

This week in history: February 23-March 1

23 February 2015

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25 years ago: Sandinistas defeated in Nicaragua election

Nicaragua's ruling Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) conceded defeat in national elections held on February 25, 1990 under the auspices of the so-called Central American peace plan and with the direct supervision and funding of the US and its various agencies. Voters went to the polls with a gun to their heads, since the US government had warned that it would continue backing the Contra war if the Sandinistas won the vote.

Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, candidate of the US-funded right-wing opposition coalition UNO, had 54.7 percent of the vote, compared to 40.8 percent for Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega. The Sandinistas remained the largest party in the national legislature.

The defeat was the culmination of a series of retreats and concessions to imperialism by the petty-bourgeois nationalist leadership of the FSLN, leaving the Nicaraguan masses more exposed than ever to direct US domination and intervention and to the return of the blood-stained Contra mercenaries and former chiefs of the Somoza regime's National Guard.

In July 1979, the Sandinistas ousted the longtime US-backed dictatorship founded by Anastasio Somoza. For years the US government sustained and illegally funded the Contras' terrorist war, which left more than 30,000 Nicaraguans dead and caused material damage amounting to some \$17 billion. The US policy of indirect military aggression was combined with an intensification of an economic blockade that crippled Nicaragua's access to international markets and credit. The result was an inflation rate that reached more than 33,000 percent in 1988.

Behind the Sandinista electoral defeat was the growing disillusionment of the oppressed masses of Nicaragua with the petty-bourgeois nationalist leadership, which was unwilling and unable to forge an independent path from

imperialism and carry out the fundamental tasks of the democratic revolution.

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50 years ago: Madrid students revolt against Franco

On February 24, 1965, Spanish police wielding truncheons broke up a peaceful student march of some 5,000 in Madrid, arresting hundreds. The students, who were led by four university professors, were demanding the right to form independent student groups.

The students marched through Madrid until they came to a barrier of police. They then sat down in the middle of the street rather than advancing further or dispersing. Upon a bugle call the police charged into the crowd. Many of the students sustained head wounds from the police riot. The professors who led the march, Jose Luis Aranguran, Garcia Calvo, Montero Dias and Garcia Vercher, were also beaten and arrested.

The crackdown did not stop the protests, with student strikes continuing along with meetings of up to 5,000 students taking place daily. The regime responded on February 26 by closing Madrid University's School of Philosophy and Letters, followed two days later by the suspension of the university medical school. On March 1 students issued a resolution calling the situation "untenable" and demanding a change in "divided and oligarchic Spain."

The students' immediate targets were the official student organizations, imposed on the universities by the regime, which handed out scholarships and privileged positions based on fealty to Franco. But under Spain's fascist regime, even a challenge to such minor institutions called into the question the entire corporatist and nationalist-Catholic set-up, which had been built on the bones of tens of thousands of Spanish workers and intellectuals murdered in the Civil War of the 1930s and the White Terror that followed.

Behind this brutal regime stood the United States, which had normalized relations with Spain in the 1950s and promoted a liberalization of its autarkic economic policies.

This set into motion rapid economic growth in the early 1960s, while hundreds of thousands of Spanish migrants sent remittances and traveled back and forth from West Germany, France and elsewhere in Western Europe. These economic and social developments, however, began to erode Franco's dictatorship, which was ultimately based upon Spain's backwardness.

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75 years ago: Stalinist massacre of Polish officers at Katyn Forest

On March 1, 1940, between 15,000 and 22,000 Polish Army officers, along with a number of intellectuals, were taken from three Soviet detention camps in Kozelsk, Starnblesk and Ostashkov and executed over a ten-day period by the Soviet NKVD (the Stalinist secret police). The order was personally approved by Stalin after a proposal by NKVD head Lavrentiy Beria.

For more than a year their fate was uncertain, until German imperialism launched its military assault against the USSR in June 1941. In the Katyn Forest near Smolensk, Poland, near the location of a house used by the NKVD as a retreat, German soldiers uncovered eight mass graves containing the bodies of 4,253 Polish officers from the Kozelsk detention camp. Each victim was found to have had their hands tied behind their back and was shot in the back of the skull with a single bullet.

The German authorities accused Stalin of the atrocity and, despite the barbaric crimes committed by the Nazi forces against the Poles under Nazi occupation in the Western part of the country, they proceeded to trumpet their findings in the Katyn Forest for their full propaganda value. The Soviet Union denied the accusations and claimed Germany carried out the murders in 1941.

But among the articles found on the corpses were 22 diaries whose entries break off during the period March-April 1940, clearly establishing that the Polish officers were liquidated during the time of Soviet occupation of Eastern Poland.

In the period after World War II, the imperialists would from time to time publicize the Stalinist massacre in Katyn Forest and, seeking to equate Stalinism with communism, would use the crime to bring genuine communism into disrepute.

Roosevelt forbade the publication of the details about the murders in the Katyn Forest, as part of his wartime alliance with the Soviet Union. When confronted about the

accusations against Stalin he replied, "This is entirely German propagand and a German plot. I am absolutely convinced the Russians did not do this."

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100 years ago: Ohio coal strikers appeal for support

Coal miners in eastern Ohio's Jefferson and Belmont counties issued an urgent appeal on February 16, 1915 to the entire working class to come to their aid. Fifteen thousand miners had been locked in a bitter yearlong dispute with the eastern Ohio mine owners, who had steadfastly refused to obey the state's own mining laws.

Dozens of miners had been arrested on charges ranging from assault to "treason against the state of Ohio," with many of them sent to jail because they could not pay fines.

The miners' appeal, issued in Dillonvale, Ohio, explained: "Fellow workers: At our last meeting ... we decided to appeal to you for some small help in our case to win a fight for a larger piece of bread. As you are aware, we have been on strike for 11 months now and only part of that time we have received benefits, and now they are cutting our benefits down next week, it will be only \$1.00 a week."

In passing the appeal on to the labor movement, William D. ("Big Bill") Haywood, general secretary-treasurer for the revolutionary syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), called on coal miners in West Virginia, Pennsylvania and western Ohio to join the striking miners:

"Erase from your mind the imaginary county and state lines that cause you to feel in a separate world from your fellow miners and make you scab on them.

"Lay down your picks, blow out your lamps, and go out in the free air and light in aid of your Ohio fellow coal miners. Refuse to mine coal under conditions except that the coal barons in eastern Ohio come to terms...

"An injury to one is an injury to all.

"The coal diggers of eastern Ohio are appealing for aid from their fellow workers ... it may be any one of you next to ask for solidarity."

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