

This week in history: March 3-9

3 March 2014

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: Bitter strike begins at Eastern Airlines

At 12:01 a.m. on March 4, 1989, more than 8,150 machinists and baggage handlers went on strike against Eastern Airlines. The workers, organized by the International Association of Machinists (IAM), rejected demands by the company for \$150 million in concessions, amounting to almost \$20,000 annually for each employee. Eastern had been claiming that the company would go bankrupt if workers continued to resist. To underscore the threat, Eastern mailed out 60-day layoff notices to its entire workforce of 31,200.

Airline owner Frank Lorenzo had earned the hatred of workers for using Chapter 11 bankruptcy in 1983 to terminate union contracts at Continental Airlines after a hostile takeover in 1981.

In the weeks prior to the strike at Eastern, the company operated a training school for strikebreaking mechanics in Houston, Texas, intending to use scabs against the strikers. On the first morning of the strike, however, Eastern pilots, organized by the Air Line Pilots Association, announced that they would honor the IAM picket lines and shortly afterward, flight attendants, organized by the Transport Workers Union, joined the strike. The united action by workers crippled Eastern's operations, shutting down virtually all flights.

As IAM members working on the railroads threatened sympathy strikes, President George H.W. Bush's newly-appointed transportation secretary, Samuel K. Skinner, warned that the government would not let labor struggles "hold the economy hostage" and if the strike became widespread, the administration would seek emergency action "to ensure that this country never faces such a peril again."

These threats were aimed at a union leadership who didn't want the struggle in the first place. Before the strike, the AFL-CIO called on Bush to invoke the emergency provisions of the 1926 Railway Labor Act and impose a 60-day cooling off period. The administration refused the request in order to implement their own strategy of making an example of the workers at Eastern.

On March 9, Eastern once again filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy.

In a front-page article in its March 10 edition, the *Bulletin* newspaper, predecessor to the *World Socialist Web Site*, made this warning to workers: "Despite the great power of the struggle,

however, its victory requires more than maintaining solidarity and standing firm on the picket lines. The Eastern workers are not just fighting Lorenzo; they are fighting a full scale government assault involving every agency of the capitalist state, from the White House, to the Supreme Court, to Congress. And they are fighting a no less implacable enemy which operates as the fifth column of big business and the government within the labor movement—the AFL-CIO bureaucracy."

[top]

50 years ago: *New York Times Co. v. Sullivan* upholds freedom of press

On March 9, 1964, in the case *New York Times Co. v. Sullivan*, the US Supreme Court ruled that the press is broadly protected by the First and 14th Amendments from libel charges and defamation lawsuits brought by public officials. The 9-0 ruling established a high standard for libel, holding that state officials would have to prove "actual malice"—that the publishers and journalists knowingly falsified information or acted with reckless disregard for the truth—in making false or incorrect statements that appeared in the media.

The ruling came in the context of the mass civil rights movement of oppressed black workers against the "Jim Crow" Democratic Party regime in the US South. Alabama public officials had brought libel suit in state courts against the *New York Times* for publishing an advertisement that included some factually incorrect information. The March 29, 1960, advertisement, "Heed Their Rising Voices," solicited legal funds for Martin Luther King, Jr., who had faced several arrests and ongoing legal harassment from Alabama authorities. An Alabama court awarded Montgomery Public Safety commissioner L. B. Sullivan \$500,000 in damages from the *Times* and other defendants.

In seeking to overturn the damages, the *Times* admitted to several unintentional factual errors. It claimed the aim of the lawsuit was not to correct false information, but to silence media coverage. The suit was not rare; by one count there were in 1964 over \$300 million in outstanding libel and defamation suits brought by public officials against news organizations in the South. The cumulative effect was to chill media coverage of the civil rights struggle, including reports on the violence instigated by Southern officials against protesters.

[top]

75 years ago: Coup deposes remnants of Spanish Republic

Juan Negrin's Spanish Republican administration, whose area of control was by then restricted to the center-south zone containing Madrid surrounded by Franco's army, was overthrown on March 5, 1939 by a coterie of Republican military officers who established a National Council of Defense (Spanish initials CND) headed by General Sigismundo Casado, Chief of the Central Republican Army. Negrin and his Foreign Minister Alvarez del Vayo arrived shortly afterwards in Toulouse, France, with the remainder of his deposed cabinet following over subsequent days.

Seeking to save themselves by suppressing any further resistance to Franco, the officers at the head of the CND wished only to surrender rather than fight on to secure the best possible terms of negotiation, as proposed by Negrin. The CND manifesto accused the Negrin leadership of planning to flee abroad and was supported by all the Republican political factions except the Stalinist Spanish Communist Party (PCE). The CND justified their taking of power by stating it was necessary in order to forestall a communist coup d'état. The PCE opposed the overthrow of their ally Negrin, and Madrid witnessed scores of armed clashes between PCE members and CND troops. Fighting also ensued in Guadalajara and other towns where the defeated Communist workers were arrested and frequently shot dead by CND-controlled troops.

The purpose of the coup quickly became apparent when almost immediately after deposing Negrin the CND issued an appeal for Republican supporters in Franco-controlled territory to make their peace with the General rather than mounting guerrilla action and sabotage behind fascist lines. On March 6, on behalf of the CND, General Miaja issued a radio broadcast appealing for Spanish unity.

Also this week what remained of the Republican naval fleet set sail from Cartagena and landed 11 units off the coast of Bizerta in Tunisia and surrendered to the French colonial authorities, who would subsequently intern the Republican supporters and deliver them back to Franco. Some 4,000 sailors and 500 civilians, among them women, were not allowed ashore until the authorities were convinced that both the ships and personal were disarmed. En route from Cartagena the fleet was bombarded by the German and Italian air forces. Three destroyers were sunk and hundreds drowned.

[top]

100 years ago: Major powers appoint new King of Albania

On March 9, 1914, Prince William of Wied, a German army officer, was formally appointed King of the Albanian protectorate by the major European powers, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, along with the Austro-Hungarian and Russian empires. Having turned down an offer for the same position in 1913, the prince now agreed to accept this newly acquired domain.

Prince William had been selected by the major powers from a

stock of candidates including representatives of Turkish, Swedish, and other German royalty. His ascension was in part due to his familial ties to the influential Queen Elisabeth of Romania, his aunt.

The ascension took place in the context of political instability caused by the two Balkans wars fought in 1912-13— the first between the ailing Ottoman Empire and a number of Balkan states, and the second, fought among the latter countries over their shares in the spoils of Turkey's decline.

Albania had been the scene of a major nationalist uprising in August 1912 against occupying Turkish forces. After the declaration of independence that followed the revolt against the Ottoman Empire, large swathes of Albania were rapidly occupied by Greek, Montenegrin and Serbian armed forces. Austria-Hungary and Italy had been among the most vocal supporters of a nominally independent Albania, fearing that its outright partition threatened their own interests in the Adriatic, and created the conditions for domination of the region by the Russian Empire.

The Ambassadors Congress in London initiated the moves by the major powers for formal Albanian independence in July 1913. Serbian troops withdrew from Albania shortly afterward.

Once installed in office, Prince Williams was quickly revealed as a ruler of very limited authority. Prominent government ministers with ties to Italy and Serbia plotted against him. After barely six months, he was forced to abdicate shortly after the outbreak of the First World War, leaving Albania, never to return, in early September, 1914.

[top]



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