

This week in history: March 28-April 3

28 March 2016

25 Years Ago | 50 Years Ago | 75 Years Ago | 100 Years Ago

25 years ago: Chairman of East German privatization agency assassinated

On April 1, 1991, Detlev Rohwedder, chairman of the institution responsible for the privatization of East German industries—the Treuhand—was assassinated by a sniper. As chair of the Treuhand, Rohwedder was responsible for 8,000 former state-run companies of East Germany, employing 6-7 million workers.

In the space of a few months since capitalist reunification of Germany the previous October, nearly 1 million jobs were destroyed in the old German Democratic Republic (GDR). According to official figures, jobs were being lost at the rate of 10,000 per day. Official unemployment in the east was estimated to reach 50 percent of the workforce, as workers registered as “short-time” would lose their jobs.

In previous weeks, hundreds of thousands of workers returned to the streets of Berlin, Leipzig and Dresden to protest against the consequences of the reunification. On Monday March 25, for the third consecutive week, 80,000 workers and youth assembled in the main square of Leipzig to express their disillusionment with the German government and demand the resignation of Chancellor Helmut Kohl. In addition, tens of thousands of workers demonstrated in Zwickau, Erfurt, Cottbus and the shipyard town of Rostock. “Kohl must go!” and “Helmut out!” were two popular slogans.

A few days after the first of the Monday demonstrations resumed in Leipzig in March, the government in Bonn announced that on August 1 rents in the former GDR would be doubled and in many cases tripled.

Klaus Zwickel, the deputy chairman of IG Metall, the largest German trade union, publicly expressed his fears that the movement developing in the working class could go beyond the control of the union. He told the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, “In view of the hopelessness confronting the people there, it can’t be excluded that a point will be reached where a purely trade union perspective is insufficient. We can only hope it doesn’t come to such an explosion.”

Rohwedder’s murder could well have been a provocation

aimed at discrediting the workers’ movement against Treuhand. He was shot through the window of his home in Dusseldorf. According to Wikipedia, “The shots were fired from 63 m away from a rifle with 7.62×51mm NATO standard calibre. An inspection of the scene found three cartridge cases, a plastic chair, a towel, and a letter claiming responsibility from an RAF [terrorist organization Red Army Faction] commando named after Ulrich Wessel, a minor RAF figure who had died in 1975. The shooter has never been identified.”

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50 years ago: Strikes, demonstrations, bring down Ecuador junta

On March 29, 1966, the Ecuador junta headed by Admiral Ramón Castro Jijón fled the Government Palace in Quito after a week of mass labor strikes and student demonstrations. Jijón resigned as president, a position he had held since the coup that established the junta in 1963. The other members of the three-man junta, General Marcos Gandara and General Luis Cabrera, also resigned from government. The next day banana plantation owner and economics professor Clemente Yerovi was sworn in as interim president.

The 1963 coup had been welcomed by the Kennedy administration, one of a spate of CIA-backed coups in Latin America and the Caribbean that gave the lie to the democratic pretensions of Kennedy’s Alliance for Progress initiative.

The right-wing junta proved incapable, however, of addressing the underlying social and economic crisis of the impoverished South American country. The growth of the cities, and the decline of agriculture, exposed the feudal *huasipungo* plantation system, whereby indigenous peasants were allowed tiny plots of land in exchange for plantation labor. However, the junta’s Agrarian Reform Law, imposed in 1964, was stillborn. The situation was exacerbated by declining revenue from bananas, then the country’s leading export.

Racked by mounting debt, the junta resorted to the imposition of import taxes, a move that triggered the March 1966, call to strike by the right-wing Chamber of Commerce. Ecuador’s working class and student youth seized on the opening provided, as strikes and demonstrations swept the country. A

military crackdown at Central University failed to stem the revolutionary tide, and the junta fled.

It was replaced by a market-oriented regime under Yerovi, who was then replaced in a general election by another moderate, Otto Arosemena Gómez, in 1967. The following year, the left-nationalist José María Velasco Ibarra was returned to office for the fifth time, 34 years after his first election. Velasco would be driven from office in yet another CIA-backed coup in 1972.

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75 years ago: Strikes cripple US arms production

On April 2, 1941 autoworkers, steel workers, miners and other industrial workers launched powerful strikes against corporations under military contract. Everywhere workers brushed aside the argument that it was unpatriotic to strike as US imperialism stepped up arms production in preparation for entry into World War II. The strikes brought calls from Congress for the death penalty against strikers.

Throughout March, a series of sit-down strikes against beatings and victimizations of over 1,000 UAW members rocked Ford's giant River Rouge plant in Dearborn, Michigan. On April 2, a new provocation caused all 85,000 workers to walk out. Ford's attempt to use 10,000 black autoworkers as strikebreakers failed as nearly 90 percent immediately joined the union.

When Ford attempted to reopen the plant the following day using 8,000 armed goons and Dearborn police, workers set up barricades blocking access in a 10-square-mile area around the plant. The strike broke Ford's resistance and led to the establishment of the first full union shop in the auto industry.

At Bethlehem Steel the victimization of 1,000 steel workers and attempts by the company to foist a company union on the ranks resulted in massive strikes involving 90,000 workers. The strikes won bargaining rights for the CIO's Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC) and paved the way for wage increases for 603,000 steel workers across the country.

Unable to control the upsurge, the United Mine Workers (UMWA) led by John L. Lewis refused to accept mediation by the new National Mediation Defense Board, set up by Roosevelt to block strikes against war production. Four hundred thousand soft coal miners in the eight-state Appalachian coal fields walked out and won a \$1-a-day wage increase and the first paid vacations in the history of the UMWA. The strike was particularly violent in Harlan County, where company thugs machine-gunned miners, killing four and wounding five more.

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100 years ago: Mass strike of construction workers in New York City

On April 3, 1916, thousands of workers engaged in constructing the New York City subway system walked off the job after their demands for improved pay and conditions were ignored by the General Contractors Association.

Four thousand timbermen and laborers who were members of the Tunnel and Subway Constructors International Union met in Harlem on April 2, and were addressed by leaders of the union along with representatives of Central Federated Union, the local organization of the American Federation of Labor.

Ten thousand workers employed by 40 contractors were engaged in the subway construction. The union was demanding a wage increase for timbermen of 75 cents per day, from \$2.50 to \$3.25, and for timbermen's helpers of 25 to 40 cents, up to \$2.40 a day. For laborers, the demand was for wages to be raised to \$2 a day, up from the previous rate of just \$1.60-\$1.75. Workers were also calling for union recognition, and genuine observance of the eight-hour day, which was regularly broken.

On the first day of the strike, between 4,000 and 5,000 workers walked out, crippling construction. In Brooklyn, the strike was almost 100 percent successful.

On April 5, 2,000 drill-runners and blasters downed tools in protest against the employers' attempts to force them to carry out the work normally done by the strikers. Work on several of the most important sections of the subway construction was brought to a halt as a result.

The contractors saw the demand for \$2 a day for the laborers as a major threat, as the union had warned in its leaflets that the demand would not be restricted to subway work. As many as 100,000 laborers would have been affected by a general rise in the prevailing wage, including those employed by street and railway companies and those on city-owned construction work on sewers, water mains, and other public utilities.

The strike vote was taken in Italian, the native language of the predominantly migrant workforce in attendance. The overwhelming support for the vote, and the strike, provided yet another manifestation of the radicalization of American labor in the decade from 1910 to 1919, a period which saw major strikes among many sections of the working class, including textile workers, coal miners, iron miners, and steel workers.

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