

This week in history: July 30-August 5

30 July 2018

25 years ago: Clinton declares war on social spending programs

August 3, 1993: In a nationally televised speech, US President Bill Clinton declared war on what he called the “politics of entitlement,” defending an austerity budget and reaffirming his pledges during the 1992 election campaign to “end welfare as we know it.”

The speech came as the Democratic-controlled Congress was passing a budget which marked a political watershed for American capitalism, as the Democratic Party scrapped the last shred of reformist pretense and openly proclaimed itself the instrument for the destruction of social programs. There was not a penny of the spending on public works which Clinton claimed to support in his first State of the Union speech six months earlier.

In his speech, perhaps the most reactionary address by a Democratic president in the 20th century, Clinton denounced those who wanted “something for nothing,” by which he meant the poor, the unemployed and the elderly. He was not referring to the billion-dollar handouts to the super-rich contained in the budget, which passed only thanks to flagrant vote-buying, with rival corporate interests fighting over various changes in tax provisions.

It was symbolic that the “swing” vote in the US Senate, whose support ensured passage of the budget, was Democrat Dennis DeConcini of Arizona. He was the leader of the “Keating Five,” the five senators who received substantial campaign contributions in return for lobbying on behalf of savings & loan magnate Charles Keating, a billionaire swindler who went to prison for robbing thousands of elderly people of their life savings.

DeConcini was given a slap on the wrist—censured by the Senate—but retained his key position on the Senate Finance Committee, where he shepherded the Clinton budget through, and then was rewarded with lavish praise in the president’s televised address.

Two days after the speech, on August 5, Clinton signed an executive order that for the first time set limits on spending on such entitlement programs as Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid. Any spending above the limits would have to be reported to Congress, along with specific proposals for offsetting spending cut or tax increases.

The only “progressive” fig leaf on the budget was a small increase in taxes on the highest income bracket, the top 1.2 percent, whose rates would increase from 31 percent to 36 percent. This was still far below the 50 percent rate that was in effect for most of the 1980s, but which was drastically slashed in the final years of the Reagan administration and then under President George H. W. Bush.

50 years ago: Bratislava Declaration is signed in Czechoslovakia

August 3, 1968: Six representatives from the Communist parties of the Soviet Union, Bulgaria, Hungary, East Germany, and Poland met with the leaders of Czechoslovakia and signed what became known as the Bratislava Declaration. The meeting was organized as a response to reforms in Czechoslovakia put in place by Communist Party First Secretary Alexander Dubcek, who had come under fire from the Stalinist bureaucracy for supporting a liberalization of the economy and allowing writers to publish political criticisms.

Leonid Brezhnev, leader of the Soviet Stalinists, feared that Dubcek’s reforms would weaken the grip of the bureaucracy over the working class, both within Czechoslovakia and throughout Eastern Europe and undermine the Warsaw Pact, the bloc of countries dominated by the USSR and in most cases hosting substantial garrisons of Soviet troops ever since World War II.

The August 3 meeting was officially organized to discuss, “ways of strengthening and promoting fraternal co-operation among socialist States” and to assure an “unswerving loyalty to Marxism-Leninism, the education of the masses in the ideas of socialism and proletarian internationalism.” In actuality, Stalinism had long since separated itself by a river of blood from Marxism, socialism and proletarian internationalism, terms that in the usage of the bureaucracy simply meant political subordination to Moscow.

The meeting was presented as a thaw in the tensions between Czechoslovakia and the Soviet bloc, because it coincided with the withdrawal of Warsaw Pact forces from Czechoslovakia after the completion of long-planned military exercises. But this was only a cover, with Moscow

subsequently invoking the language of the Bratislava Declaration, particularly its references to combating “bourgeois ideology”, to provide a justification for the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia that would come later in the month.

75 years ago: Uprising at Treblinka extermination camp

On August 2, 1943, prisoners at the Treblinka extermination camp, in German-occupied Poland, launched a heroic uprising against their Nazi jailers, which shook Third Reich forces and inspired workers and youth engaged in the struggle against fascism across Europe.

The camp, in a forest north-east of Warsaw, had begun operations in July 1942. The location was chosen because it was about 50 miles northeast of Warsaw, close enough to the ghetto which supplied most of the victims, but in an otherwise isolated rural area with good rail connections due to a local gravel mining complex.

The construction of the extermination camp was a large-scale enterprise involving hundreds of workers, most of them Jewish forced laborers who were compelled to build the facility in which they would eventually be murdered. Over a period of little more than 12 months, until October 1943, an estimated 700,000 to 900,000 people, nearly all of them Jews, were murdered in gas chambers that operated on a daily basis.

On August 2, dozens of inmates, led by imprisoned Polish army officers and Jewish workers affiliated with left-wing political organizations, initiated an offensive against the German troops that controlled the facility. They broke into the armory at the camp, taking dozens of rifles and other weapons.

Hundreds set fire to buildings and surrounding structures, while giving fierce resistance to the forces of the Third Reich. Around 200 escaped the facility, but an estimated half of those were shot dead. Nazi troops responded to the upheaval with barbaric repression, raining indiscriminate machine-gun fire down on the prisoners.

This was the same policy that had been pursued amid earlier rebellions in ghettos and concentration camps across Poland, including in response to the Warsaw Ghetto uprising in May of 1943. The Nazis’ genocidal “final solution” claimed the lives of approximately 90 percent of Polish Jews.

100 years ago: French Socialist Party opposes anti-Bolshevik intervention

On July 30, 1918, the national congress of the Section Francaise de l’Internationale Ouvriere (SFIO—the French Socialist Party), responding to the growing antiwar and radicalized mood among French workers, rejected

intervention by the imperialist Allies against the Bolsheviks in Russia. A centrist tendency, led by Jean Longuet, grandson of Karl Marx, a reformist and pacifist, won the leadership of the party away from the extreme rightwing and social patriotic forces led by Albert Thomas.

The French social-democrats, along with their counterparts in every major European country, had gone along with the war aims of their imperialist master, adopting the policy of the Union Sacree—the “sacred union” of the workers organizations and the bourgeoisie for the duration of World War I. Using the language of Jacobin nationalism and anti-German chauvinism, they lauded the superiority of French republican institutions over the monarchy ruled by Kaiser Wilhelm II.

L’Humanité, the daily paper of the SFIO, called on workers to perform their military duty or to speed up production at home. The secretary of the CGT trade union confederation, Leon Jouhaux, became a Commissar of the Nation and sat on war committees alongside royalists. Many leaders of the French Socialists, including Marcel Cachin, a future founding member of the Communist Party, were fervent supporters of the war.

An amorphous opposition within the SFIO began to develop in 1916, similar to the trend led by Karl Kautsky in Germany. The sufferings of the masses and the continuing slaughter which would result ultimately in 1.4 million French dead and 3 million wounded produced an enormous revulsion against the right-wing faction of the SFIO.

The national congress of the party, in addition to passing a resolution against Allied intervention in Russia and in opposition to any “projects of a Russian counterrevolution,” criticized the right-wing Thomas faction. It recorded regret at “recent manifestations by certain members of its parliamentary group” who lined up with the openly pro-imperialist leadership of the American Federation of Labor.

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