

This week in history: January 31 - February 6

31 January 2011

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](#)

25 years ago: 11.5 million US workers lost jobs in plant shutdowns from 1979 to 1984

On February 4, 1986, Pres. Ronald Reagan delivered a State of the Union Address hailing an alleged US recovery from the deep recession of the 1980s. He said the economy was “on the move,” driven by “sunrise industries,” 37 straight months of economic growth, and an official unemployment rate a 4 percent, down from 12 percent in 1980.

The reality of the “Reagan recovery” was massive social dislocation and the gutting of basic industry, as a Congressional report released two days later revealed. It found that between 1979 and 1984, a staggering 11.5 million workers lost their jobs due to plant or factory shutdowns. Only 60 percent of them found new jobs during the same period, and most of these found work in low-paid service sector jobs. Among the displaced, many were middle-aged manufacturing workers “with long and stable job histories,” the Congressional Office of Technology Assessment found. The manufacturing areas of the Northeast and the Midwest were particularly hard hit.

This devastation was the result of a conscious policy of the US ruling class, pursued by both Republicans and Democrats. In 1979, President Jimmy Carter’s selection to head up the Federal Reserve Board, Paul Volcker,

dramatically increased interest rates on bank lending. This “shock therapy” created a tidal wave of plant shutdowns, farm foreclosures, and high unemployment, that were used as a battering ram against strike activity. The basic aim was to break the resistance of the working class to a corporate assault on jobs and wages after the high level of strike activity in the 1970s. This attack was announced by Reagan’s crushing of the PATCO strike of air traffic controller in 1981, with the complicity of the AFL-CIO labor bureaucracy.

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50 years ago: Angolan rebels launch anti-colonial war against Portugal

On February 4, 1961, about 200 fighters of the anti-colonial People’s Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) launched an attack on a Portuguese police station and prison in the colonial capital, Luanda. The attack was beaten off, but the week of fighting that followed made clear that the anti-colonial war had begun in earnest.

The revolt began in January, when workers at an extensive cotton plantation in the Baixa de Cassanje region went on strike, burning their identification cards and attacking Portuguese managers. The Portuguese military responded on February 4 with a bombing campaign and used napalm indiscriminately on the villagers, killing as many as 7,000.

The response to the MPLA attack in Luanda was equally savage. “The Portuguese vengeance was awesome,” according to one account. “The police helped civilian vigilantes organize nightly slaughters in the Luanda slums. The whites hauled Africans from their flimsy one-room huts, shot them and left their bodies in

the streets.” Hundreds were killed.

Angola had been ruled by Portugal since the 1500s, when it was a center of the Atlantic slave trade and much of its population was brutally shipped off to the plantations of the new world. After WWII, the Portuguese empire continued as an ally to US imperialism under the quasi-fascist Estado Novo of António de Oliveira Salazar. Salazar was committed to keeping Mozambique and Angola, which was rich in oil and diamonds, as colonies. He promoted them to the status of Portuguese provinces in 1951.

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75 years ago: Charlie Chaplin’s “Modern Times” released

Charlie Chaplin’s film “Modern Times,” a comedy that depicts the social consequences of the Great Depression and the brutality of modern city life, was released on the 5th of February 1936. It was the final movie for Chaplin’s out-of-luck working class protagonist, “Little Tramp.” Chaplin also wrote and directed the film.

The movie follows the “Little Tramp” through various misadventures in the industrial city played out against Chaplin’s signature disdain for authority figures like bosses, police and landlords. Employed initially on a manufacturing assembly line, the “Little Tramp” suffers a nervous breakdown due to constant speed-up on the assembly line and creates havoc in the factory. After recovering he is arrested after police mistakenly believe him to be the leader of an angry workers’ street demonstration. The film draws to a close with the character, if not triumphing against adversity, then at least not being crushed by it.

The “Little Tramp” speaks before the film ends, breaking Chaplin’s long film silence that had continued even in the era of the “talkies.” At the film’s climax, Little Tramp sings in French-Italian gibberish. His enduring silence is thus finally broken, in a superb twist, by a character previously silent because he evidently could not speak English. Chaplin was saluting the workers emigrating to America, who spoke the tongues of the world and who therefore struggled in their adopted

homeland.

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100 years ago: As Mexican revolution intensifies, US launches aerial surveillance of border

On February 5 or 6, Mexican rebels captured the town of San Ignacio, opposite Fort Hancock, Texas. Meanwhile, several rebel armies, under generals Orozco, Blanco, de la Luz Sances, and Alanis were preparing to lay siege to Juarez.

At this point in the fighting, the Mexican Revolution was concentrated in the north along the frontier with the US. The *New York Times* noted that the American military presence on the border, then under the control of General Hoyt of the Department of Texas, would be sent on “wild goose chases” after rebel crossings that would fail to materialize. While the US authorities searched, rebels would cross at other points.

In response to the easy movement of Mexican rebels in and out of Texas, the US War Department (later renamed the Defense Department), determined to step up the American military presence along the border. US Army Chief of Staff General Wood secured a “Wright biplane” to conduct aerial reconnaissance missions on the border under the auspices of the new US Aeronautical Reserve. As many as six planes were to be requested, and the War Department was preparing a special appropriation of \$125,000 to purchase them.

[top]



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