

This week in history: March 05 - March 11

5 March 2012

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: 135 drown in North Sea ferry disaster caused by corporate speedup

On Friday, February 6, 1987, in the first moments after the Dover-bound North Sea ferry *Herald of Free Enterprise* left the Belgian port of Zeebrugge with 543 people aboard, it capsized in 30 feet of water, causing the drowning deaths of 135 people. This was the largest British maritime disaster since the sinking of the *Titanic* in 1912.

The sea-lanes across the English Channel were among the busiest in the world with as many as 250 ferry trips each day. Ferry companies were under financial pressure to streamline operations in preparation for the competitive threat posed by the proposed Channel tunnel planned jointly by the UK and France.

The British National Union of Seamen had previously criticized safety procedures on the “roll-on roll-off” channel ferries, in which cars and trucks are driven on and off quickly. The loading doors were often not completely shut while the ferries were in the harbor areas in order to make departures faster and to ventilate exhaust fumes from the vehicles in the ship’s hold.

In a public statement, a spokesman for the company that ran the ferry, Townsend Thoresen said, “We have accepted that it is something to do with the doors. That is how the water rushed in because there is no other hole in the ship.”

Regulations at the time of the accident considered shutting of bow doors before leaving the dock advisable but not mandatory. The *Herald of Free Enterprise* disaster was the fifth major North Sea ferry accident in as many years.

[top]

50 years ago: Vietnam fighting intensifies

On March 10, 1962, the South Vietnamese military admitted that its forces had suffered more casualties in February and the first ten days of March than in all of 1961, and that the previous week’s fighting had cost a combined 1,200 government and insurgent National Liberation Front (NLF) casualties. Government outposts were reportedly nearly overrun in Tay Ninh province near the Cambodia border and Phuoc Thanh province near Saigon before “Viet Cong” NLF fighters were beaten back by government warplanes.

The previous week two South Vietnamese pilots had attempted to assassinate the corrupt US puppet dictator, Ngo Dinh Diem, by bombing the presidential palace in Saigon. Diem was unhurt.

On March 6, the commander of US forces in the Pacific, Admiral Harry D. Felt, announced from Saigon that government forces had finally “gone on the offensive” against the NLF. When a reporter noted that government casualties were higher than those among the rebels, Felt responded, “We haven’t thrown in the towel yet. Let’s not judge this situation from the past. Let’s see what we can do.”

On March 7, United States Operations Mission head Arthur Z. Gardiner said that the US would dispose of about \$200 million in aid to the South Vietnamese government, over and beyond military assistance. Much of this aid would be spent on securing support for the government in South Vietnamese villages where “the decisive battle for people’s hearts and minds was being fought,” to borrow the phrase used by the *New York Times*.

On March 8, the *Times* reported on a US-led attack on a village, Cai Ngai, in the far south of Vietnam. Five US helicopters transported government soldiers to the village. All five helicopters were strafed, and one was disabled, though no Americans were wounded. The South Vietnamese government soldiers transported in the helicopters then went on an attack, killing nearly three dozen villagers—described by the *Times* as “guerillas”—and arresting 20 more, before burning down “a food supply depot and a first aid station.” The report commented, “Apparently, the Viet Cong felt so secure in this deeply pro-Communist zone that the village approaches were

left undefended.... But, as usual, the main enemy force got away.” It quoted commanding officer Captain Robert Bebb as saying, “We sure hit a nest full this time, but we just didn’t move fast enough.”

[top]

75 years ago: Sit-down strike erupts at Chrysler in Detroit

On March 8 1937 the United Automobile Workers (UAW) union called an immediate sit-down-strike at Chrysler when the corporation refused to recognize the union. The strike immediately stopped production at Plymouth, De Soto and Dodge Chrysler plants in Detroit. Simultaneous sit-down strikes also began at the Packard Motor Company plant in Detroit. Over 6,000 workers also occupied their places of employment at the Chevrolet factories in Flint, Michigan during this momentous day.

The Detroit sit-down erupted from below. One day prior to the outbreak of the strike, Homer Martin, the president of the UAW, warned Chrysler that the union intended to represent the corporation’s entire industrial workforce but stopped short of issuing any ultimatum. When asked what the union would do should Chrysler refuse these demands, Martin told the press they would “cross that bridge when we come to it.”

On March 5, 100 young women sit-down strikers at Woolworth’s department store in Detroit won their demands for a raise. The spontaneous strike began 16 days after the victory in nearby Flint; now all across Detroit employers were giving workers raises in order to avert occupations.

The biggest victory came a day earlier, on March 4, when US Steel, the major bastion of anti-unionism, capitulated to the Steel Workers Organizing Committee of the CIO rather than risk a strike involving hundreds of thousands of workers.

Only weeks after the victory of the Flint sit-down strike at General Motors, the American Federation of Labour (AFL) responded to the wave of worker militancy by stepping up its red-baiting of industrial workers and their unions and seeking agreements with corporate management against the Committee of Industrial Organizations (CIO). On March 5 the president of the AFL, William Green, received a telegram from the representatives of company unions at Carnegie Illinois Steel Corporation inviting his union federation to fight the influence of the CIO.

[top]

100 years ago: Brisbane general strike ends

After five weeks, the general strike in Brisbane, Australia was officially ended on March 6, 1912. The strike was triggered when members of the Australian Tramways Association were sacked on January 18 after they defied management orders and wore their union badges to work. The dispute had begun nine months earlier when Joseph Stillman Badger, the manager of Brisbane Tramways, had banned union badges in an attempt to hinder worker organization.

In protest against the sackings, tramway workers marched on Brisbane Trades Hall where a meeting was organized in Market Square, attended by over 10,000 people.

On January 22, a press notice instructed employees to attend work without union badges and warned that those who remained absent would be considered to have resigned. A unionist, J. Moir, sought to liaise with Badger and the Tramway Union, but Badger refused to speak with unionists. Labor organizations and unions interpreted this rebuff as an attack on unionism and, on January 28, 43 trade unions were represented at Trades Hall, where a strike committee was appointed.

On January 30, the strike committee called a general strike. Work could only be carried out with a special permit from the strike committee, which also issued strike coupons that were recognized by various companies in exchange for services. On January 31, more than 50,000 supporters watched a demonstration of over 25,000 workers.

Digby Denham, the conservative Queensland Premier, said there were “not going to be two governments,” and opposed all permits for future processions. In defiance, around 15,000 unionists and supporters turned up at Market Square February 2, where they were savagely attacked by police in a day known as Black Friday.

The strike ended when the Employers Federation agreed not to victimize strikers. However, tramway company workers who had struck were fired and Brisbane Tramways refused to ever re-employ them. They were only re-hired when the company was acquired by the Brisbane government in 1922, but the wearing of union badges was prohibited until 1980.

[top]



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact