

This week in history: February 12-18

12 February 2018

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25 years ago: Haiti ferry sinking kills hundreds

On February 17, 1993, an overcrowded ferry travelling from the provincial city of Jérémie to Port-au-Prince capsized and sank off of Haiti's southern peninsula, killing many hundreds of passengers. The precise death toll was never learned, but some estimates put the figure at approximately 1,200, with as many as 1,500 on board the 150-foot vessel *The Neptun* when it sunk in the midst of a heavy rainfall. The Red Cross counted only 285 survivors.

Haiti's poverty was such that, in the absence of phone lines and roads, nothing was known of the sinking for more than 24 hours, until corpses began washing ashore on the beaches near the towns of Miragoâne and Petit-Goâve.

The majority of those on board were poor peasants heading for the market in Port-au-Prince, who paid the equivalent of \$7 for the 18-hour overnight trip. The vessel was especially crowded because its regular weekly trip had been canceled several times, largely because the owners feared that desperate Haitians trying to flee the country might hijack the vessel to break through a US quarantine of the island. The US Coast Guard, on President Clinton's orders, had a flotilla of more than 20 vessels in international waters off Haiti for the purpose of preventing refugees from escaping the military dictatorship nominally headed by Marc Bazin.

Several days before the ferry disaster, 40 "human rights" observers from the Organization of American States and five from the United Nations arrived in Haiti, tasked with overseeing the transition from military dictatorship to bourgeois democracy and the eventual return to power of President Aristide, who had been deposed in September of 1991.

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50 years ago: Tet Offensive provokes crisis in Johnson

administration

On February 12, 1968, in the wake of the Tet offensive, President Lyndon Johnson held private meetings with his top generals to discuss US strategy in Vietnam. They reviewed a proposal from General William Westmoreland, the top American commander in Vietnam, to expand the war and bring in reinforcements exceeding 200,000 troops.

The consultation came as the casualty toll mounted. American losses in the first 12 days of the Tet offensive were higher than any yet sustained in a similar time period, 973 killed and 4,874 wounded. The puppet regime in South Vietnam reported that its forces suffered 2,119 killed and 7,718 wounded during the same period.

Fighting still raged on the outskirts of Saigon and the National Liberation Front continued to hold the city of Hue. They were meanwhile tightening the siege of 5,000 US Marines at Khe Sanh. In one of the most stunning setbacks of the war, on February 7, the NLF overran the Special Forces camp at Lang-Vei, wiping out more than 900 South Vietnamese militia along with their US advisers.

Under conditions of mounting opposition at home, the call for a further escalation threatened to destroy the credibility of the Johnson administration, which only weeks earlier claimed to see "light at the end of the tunnel." To commit large new forces would require the extension of the draft and an extensive call-up of the reserves. Johnson hesitated and then decided against any immediate action. A token additional contingent of 10,500 men was instead ordered to Vietnam. Later in the month Johnson ordered General Earle Wheeler, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to Vietnam to meet personally with Westmoreland and assess the situation.

Having concluded by mid-1967 that the war could not be won, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara was slated to step down at the end of the month. Incoming Defense Secretary Clark Clifford was ordered to assemble a task force to analyze the options open for US imperialism in Vietnam.

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75 years ago: Goebbels announces Nazi program of “total war”

On February 18, 1943, Joseph Goebbels, Nazi Germany’s Reich Minister of Propaganda, announced a policy of “total war” in a speech at Berlin Sportpalast. The declaration followed a series of German defeats, including the destruction of an entire German army by Soviet forces at Stalingrad.

Addressing 14,000 Nazi supporters, Goebbels spoke as the representative of an increasingly nervous regime. Acknowledging that Germany faced a serious crisis on the Eastern front, Goebbels declared, “Stalingrad was and is fate’s great alarm call to the German nation!” He admitted that the Nazis had underestimated the Soviet Union’s ability to resist the fascist onslaught, commenting “we did not properly evaluate the Soviet Union’s war potential. Only now do we see its true scale.”

Goebbels’ speech was full of the anti-Semitic and fascist rhetoric of the German regime, and underscored the regime’s intense fear of the working class. The speech included 47 references to “Bolshevism” and multiple warnings of the specter of socialist revolution across Europe and internationally.

Calling for all-out mobilization against the Soviet Union, Goebbels demanded curtailment of the production and consumption of luxury items, and the use of all spare labour, including from women, for war industries.

Despite Goebbels’ bombastic pronouncements, few serious measures followed the speech. Even before the war began, Germany had introduced rationing and geared industry to war production, a process that escalated rapidly after 1942. While taking symbolic measures against some luxury consumption, the Nazi’s were fearful of inflaming growing opposition to their regime. The mobilization did not solve the growing labor crisis Germany faced. At the same time, the government and ruling elite were increasingly beset by bitter conflicts.

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100 years ago: Wilson accuses shipyard strikers of “giving aid and comfort to the enemy”

In a February 17, 1918 telegram sent to William L. Hutcheson, general president of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, Democratic President Woodrow Wilson rejected the union leader’s request for a meeting to resolve labor unrest on East Coast docks,

and instead issued an ultimatum: “Will you cooperate or will you obstruct?”

Strike action by thousands of shipyard carpenters in the ports of New York and Baltimore, in particular, brought down upon them the wrath of the entire ruling class, the press and the leadership of the American Federation of Labor.

A union leader explained his members’ main grievance: “The Labor Adjustment Board fixed a rate of \$6.60 a day on the Pacific Coast where the cost of living is much higher than here. The nominal rate here is \$4.88 a day ... But the men have not been getting it. Because of great unemployment among carpenters... the shipyard owners have been able to take advantage of the workmen. This has been done mainly in the way of putting skilled carpenters in the class of unskilled or semiskilled labor and paying them in some cases as low as \$3 a day.”

A general strike among 15,000-20,000 shipyard carpenters in the New York harbor nearly broke out after 100 workers involved in the walkout received notices to appear at the draft board “and bring proof of your employment with the Staten Island Shipbuilding Company, properly signed by your firm.” The firm had, of course, refused to supply the letters, making the workers vulnerable to the draft. Union leaders managed to stifle the strike movement.

In his February 17 telegram, Wilson declared, “No body of men have the moral right to strike in the present circumstances of the nation ... If you do not act upon this principle, you are undoubtedly giving aid and comfort to the enemy, whatever may be your own conscious purpose.”

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