

This week in history: March 17-23

17 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: Eastern Airline strikers face betrayal by unions

This week in 1989, the strike by Eastern Airlines mechanics, ground crew, pilots and flight attendants was entering its third week. Despite the enormous support in the labor movement displayed in rallies and mass pickets at airports around the country, the treacherous handling of the strike by the unions had put the struggle in danger.

As the *Bulletin* newspaper, one of the forerunners of the *World Socialist Web Site*, said in its March 17 edition: "It is necessary to issue a blunt warning: unless a rebellion is launched by the rank and file against the policies of the AFL-CIO, International Association of Machinists and Air Line Pilots Association bureaucrats to expand the strike and shut down the entire airline industry, the struggle against Eastern's union-busting and concessions demands will be defeated."

The article continued, "AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland, IAM President William Winpisinger and his hatchetman at Eastern, Charles Bryan, ALPA President Henry Duffy have done everything in their power to paralyze the labor movement in the face of this latest government-backed assault on the unions. They have refused to extend the strike, using court injunctions in a few cities as the cover for their opposition to any attempt to shut down Lorenzo's scab Continental operation, other airlines or the railroads."

Eastern Airlines boss Frank Lorenzo also owned Continental Airlines, and in anticipation of the Eastern mechanics strike, he had been training strikebreakers to replace them. Continental was the bulwark of Lorenzo's union-busting operation, where he had used the bankruptcy courts years earlier to abrogate workers' contracts, making them the lowest paid in the industry.

However, the support of Eastern pilots and flight attendants on the picket line shut down almost all scheduled flights. At the end of the first week of the strike, Eastern filed for bankruptcy protection.

Flight attendants at Continental Airlines went on strike on March 20, 1989. The Continental flight attendants voted 80 percent for strike authorization the previous December, over low pay and long hours. They had been working over five years without a contract. The decision of the flight attendants to strike during the Eastern strike was intended to strengthen their position, but the unions left them isolated, defeating the strike in five days.

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50 years ago: Civil rights school boycotts in NYC

Over 25 percent of New York City public school students participated in a boycott on March 16, 1964 to press demands for civil rights. Black and Puerto Rican students participated in large numbers, over the opposition of the middle class leadership of the NAACP, the national Congress for Racial Equality (CORE), and the Urban League.

School officials estimated that 167,459 students were absent, over and above the normal 100,000. In many schools in Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant, the two largest black neighborhoods, at least 90 percent of the students participated, despite an almost complete news blackout.

The work of organizing the boycott was carried out by rank-and-file members of CORE, who defied the national leadership, and by other local organizations in Bedford-Stuyvesant. Similar school boycotts demanding desegregation and greater funding for schools in minority areas were held in major cities throughout the US in March. Students organized their own picket lines in front of high schools and junior high schools, while 3,000 students protested in front of the board of education offices in Brooklyn. In one school, it was reported that three teachers took turns instructing one student.

The only prominent leader supporting the school protest, black nationalist Malcolm X, turned up at the boycott headquarters. His appearance came only a week after he had announced that he was breaking with Elijah Muhammad's Black Muslim movement to organize a black nationalist party advocating armed self-defense of the black population.

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75 years ago: Gestapo rounds up opponents in Czechoslovakia

Beginning March 17, 1939, the German Gestapo launched a round-up of political opponents after Hitler's annexation of Czechoslovakia. Shortly after the invasion of the central European state, the Nazis established a concentration camp at Milovice, some 16 miles from Prague. Among the very first to be arrested were 47 Czech social workers who since the previous October had been working in cooperation with the various British and American refugee agencies.

The London *Times* reported that the position of the Czech Jews "is, to say the least, unpromising," before noting how the exceptionally large number of hearses and mourners in Prague's Jewish cemetery immediately after the invasion meant large numbers had taken their own lives in despair. Four Jews, according to the British newspaper, were said to have jumped from a window in central Prague, one after the other, after German troops entered the Czech capital.

Although the Czech frontier remained open in theory, in fact only those with visas issued by the Gestapo were allowed to cross, and such visas were not issued by the Nazi authorities to "non-Aryans." Crowds formed outside the British embassy, but a British visa was useless without a counter-visa from the Gestapo. Two hundred wealthy Czech Jews, set to depart for the Dominican Republic, were forced to postpone their departure.

The exclusion of Jews from commercial and everyday life was occurring "at breathless speed," according to the *Times*. The German language *Prager Tagblatt* reported that the "cleansing" of the Czech film industry was already under way and that Jewish directors, producers and cameramen had already "resigned" their posts. "One law is eternally valid," the newspaper asserted, "the right of the German people to the Lebensraum commensurate with its numbers and achievements," the newspaper asserted.

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100 years ago: Curragh incident marks turn to partition of Ireland

This week in March 1914, Sir Edward Carson and his Ulster Volunteer Force threatened to engulf Ireland in civil war in response to the British government's proposal for Irish home rule. The Liberal government of H.H. Asquith capitulated, opening the door to eventual partition of Ireland.

Carson, a leading figure of the British Conservative Party and the unionist movement—those who favored the continuing subjugation of Ireland to British imperialism—launched a campaign against proposals for Irish Home rule, organizing a series of well-attended rallies in Ulster. In September 1912, he created the Ulster Covenant, which bound signatories to oppose Home Rule by "all means necessary." Soon afterward Carson established the paramilitary Ulster Volunteers, which in January 1913 was transformed into the Ulster Volunteers Force (UVF), also known as "Carson's Army."

With moves for a third Home Rule bill underway, British authorities feared that the UVF would act on its threats of violence, and make an attempt to seize British arsenals. On March 20, 1914, 61 British officers in the Irish command resigned, while up to a hundred others threatened to take the same action, in response to discussion about British forces acting against the UVF. The incident provoked a political crisis in Britain, leading to the resignation of the Secretary of State for War, and the top military officer of the army.

Underlying Carson's actions was fear of the development of a unified movement of the Irish working class, in opposition to every section of the ruling elite. Irish workers had been locked in a bitter struggle with Dublin's leading employers from August 1913 to January 1914. While the dispute ended in a defeat for the workers, as a result of betrayals by the union leaderships, the "Dublin lockout," as it was known, highlighted the militancy and potential political strength of the Irish working class.

Ulster became a focal point for the machinations of the Unionist and Tory ruling elite in Britain and Ireland, both because of its economic significance as the industrial and manufacturing center of the country, and for its political use as a means of promoting sectarian divisions to weaken and divide the working class.

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