

This week in history: February 16-22

16 February 2015

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25 years ago: Marion Barry refuses to resign in the face of drug charges

Washington, DC Mayor Marion Barry accused the US Department of Justice of conducting a “political lynching” in the indictments brought against him this week, 25 years ago. Barry declared publicly that he would not resign as mayor of Washington, DC, the office he had held for almost 12 years.

Barry’s legal counsel stated he would contest all eight charges: three felony charges of lying to a federal grand jury about involvement in drug transactions and five misdemeanor charges of possession of crack cocaine.

Barry was arrested the previous month in an FBI sting operation in which a former girlfriend, Rasheeda Moore, invited him to a hotel room equipped with a video surveillance camera to smoke crack and have sex. Moore had been secretly working with the FBI. The arrest was caught on video after Barry was recorded smoking freebase cocaine.

Barry continued to act as mayor after his arrest, communicating with his office by telephone from a Florida alcohol and drug rehabilitation center. He claimed publicly that he was rehabilitating himself solely from alcohol abuse, a disease he said afflicted “millions of Americans.”

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50 years ago: Malcolm X assassinated

On February 21, 1965, black nationalist leader Malcolm

X was assassinated by gunmen loyal to the rival Nation of Islam at a rally of his supporters in the Audubon Ballroom in Manhattan. A week earlier his home had been the target of a firebomb attack. He reported receiving daily telephone threats and had requested a gun permit from the New York City Police Department.

The Nation of Islam had been heavily infiltrated by the FBI in the notorious COINTELPRO operation. John X Ali, national secretary of the organization, was later revealed to be an agent. Ali met with one of Malcolm X's assassins, Talmadge Hayer, the night before the killing. Malcolm X also believed that the CIA had attempted to assassinate him in a near-fatal poisoning during his 1964 trip to Cairo.

A minister and leading spokesman for 12 years in the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X broke with the organization and its founder Elijah Muhammad in 1964. Advocating more militant tactics in the struggle for black civil rights, he established the Organization of African American Unity.

He was suspended by the Nation of Islam in 1963 following the assassination of President Kennedy for making the famous comment that “the chickens are coming home to roost.” This blunt remark provoked a vicious witchhunt by the capitalist press, which was busy manufacturing the Kennedy myth, presenting this corrupt imperialist politician as a martyr for the poor and minorities.

Malcolm X further enraged bourgeois opinion and the conservative middle class leadership of the Nation of Islam by his support for armed self-defense by blacks against racist attacks. While rejecting the most extreme forms of anti-white demagoguery peddled by the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X never broke from the nationalist conception that “white society” rather than the capitalist system was the source of racism. Neither was he able to break with religion.

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75 years ago: British-German military actions off Norway

On February 16, 1940, the British navy sailed into Norwegian waters and intercepted the *Altmark*, a German supply ship, which was carrying 299 British merchant seamen as prisoners.

A Norwegian boat positioned itself several times between the German boat and the British ships to prevent a confrontation. Finally a British ship drew up alongside the *Altmark*, opened fire and stormed aboard to liberate the prisoners.

A decision by Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty, to violate Norwegian neutrality by engaging Germany in Norwegian territorial waterways escalated the struggle by the rival combatants in World War II for control over Scandinavia.

The USSR, after two months of setbacks in its war against Finland, had just launched a massive invasion of Finland, and its numerical superiority in forces was finally beginning to break the stubborn Finnish resistance.

Britain had been preparing to assist Finland in its war against the Soviet Union by advancing troops through Norway and Sweden, while at the same time utilizing the opportunity to cut off Swedish iron ore being shipped to Germany to maintain Hitler's military manufacturing.

Churchill's move into Norwegian waters represented the first time the Allies had deliberately violated neutral territory in the war with Germany. Hitler recognized that Churchill would not hesitate to do so again and stepped up his own plans to invade Norway, both to secure his supply of Swedish ore and to keep the British navy out of the Baltic Sea, where German defenses were weak.

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100 years ago: Rosa Luxemburg imprisoned by German authorities

On February 18, 1915, the revolutionary Marxist leader Rosa Luxemburg was imprisoned by German authorities for her opposition to the imperialist world war that had broken out in August 1914.

She would remain in Barnimstrasse women's prison in Berlin for the following year, during which time she wrote *The Crisis of German Social Democracy*, otherwise

known as *The Junius Pamphlet*, after the pseudonym she chose to disguise her authorship while in prison. Luxemburg was the most prominent opponent of right-wing opportunism within German Social Democracy and was an outspoken critic of the decision by the parliamentary wing of the SPD to vote for war credits in August 1914, betraying the principles of socialist internationalism.

Following the vote by the SPD for war credits she wrote, "Never before in the history of class struggles, since there have been political parties, has there been a party that, in this way, after fifty years of uninterrupted growth, after achieving a first-rate position of power, after assembling millions around it, has so completely and ignominiously abdicated as a political force within twenty-four hours as Social Democracy has done."

Immediately following the betrayal of the SPD, Luxemburg, along with Karl Liebknecht, formed the Group Internationale within the SPD, a tendency fighting for a revolutionary, internationalist and anti-war perspective within the membership of the SPD and the working class.

Just days before the outbreak of World War I, hundreds of thousands of workers had demonstrated in Berlin against the war drive of the imperialist nations. Six months after the war had started there was widespread hostility within the working class to the war effort.

The jailing of Luxemburg was an attempt to silence her under conditions where the opportunist leadership of the SPD and the German ruling class feared an uprising of the working class in opposition to the war.

Two weeks earlier, Karl Liebknecht had been censured by the parliamentary wing of the SPD for breaking with party policy and was drafted into the army. As was the case with Liebknecht, the leadership of the SPD did nothing to oppose the state attacks against Luxemburg.

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