This week in history: February 4-10

4 February 2019

25 years ago: Byron De La Beckwith convicted for 1963 assassination of civil rights leader Medgar Evers

Byron De La Beckwith, member of a white supremacist group, was convicted on February 5, 1994 for the 1963 assassination of Medgar Evers, a civil rights activist and head of the Mississippi state branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

De La Beckwith joined the White Citizens' Council in 1954, a white supremacist organization formed following the Supreme Court's ruling in *Brown v Board of Education*, which declared segregated public schools unconstitutional. The group fought to resist racial integration and to prevent African American citizens from voting. It operated as the "respectable" middle class front for the Ku Klux Klan.

Medgar Evers became a prominent leader of the civil rights movement for his role in the investigation of the 1955 lynching of Emmett Till. He became a target of the Ku Klux Klan, the White Citizens' Council, and similar groups. He received so many death threats that he and his wife, Myrlie Evers-Williams, practiced and trained their three young children in safety drills in case of an attack on their home.

Early on June 12, 1963, the morning after President John F. Kennedy gave a nationally televised speech calling for the passage of civil rights legislation, Evers pulled into his driveway. As he walked up to his front door, he was shot in the back through his heart by De La Beckwith. None of Evers' normal police escorts and security were present, leading to public speculation that many of the local police officers were members of white supremacist groups and had advance knowledge of the attack. Evers was pronounced dead 50 minutes later at a nearby hospital, where he was initially denied entry due to his race. He was 37 years old.

Nine days later De La Beckwith was arrested for murdering Evers. In Mississippi, under the system of racial segregation known as Jim Crow, African Americans were excluded from jury pools, which drew from registered voters. In February and April 1964, two all-white juries deadlocked, failed to reach a verdict and De La Beckwith went free.

Myrlie Evers-Williams waited until a new judge was appointed in the county and brought her husband's case forward again in 1994 with new evidence, mainly including the killer's own bragging admissions of guilt throughout the decades following the murder. De La Beckwith was convicted after spending nearly 30 years free, except for a stint from 1977-1980 when he was sentenced to jail for conspiring to murder A. I. Botnick, a Jewish activist in the civil rights movement.

50 years ago: Millions strike in Italy

On February 5, 1969, millions of Italian workers participated in a one-day general strike called by the major labor federations to demand higher pensions. The strike shut down all major newspapers, television stations, ports, most factories, and many stores. Thousands of workers attended rallies called by the unions in all the industrial centers.

Leaders of all three union confederations—the Stalinist General Confederation of Italian Labor, the Catholic Church-sponsored Confederation of Italian Unionized Labor, and the Social Democratic Italian Union of Workers—sanctioned the general strike. They claimed that 90 to 95 percent of their membership participated.

The strike had its greatest impact in the highly industrialized Lombardy and Piedmont regions. At the giant Fiat automobile complex in Turin, most of the company's 120,000 production workers stayed off the job.

Just a few days before the general strike, other sections of workers had already taken action. On February 3, 10,000 students marched in Milan, hundreds of farm workers in Naples blocked rail lines to protest falling fruit prices, and highway toll collectors began a 72-hour strike, allowing drivers to use the highways for free.

At this time, Italy had accumulated the world's third largest gold and foreign currency reserve, trailing only the United States and West Germany. Exports had increased and Gross National Product was rising. In the midst of these gains for the capitalists, employment and living standards for workers had remained stagnant.

The minimum pension benefit received by an Italian worker was only 12,000 lire ($19.20) a month. The 1.8 million retired workers received an average of 30,000 lire ($48.00) per month. The unions demanded that the maximum pension after 40 years be raised immediately, at government expense, to 70 percent of

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final salary, with the figure to rise to 80 percent by 1973. There were also calls for an increase in the minimum pension and for payments to those without pensions.

Newly installed Italian Prime Minister Mariano Rumor entered immediately into negotiations with the unions over these and other demands for social legislation. Rumor headed a "Center-Left" coalition of Christian Democrats, the reformist Socialist Party and Republicans. Recent electoral gains by the Stalinists had sharply reduced the "Center-Left" majority, increasing pressure for social reforms.

75 years ago: Roosevelt moves to control Arabian oil

On February 6, 1944, the US government's Petroleum Reserve Corporation, set up by President Franklin Roosevelt, unveiled its plans to construct a vast pipeline across Saudi Arabia to transport crude oil from the Arabian wells owned by Standard Oil, Gulf and Texaco to Mediterranean ports and refineries.

With growing assurance that Allied imperialism had successfully defended Middle East oil resources from a militar **y** assault b **y** Mussolini and Hitler, the US sought exclusive control over Saudi Arabian oil against any encroachments by the British. Roosevelt had used Lend Lease, which was only to be made available to countries actively fighting the war against the Axis, to outbid Britain in buying off King Ibn Saud. As Roosevelt told the British ambassador, "Persian oil is yours. We share the oil of Iraq and Kuwait. As for Saudi Arabian oil, it's ours."

The Roosevelt administration accompanied its move into Saudi Arabia with a public campaign about the benefits of cheaper prices after the war and the threat of oil shortages if the project was not carried out. One news commentator nevertheless remarked, "To go into a colonial country and buy oil concessions by favors to desert sheiks, to embark on a long-range program for the exploitation of natural resources which belong to another people, is imperialism, however we choose to disguise it."

In 1940, the United States produced 63 percent of the world's oil supply, while Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia jointly contributed only 5 percent. But exploration had shown that the Middle East contained rich reserves which, if not secured by the US, would threaten the dominant position of the US oil barons in world markets.

A year later, Roosevelt would meet with King Abdul-Aziz aboard a US warship near Suez and sign a secret agreement for the postwar period, exchanging US military protection for Saudi Arabia for unrestricted US access to Saudi oil.

100 years ago: Seattle general strike begins

On February 6, 1919, 25,000 workers in Seattle, Washington walked out to join 35,000 shipyard workers already off the job, as a general strike virtually shut down the city. The strike was the most powerful US manifestation of the post-World War I wave of revolutionary struggles of the working class touched off by the Russian Revolution.

The Metal Trades Council, representing the 17 unions in the ship yards, had demanded a wage increase of $1.00 a day across the board. The Shipbuilding Labor Adjustment Board had turned it down. On January 21, the metal tradesmen struck the shipyards of Seattle and Tacoma. On the second day of the strike, an appeal for active assistance was made to the Central Labor Council, which polled its affiliates on calling a general strike to support the shipyard workers. The response was overwhelming.

The General Strike Committee largely ran the city. It established community kitchens, butcher shops and laundries, issued special delivery permits and even organized the patrol of the streets by 500 uniformed war veterans. The committee declared that the working people were "learning to manage" the local economy. National labor leaders pressured the Seattle unions to call off the strike—in most cases, after four or five days—before the shipyard workers had won their demands.

The Pacific Northwest had been the scene of major struggles involving the left-wing Industrial Workers of the World and different groups of employers in the lumber industry, in particular. There was much pent-up anger over the murder of workers in Everett, Washington and other locales.

Immediate after the war, an explosive strike wave erupted in the US. In 1919, 4 million American workers went on strike—fully one-fifth of the nation's work force. The Bolshevik Revolution had a great influence over the most advanced sections of the working class. In addition to the Seattle strike, miners in Butte, Montana walked out in February 1919 in a strike run by "The Soldiers, Sailors and Workers Council." A representative of the Seattle labor movement, Hulet C. Wells, was sent as a delegate to the Communist International in Moscow soon after the general strike.

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