

This week in history: January 13-19

This column profiles important historical events which took place during this week, 25 years ago, 50 years ago, 75 years ago and 100 years ago

12 January 2025

25 years ago: Tens of thousands demonstrate against Confederate flag in South Carolina

On January 17, 2000, Martin Luther King Jr. Day, almost 50,000 people protested in Columbia, South Carolina against the Confederate flag flying over the statehouse. The demonstrators carried signs and chanted slogans of “Bring it down” and “Your heritage is my slavery.”

The significant size of the crowd revealed the deep hatred for this obnoxious symbol which had been flying over the statehouse for decades in a blatant attack on the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s and equality for blacks. The Confederate flag was the banner of the slaveowners’ rebellion that triggered the American Civil War of 1861-1865. After the victory of the Union side, led by President Abraham Lincoln, and the revolutionary overthrow of the slavocracy, the Confederate flag was then taken up by the reactionary movements such as the Ku Klux Klan which sought to impose and maintain white supremacy in the South.

Polls found widespread support for the removal of the former Slave Power’s flag, which had been appropriated by modern-day religious fundamentalists, bigots and white supremacists, and embraced by the right-wing of the capitalist class. One newspaper poll indicated that only 25 percent wanted the flag to stay where it was. Another survey found that 57 percent wanted the flag down, with two-thirds favoring its removal to a memorial on the state capitol grounds.

However, the organizers and leaders of the anti-flag movement, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and other civil right groups, demonstrated their political bankruptcy throughout the demonstrations. Rather than addressing broader social questions of poverty, homelessness, and growing social inequality under the existing political system of capitalism, these groups stopped at the “single issue” of the removal of the flag, as if this would solve the issues impacting black and white workers. At the start of the 21st century, social indices already revealed massive inequality, poverty, war and attacks on democratic rights.

While dressing themselves in the heritage of King, a believer in reforming capitalism instead of replacing it with a revolutionary socialist government of the working class, the anti-flag leaders abandoned King’s radical opposition to imperialist war and his advocacy of wealth redistribution. King eventually concluded that political equality could only be reached by eliminating social

inequality, the exploitation of the working class, and US imperialism.

Since King’s assassination in 1968, the NAACP and civil rights leaders had moved sharply to the right. The right-wing trajectory of these organizations and their failures to address the burning issues impacting the population were bound up with their opposition to building a movement in the American working class. At the same time the anti-flag movement coalesced in South Carolina, dock workers in Charleston were on strike fighting for better social conditions. The state government brought in a phalanx of police and state troopers to defend the profits of the dock companies and break the strike.

50 years ago: Deng Xiaoping returns to high office in China

On January 17, 1975, Deng Xiaoping, an influential figure in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and eventual successor to Mao Zedong, was reinstated to positions of significant power in the People’s Republic of China. Deng previously had been purged from his offices after Mao initiated his Cultural Revolution in 1966.

Deng’s restoration reflected deep fissures within the CCP surrounding Mao’s recent turn toward accommodations with imperialism. Building off US President Richard Nixon’s 1972 visit to China, Mao was prepared to move forward with plans that would allow for financial investment from foreign capital to penetrate Chinese industry. Deng had been a long-time advocate and architect of these plans.

Initially a trusted lieutenant of Mao Zedong, Deng rose to prominence as a skilled military leader during the Chinese Revolution and as a pragmatic administrator. However, as Mao launched the Cultural Revolution to reassert his control over the party after the economic disaster of the “Great Leap Forward,” Deng found himself at odds with Mao’s personalist dictatorship.

Deng was labeled a “capitalist roader”—a term used during the Cultural Revolution to denounce those accused of steering China away from “socialism” and toward capitalist restoration. Stripped of his positions and subjected to public humiliation, Deng appeared to be at the end of his political career.

However, Mao maintained a close correspondence with Deng over the years of his official exile and eventually came to support his economic plans. Essentially Mao kept Deng sidelined from official

party circles until it became political advantageous to bring him back.

By the early 1970s, China faced immense economic difficulties. The disastrous effects of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution devastated industrial and agricultural production, raising fears within the Maoist bureaucracy of unrest among the working class. This outcome the CCP leadership, like its counterparts in the Soviet Union, sought to avoid at all costs. Instead, to protect its own privileges, the CCP's leadership pursued deals with imperialist countries to attract foreign investment and secure temporary economic relief. These conditions paved the way for Deng's rehabilitation.

