

This week in history: December 31-January 6

31 December 2018

25 years ago: Zapatista rebellion erupts in Chiapas, Mexico

The peasant-based Zapatista Army of National Liberation (Spanish acronym EZLN) staged an open revolt in Chiapas, the southernmost state of Mexico, on January 1, 1994, the day that the North American Free Trade Agreement came into effect. The EZLN was led by a group of middle-class intellectuals who, based on semi-Maoist ideas, went “to the people” in the Lacandon Jungle, one of the most remote areas of the country, with a largely indigenous (non-Spanish speaking) population.

About 3,000 armed insurgents seized towns and cities in Chiapas, Mexico’s poorest state, freed prisoners in the jail of San Cristobal de las Casas, the largest city they were able to capture, and set fire to police headquarters and military barracks. Mexican troops counterattacked the day after the New Year, with ferocious fighting and much bloodshed in the town Ocosingo.

The uprising, which shocked the Mexican government, was largely suppressed after four days. President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, with the full support of the Clinton administration in the United States, ordered the use of advanced weaponry, including jet fighters and helicopter gunships, against peasants equipped with little more than machetes and spears. The Zapatistas were forced to retreat into the jungle.

There was no official death toll, but the actual figure was certainly in the hundreds, if not higher. Morgues in the state were said to be “saturated” with corpses. Hospital officials said there were relatively few treated for wounds and other injuries, an indication that the military had systematically shot the wounded and those who surrendered. In Ocosingo, television footage showed rows of corpses with their hands tied behind their backs.

The widespread killings also revealed endemic racism, as the vast majority of the victims were Indian peasants, subjected to apartheid-style oppression and exploitation by the landlords of the great plantations. A Roman Catholic bishop from Chiapas state, Felipe Gutierrez Franco, called the situation in the combat zone “a bloodbath, in which the Indians provide all the corpses, so that others may profit handsomely.”

The EZLN issued its First Declaration and Revolution Laws calling for armed struggle against the Mexican government, because it had ignored peaceful protests by the peasant and Indian population of Chiapas, the country’s poorest and most undeveloped state. They called for autonomy for indigenous communities and democratization of the national government, which had been controlled by the ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional for 65 years.

The US government sent five “observers” to Chiapas state to assist in the repression. Meanwhile the US began implementing terms of the North American Free Trade Agreement, which took effect January 1, opening the way for American companies to profit more directly from the suppression of the Mexican peasantry.

50 years ago: Irish civil rights demonstrators attacked while police watch

On January 4, 1969, Irish civil rights protesters engaged in a four-day march from Belfast to Derry to protest the treatment of Northern Ireland’s Catholic minority, were attacked by a mob of Unionists while police stood by and did nothing. The Protestant loyalists broke up the march before it could reach its destination.

The marchers included members of the student-led Northern Ireland socialist organization “People’s Democracy” along with some supporters from the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA). People’s Democracy was formed in October of 1968 by students at Queen’s University Belfast in response to the police repression of a peaceful protest organized by NICRA. The group called for the repeal of the Special Powers act, for fair distribution of jobs and housing, and for the protection of many democratic rights like free speech, an end to gerrymandering, and a policy of “one man, one vote.”

On January 4, when the marchers approached Burntoltet Bridge, they were ambushed by about 300 Unionists, including at least 100 members of the Ulster Special Constabulary, a special police force. This group hurled rocks at the marchers and beat them with clubs and boards with nails driven through the end.

One participant, Bernadette Devlin, who would later be elected as a Member of Parliament, recalled, “We came to

Burntollet Bridge, and from lanes at each side of the road a curtain of bricks and boulders and bottles brought the march to a halt. From the lanes burst hordes of screaming people wielding planks of wood, bottles, laths, iron bars, crowbars, cudgels studded with nails, and they waded into the march beating the hell out of everybody.”

The march had been heavily followed by police who had prior knowledge that the marchers would be attacked. Police assured the march organizers that if they continued on towards Burntollet Bridge that they would be protected from the attackers. But as the Unionist assault began against the protesters, the police stood back and watched.

75 years ago: Hitler speech highlights crisis of fascist regimes

On January 1, 1944, Nazi dictator Adolf Hitler delivered a New Year’s message which pointed to the increasing crisis of the fascist regimes in Europe, amid major military defeats and mounting opposition from the working class.

Hitler began by noting that “bitter and difficult decisions had to be made” over the previous 12 months. “After the Allies succeeded in landing in French North Africa, which was made possible by the breach of word and loyalty of the French admirals, generals, and other officers, I had to try to win time under any circumstances,” he declared.

Fascist forces had been expelled from their last redoubts in northern Africa in May 1943. This had created a base for the Allied powers to launch an invasion of Italy in September, 1943. The fascist regime of Benito Mussolini fell, amid bitter infighting within the Italian ruling elite. It was only resurrected in part of the country, through the direct intervention of German troops. As Hitler spoke, German forces were in a brutal war for control of Italy against a mass partisan movement in the north and the Allied powers in the south.

Over the previous year, the Nazis had also suffered devastating defeats on the Eastern Front, including at Stalingrad in January 1943. Attempts to reverse the losses, including the Kursk offensive, ended in further catastrophes, ending any prospect of a German victory over the Soviet Union. In the final stages of the year, Soviet forces had recaptured the key cities of the Ukraine, including its capital Kiev. As 1944 opened, the Red Army was advancing towards German-controlled Poland.

Hitler’s speech opaquely referenced mounting domestic opposition to the war, declaring, “In such a worldwide, mighty, and dreadful struggle, it cannot be avoided that the psychological stress for the individual sometimes reaches the limit of what is bearable, even surpassing it at times.” But he boasted that every aspect of life was being “subordinated ... to waging the war,” a reference to the

super-exploitation of the working class and the use of slave labor.

100 years ago: 700,000 workers march in Berlin in anti-government protest

In an enormous demonstration on January 5, 1919, which far exceeded the expectations of its organizers, hundreds of thousands of workers massed in the streets of Berlin to protest the actions of the German government, which was dominated by the right-wing Social Democrats.

The immediate cause of the mass mobilization was the attempt by the government to remove Emil Eichorn, a member of the centrist Independent Social Democrats (USPD), from his post as Berlin police chief. On January 4 a meeting was held bringing together the executive of the Berlin USPD, the revolutionary shop stewards movement and two representatives of the newly-formed Communist Party of Germany (KPD)—Karl Liebknecht and Wilhelm Pieck. This gathering issued the appeal for a peaceful demonstration.

Many of the workers who turned out were armed. All the big newspaper publishing houses were occupied, the presses stopped, the editorial staffs sent home. Later, other armed groups occupied the major railway stations.

On the evening of January 5, the leaders of the left organizations again gathered. Swept up in the mood of the demonstration and ignoring their own party’s perspective of a protracted struggle to win over the masses, Liebknecht and Pieck went along with the proposal for the immediate overthrow of the central government.

An unwieldy “Provisional Revolutionary Committee” of 53 was established and a proclamation issued calling on workers to turn out again. By the hundreds of thousands they did, on January 6. But the leaders vacillated and took no action while the masses stood around from morning until night. The mood shifted, and the counterrevolution gained confidence.

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