

This week in history: March 1-March 7

1 March 2010

This Week in History provides brief synopses of important historical events whose anniversaries fall this week.

[25 Years Ago](#) | [50 Years Ago](#) | [75 Years Ago](#) | [100 Years Ago](#)

See: “Britain: 25 years since the year-long miners’ strike.”
[top]

25 years ago: British miners’ strike ends

The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) on March 5, 1985 called an official end to the year-long strike against the Thatcher governments’ attempts to reorganize the coal industry at the expense of its workers. The defeat of the miners’ strike, which the Tory government had provoked, paved the way for a ruling class offensive against the wages and conditions of the entire working class.

The Tory government mobilized a massive police operation against the miners. On the picket lines, some 20,000 strikers were injured, 13,000 were arrested, and two were killed by the police. The British courts, media and opposition Labour Party joined hands against the miners. The Trades Union Congress, the federation of British unions, worked to suppress solidarity actions by other workers.

Central in the strike's defeat was the conception of its leader, Arthur Scargill, and his backers in Britain's middle-class radical political groupings that victory could be achieved on a strictly trade union basis, coupled with political appeals to the Labour Party for nationalist protections of the British coal industry. This was set forth in Scargill's “Plan for Coal,” which called for tariffs and subsidies for British coal against foreign competition. The NUM was left isolated and was ultimately crushed.

50 years ago: Munitions ship explodes in Havana’s harbor

On March 4, 1960, a French ship, *Le Coubre*, carrying 76 tons of Belgian weapons to Cuba’s militia, blew up in Havana’s harbor, killing dozens of workers. A half an hour later, a second explosion occurred, killing many more who had come to provide assistance to the wounded.

The Castro government immediately blamed the US for the explosion. Though no conclusive proof has been rendered, there is little reason to doubt that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) or anti-Castro groups working with it were responsible. Planes from the US had carried out a number of terror bombings targeting Cuban factories and sugar cane fields, and the US had sought to block Belgium and other countries from selling arms to Cuba.

Tensions between the US and Cuba had mounted over previous months. Castro had, early after the revolution, sought US support, and did not consider himself or his movement socialist. But Washington reacted to limited land reforms by moving to choke off the Cuban economy and supporting provocations against the nationalist government. Castro responded by cultivating ties with the Soviet Union, agreeing with Moscow on February 13 to trade agreements for petroleum products and machinery in return for sugar.

[top]

75 years ago: Attempted coup in Greece

On March 1, 1935, supporters within the Greek military of former Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos launched a coup attempt against the government of Panagis Tsaldaris's right-wing People's Party. The Venizelist coup was led by General Nikolaos Plastiras, who had played a leading role in the coup against King Constantine I in 1922 and opposed the royalist sympathies of the People's Party.

Fighting broke out in Athens on the evening of March 1 and within hours martial law had been declared by the government. The defeat of rebels in a battle near the Acropolis quickly returned Athens to the control of the People's Party.

While gun battles raged in the streets of Athens, rebel forces took control of several warships in the Greek naval fleet. Government planes dropped bombs on at least five of the ships captured by rebels and protected harbors against entry from rebel ships by laying naval mines.

The anti-royalist revolt soon spread throughout Greece and Macedonia, but rebel forces were overpowered by government loyalists in many of the battles. While struggling on the mainland, rebels were able to take control of the Island of Crete. Government planes retaliated by bombing Eleftherios Venizelos' home on the island.

Fighting lasted little more than one week in all, and the coup was soon suppressed by the Tsaldaris government. Eleftherios Venizelos would eventually be forced to flee Greece and was sentenced to death in absentia for supporting the coup.

[top]

100 years ago: Philadelphia general strike

On March 5, 1910, a general strike broke out in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania over the Philadelphia Rapid Transit Company's refusal to meet demands of striking streetcar workers organized in the Amalgamated Association of Street Car and Electric Railway Men of America. The general strike was "so titanic that it attracted the attention of all vested interests in this country and abroad," according to the *Public Ledger*.

About 140,000 workers in all organized trades followed the order for the general strike, beginning at midnight, when orchestra musicians, waiters and cab drivers stopped work. Massive crowds joined striking streetcar drivers in obstructing trolleys driven by strike-breakers. Police and company guards, firing guns indiscriminately into crowds, killed two, including a young boy. Philadelphia banned public gatherings.

Worker anger had been simmering in Philadelphia for a year. A strike of streetcar workers a year earlier had resulted in the threat of a general strike, but local politicians intervened to work out a deal. The company, however, reneged on recognizing the union, and soon began firing union workers.

When it fired 173 union members on February 19, the drivers resumed their strike, winning broad support from the city's workers. At one point, about 10,000 workers in Germantown fought a two-hour pitched battle with police.

The strike precipitated sympathy actions in Trenton, New Jersey and elsewhere on the East Coast, but the city and transit company waited the general strike out, and gradually it subsided. Ultimately, the Amalgamated overturned a rank-and-file vote rejecting an unfavorable settlement and ordered workers back on the job. In response to the strike, a Labor Party was formed in Philadelphia that called for public ownership of the city's utilities.

[top]



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