Upon his return in 1975, Deng assumed a series of key posts, including Vice Premier and Vice Chairman of the party. His main area of focus was to organize the Chinese economy, prioritizing building relations with capitalist investors.

Deng's return sparked factional struggles within the CCP between his pro-capitalist faction and the dogmatic adherents to the rhetoric of the Cultural Revolution, primarily the Gang of Four, which included Mao's wife Jiang Qing. After Mao's death in 1976 Deng would successfully outmaneuvered his rivals and consolidate power by 1981 as the dominant leader of the Stalinist regime.

75 years ago: USSR begins boycott of United Nations

On January 13, 1950, the Soviet Union began a boycott of the United Nations (UN) which lasted until August. The issue that prompted the boycott was that of Chinese representation in the international forum, following the October 1949 revolution that had brought the Chinese Communist Party to power.

The president of the Republic of China, and leader of the right-wing Kuomintang party, Chiang Kai-Shek, had signed the Charter of the United Nations in 1945, the year the UN was founded. Shortly after Chiang's reactionary bourgeois formation was overthrown in the 1949 revolution, the People's Republic of China (PRC), as the Maoist regime was titled, demanded official recognition by the UN as the government of China. In addition, they demanded that the KMT representatives at the UN be expelled.

This demand was seconded by the Soviet regime, which introduced a formal motion within the UN Security Council on January 10 to expel the KMT representative Tsiang Tingfu and replace him with one of the PRC's choosing. Soviet Ambassador Yakov Malik stormed out of the session after the motion was voted down 8-2.

Malik would again walk out of the meeting on January 13 after another failed motion, this time to seat the PRC in place of the Republic of China within the UN. The USSR was joined in supporting the motion by Yugoslavia and India, but every other member state voted against it.

The Soviet Union then presented its ultimatum to the UN in light of this failed motion: that the USSR would not acknowledge any decision made by the Security Council, nor attend any of its meetings, while Tingfu or any representative of the KMT were part of it.

The episode underscored the hypocrisy of the international order that was being developed by the imperialist powers in the wake of World War II. While covered with phrases about democracy and the equality of nations, it was wholly subordinate to the geostrategic interests of the major powers, above all American imperialism.

At the same time, the nationalist and bureaucratic regimes in the

Soviet Union and China did not have a principled attitude to the imperialist institutions, instead seeking to collaborate with them. Both were hostile to the program of socialist internationalism, the fight for world revolution, instead advancing the reactionary perspective of building "socialism in one country" in a world dominated by imperialism.

100 years ago: Imperialist powers split over opium regulation in China market

On January 18, 1925, the Japanese representatives to the International Opium Convention in Geneva sided with the American delegation against the British in a proposal to regulate the consumption of opium, the highly addictive drug that had ravaged the poorest nations of East Asia since the 19th century.

The British had sought to exclude Japanese imperialism from playing a leading role in opium regulation in the Western Pacific. The United States, however, opposed this move, earning the thanks of the Japanese government in a series of diplomatic letters and conversations at the Geneva conference.

The Japanese delegation now supported the American position, which sought to not only regulate trade in opium but also to stop the officially sanctioned consumption of the drug in China, Indochina (Vietnam) and Dutch-controlled Indonesia. The British—whose colony in India was a major producer of opium—opposed the regulation of its consumption, which was legal in British India.

The move by the Japanese was a rapprochement of sorts between the two imperialist powers after mass demonstrations in Japan in 1924 against the US Immigration Act of that year, which halted Japanese immigration to the United States, had soured relations between the two Pacific powers.

Japanese imperialism had regulated consumption of opium in Taiwan, which it had annexed in 1895. A considerable portion of the Taiwanese population, which the Japanese needed for cheap labor, had been addicted to the drug before the Japanese occupation.

The British had foisted opium addiction on China through illegal smuggling of the substance in the early 19th century and legal sale in the aftermath of the two Opium Wars (1839-1841 and 1856-1860) against the Qing Dynasty, which opened the Chinese market to Western goods. At the time, the most salable commodity produced by the British was opium made in India. It was only by this means that the British Empire achieved a balance of payments surplus with China and East Asia. In the early 19th century, the United States also played a significant role in smuggling opium into China, the basis of many a fortune in New England.



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