1913, and which presaged the military alliance that the two nations would forge in August 1914. The "Three Pashas," as the triumvirate was known, would exercise effective rule over the Turkish state throughout the First World War.

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