

This week in history: February 19-25

19 February 2018

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

25 years ago: Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney resigns

After eight and one-half years in office, Canada's Tory Prime Minister Brian Mulroney announced he would resign as soon his successor was chosen. While Mulroney attempted to present his resignation as a matter of "changing the mantle" and "renewal" in Canada's ruling Progressive Conservative Party, his pro-corporate policies had made him the most unpopular Canadian prime minister in the history of polling.

Mulroney had shepherded through the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement (FTA), which came into force in 1989, and initiated the negotiations that led, soon after his departure, to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with the US and Mexico. Under the FTA and NAFTA, Canadian capitalism was reorganized for increased continental and global competition, through plant closures, major wage and benefit rollbacks, and social spending cuts.

Mulroney also presided over a wave of privatizations, including of Air Canada and CN Rail, and was a staunch supporter of US President Ronald Reagan on the world stage. In 1991, he imposed the regressive Goods and Services Tax as a means of shifting even more of the tax burden from Canada's corporations and its wealthy elite onto the backs of working class consumers.

During his second term, Mulroney attempted to stabilize the Canadian federal state through a constitutional reform that offered concessions to Quebec-based factions of the ruling elite. This backfired, precipitating a major crisis of the Canadian nation-state and splits from his party by both western regionalists and Quebec separatists. The former would launch the rightwing populist Reform Party and the later the Bloc Québécois.

With his resignation, Mulroney was jumping off a sinking ship. The Tories and his successor Kim Campbell were on the precipice of the worst election defeat of any major party in Canada's history. In the October 1993 elections, the Progressive Conservatives would suffer a 149-seat loss in parliament, leaving them with just two seats when all the votes were counted.

Hated in Canada, Mulroney's career was celebrated in corporate boardrooms all over the world—especially south of the border. As an editorial by the *New York Times* put it, Mulroney "has been a good friend to the US, a close ally on global issues and a strong partner in demolishing trade barriers ... he has launched his nation in a promising new direction."

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50 years ago: US docks boycott threatened in support of striking copper miners

On February 22, 1968, Thomas Gleason, head of the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA), announced that 100,000 dockworkers on the East and Gulf coasts would no longer unload copper imports. The action was threatened in support of 60,000 striking copper industry workers, who had been on strike in five western states for more than seven months against leading US copper firms, including Phelps Dodge Corporation, Anaconda Copper, and Kennecott Copper.

The announcement, which came in the midst of the AFL-CIO Executive Council meeting in Florida, quickly tied up copper imports in the leading US port, New York City, as well as Philadelphia and Baltimore. Gleason's move came after Secretary of Labor W. Willard Wirtz told the AFL-CIO Executive Committee that he had no intention of intervening in the strike after copper unions had rejected its latest proposal.

In response to Gleason's threat, the Johnson administration immediately imposed a ban on all copper sales to non-defense contract purchasers, and warned the unions about dangers to "national defense" in the midst of the Vietnam War. It further threatened the ILA leadership that it could face prosecution for conducting an illegal "secondary boycott." In response, Gleason suspended the boycott order, supposedly to discuss the matter with union lawyers. The boycott was never enacted.

At issue in the copper strike was the union demand that contracts be negotiated for all workers, industry-wide, regardless of their employer or particular task in production.

In the negotiations between the copper giants and the unions, the Johnson administration feigned neutrality, when, in fact, the copper industry's needs were being met by imports, which were arriving at a clip of almost 60,000 tons per month. As a "compromise," it backed a three-tiered system, separating miners from production workers, which was rejected, on February 21, 1968, by union leadership.

By March, the Johnson administration had fully embraced the copper giants' position, declaring that the union demand for industry-wide contracts was illegal. The strike ended that month with a contract largely dictated by the copper firms, who immediately imposed a price increase on copper sales.

