

This week in history: June 6-12

6 June 2016

25 years ago: Yeltsin defeats Gorbachev in Soviet elections

On June 12, 1991, Boris Yeltsin was elected president of the Russian Republic of the Soviet Union by a 57 percent majority. The election was a clear expression of the hatred and contempt of the masses for the ruling Stalinist bureaucracy, represented by President Mikhail Gorbachev, which they held responsible for the devastation of living standards and increasing sabotage of the Soviet economy. At the same time, it underscored the acute dangers faced by the Soviet working class in the absence of a revolutionary proletarian leadership.

The capitalist media spouted fraudulent claims that this election represented a revival of Soviet democracy. In fact, Yeltsin engineered the vote, creating the office of a Russian presidency precisely in order to assume Bonapartist powers in his own hands, enabling him to rule by decree and to turn the Russian parliament into a powerless talk-shop.

As for his being an “anticommunist,” this was certainly true in the same sense that the term applied to every representative of the privileged bureaucratic caste which emerged under the leadership of Stalin in the 1920s, usurped the political power of the working class, smashed Soviet democracy and ruthlessly exterminated the generation of Bolsheviks who had led the 1917 October Revolution.

On June 5, just over a week before his electoral defeat, Gorbachev spoke before the Nobel Peace Prize committee in Oslo, Norway to appeal for financial support from the leading capitalist countries to back his program of “perestroika.”

The only “democratic” credentials which the spokesmen of the imperialist bourgeoisie concerned themselves with in evaluating Boris Yeltsin was his program for the wholesale privatization of state enterprises, the selling off of vital resources for Western bank credits and the transformation of the Russian Republic into one giant free enterprise zone for foreign capital.

The conception that such a transformation would be carried out democratically or would give rise to a flowering of democratic rights for the masses of Soviet workers was utterly fraudulent. In Eastern Europe, where the drive to capitalist restoration was far more advanced, even the

bourgeois media had to acknowledge that it meant a drastic attack on the living standards and conditions of the masses of workers. The results were the continuing destruction of the industrial infrastructure and the systematic dismantling of the social and cultural benefits that the working class won in struggle against the bureaucracy.

50 years ago: James Meredith shot in Mississippi civil rights march

On June 6, 1966, former University of Mississippi student James Meredith was shot in the back while participating in a march to promote black voter registration in the state. Meredith, who in 1962 became the first black student at the formerly all-white “Ole Miss,” was hit by 60 shotgun pellets as he walked along US Highway 51, two miles south of Hernando, Mississippi. Meredith had to cut short his planned 220-mile voter-registration walk from Memphis to Jackson after only 28 miles.

Earlier in the day a group of 300 black residents gathered in Hernando to greet Meredith. Police arrested Aubrey James Norvell, an unemployed white hardware clerk from Memphis, for the shooting. Despite the presence of nearly a score of police officers, including FBI and state troopers, no attempt was made to stop Norvell from firing. Initial press releases erroneously claimed that the civil rights activist was dead. Meredith’s wife collapsed in a state of shock after hearing the false reports.

After the shooting, Meredith told reporters that he regretted that he was unarmed at the time of the attack. “I’ll never make that mistake again,” he said. When a visitor pointed out that that sentiment was not in keeping with the pacifism preached by the middle class leadership of the civil rights movement, Meredith replied, “Who the hell ever said I was nonviolent? I spent eight years in the military and the rest of my life in Mississippi.”

A contingent of civil rights marchers led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Stokely Carmichael attempted to take up Meredith’s march the next day, but were forced off the highway by state police.

75 years ago: Labor candidate loses Minneapolis election

On June 9, 1941, T.A. Eide, candidate of the Minneapolis

Central Labor Union, narrowly lost the city's mayoral election to the Republican candidate, by a margin of 80,359 to 74,497. Eide was defeated after he caved in to a witch-hunt inspired by the Stalinists and taken up by the Republicans, which cited the endorsement of Eide by the Trotskyist-led Local 544 of the Teamsters.

The Minneapolis Central Labor Union had fielded its own slate of candidates for municipal office after the Stalinists, who controlled the Farmer-Labor Party in the Twin Cities, refused to allow the CLU to play any role in the selection of candidates or adoption of a platform. Eide placed first in the primary, outpolling the FLP candidate by five-to-one.

The Stalinists denounced Eide's independent campaign and branded him as the candidate of the "terrorist" Local 544 and the "underworld." The Republicans and the capitalist press took up this line and amplified it, and only days before the vote Eide capitulated and publicly denounced Local 544's leaders, alienating the rank and file of the most important union local in the state.

The CLU slate agreed to adhere to a platform adopted by the unions that called for opposition to US involvement in the world war, defense of democratic and trade union rights, extension of education, a municipal housing and job program, opposition to all sales taxes, public ownership of all utilities and free health care.

Local 544 called on all workers to "elect the labor candidates and see that they put into effect this platform." The Socialist Workers Party, then the American section of the Trotskyist movement, gave critical support to Eide against the candidate of the Stalinist-dominated FLP, while stressing the need for the establishment of a genuine Labor Party in the city, as well as efforts to link up with forces advocating an independent Labor Party nationally.

100 years ago: Arab Revolt against Ottoman Empire proclaimed

On June 7, 1916, the Sharif of Mecca, Hussein bin Ali, issued a proclamation denouncing the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), the ruling party in Turkey, and proclaiming the independence of the regions known as Hejaz. His statement was an announcement of an Arab revolt against the Ottoman Empire.

The CUP had come to power in 1908 in the "Young Turk" revolution on a program of aggressive nationalism. During the period preceding the war there had also been a rise in Arab nationalism, reflected in increasing demands for greater autonomy within the Ottoman Empire. The Arab revolt of 1916 was aimed at securing independence from the Ottomans and establishing a single Arab state in the region from Aleppo in Syria to Aden in Yemen.

Hussein bin Ali was a Hashemite Arab leader, who had

been appointed Emir of Mecca in 1908 by Abdul Hamad II, the last Sultan of the Ottoman Empire prior to the ascension to power of the Young Turks. Britain had agreed to recognize Arab independence, subject to certain exemptions, following World War I, in return for Arab help in the war with the Ottoman Empire.

The promises contained in letters to bin Ali were seen by the Arab ruling elite to constitute a formal agreement between them and Britain. They established a military force under the leadership of Hussein bin Ali's son, Faisal, which fought against the Ottoman Empire.

Britain recognized the value of supporting and encouraging Arab nationalism in order to pursue its own aims. In an intelligence memo written in January 1916, T.E. Lawrence, a member of the British Intelligence staff in Cairo later dubbed "Lawrence of Arabia," described the Arab revolt as "beneficial to us, because it marches with our immediate aims, the break-up of the Islamic 'bloc' and the defeat and disruption of the Ottoman Empire, and because *the states [Sharif Hussein] ... set up to succeed the Turks would be ... harmless to ourselves . . .* The Arabs are even less stable than the Turks. *If properly handled they would remain in a state of political mosaic, a tissue of small jealous principalities incapable of cohesion*" (emphasis in the original).

The Arab revolt commenced just weeks after the signing of the Sykes-Picot agreement that provided for the carve-up of the Arabian Peninsula between France, Britain and Russia following the defeat of the Ottoman Empire. The agreement struck conflicted significantly with the promises to Hussein bin Ali and the Arab bourgeoisie.

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