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75 years ago: Members of White Rose resistance group executed by Nazi regime

On February 22, 1943, Sophie Scholl, Hans Scholl and Christoph Probst, leading members of White Rose, an underground resistance organisation opposed to the Nazi regime, were summarily tried and executed. Brought before the "People's Court," they braved the taunts of notorious Nazi judge Roland Freisler and displayed remarkable courage in the face of death. Further trials would follow, as the Gestapo hunted down other members and supporters of the group.

The core of the White Rose was composed of University of Munich students and Professor Kurt Huber. Beginning in June 1942, until the apprehension of the Scholls on February 18, 1943, the group distributed six leaflets and spread graffiti denouncing the Nazi regime and calling upon the German people to resist. Their activities reflected a growing backlash among youth, workers, and sections of the intelligentsia against the horrors of World War II and the Nazi regime.

The group's early leaflets were couched in Christian terms. They made reference to the atrocities committed against Jews and Poles and the deteriorating military situation on the Eastern Front and in North Africa. Later leaflets advanced explicitly left-wing and socialist arguments. The fifth leaflet declared: "The working class must be liberated from their menial slavery through a practical form of socialism. The illusion of a self-sufficient economy must disappear from the face of Europe. Every nation, every individual has a right to the goods of the world!"

The Scholls were captured by the Nazis after a university leaflet distribution on February 18. A seventh leaflet, by Probst, was found in their possession. All three were charged with treason and found guilty by the Nazi kangaroo court. Their death sentences were carried out by guillotine. In his final moments, Hans Scholl shouted "Long live freedom!" while his sister defiantly denounced her executioner as a coward. Hans Scholl was 24 years old when he was murdered, Sophie Scholl was just 21.

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100 years ago: Germany breaks truce, invades Soviet Russia

Fifty-three divisions of the German and Austro-Hungarian empires marched deeply into Russian territory this week in 1918, violating the armed truce established in lengthy, but inconclusive, negotiations at Brest-Litovsk.

The Bolshevik delegation, led by Leon Trotsky, who had replaced Adolph Joffe in the last phase of negotiations, had refused humiliating terms demanded by the Central Powers. However, without the military capacity to wage war against Germany, the Bolshevik Central Committee had adopted Trotsky's slogan of "no war—no peace," whose aim had been to buy time during which the European proletariat, especially the German and Austrian workers, would rise up and demand an end to the imperialist slaughter.

The German onslaught encountered almost no resistance, the Russian army having largely dissolved before the Bolsheviks took power in the October Revolution. Within days, Germany had taken control of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, and had occupied Minsk, while the German fleet advanced on the Russian Baltic fleet stationed at Reval (Tallinn). The Soviet government was compelled to call for a total withdrawal from Finland and retreat from recent gains in Ukraine.

In response to the invasion, the Bolshevik Central Committee voted,

after an all-night meeting, to conclude an unfavorable peace imposed by Germany in order to preserve the revolution. It sent out a wireless cable, signed by Lenin and Trotsky, indicating its willingness to accept German terms, while protesting the invasion:

The Council of People's Commissars protests against the fact that the German Government has directed its troops against the Russian Soviet Republic, which has declared the war as at an end and which is demobilizing its army on all fronts.

The Workmen's and Peasants' Government of Russia could not anticipate such a step because neither directly nor indirectly has any one of the parties which concluded the armistice given the seven days' notice required in accordance with the treaty of December 15 for terminating it.

The Council of People's Commissars in the present circumstances regards itself as forced formally to declare its willingness to sign a peace upon the conditions which had been dictated by the Delegations of the Quadruple Alliance at Brest-Litovsk.

The Council of People's Commissars further declares that a detailed reply will be given without delay to the conditions of peace as proposed by the German Government.

(Signed) For the Council of People's Commissars, LENIN, TROTSKY.

Germany received the telegram, but continued its advance with an eye toward crushing the revolutionary proletariat in Ukraine and setting up German vassal states there and in the Baltic.

On February 22, the Central Committee issued a new order, signed by Lenin and military commissar Nikolai Krylenko, calling for guerilla war and "struggle to the death or victory" if Germany refused peace terms. "The people's terrorism must be opposed to the advancing enemy," it stated.

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