

# This week in history: February 18-24

18 February 2019

## 25 years ago: Worldwide unemployment smashes record set in Great Depression

The International Labor Organization (ILO), an agency of the United Nations, released a report on February 19, 1994, detailing historically unprecedented high unemployment worldwide. “More people are out of work than ever before,” the report began, “and there is widespread anxiety that these numbers will grow.”

The agency predicted that by the end of 1994, 35 million people would be without work in the major industrialized countries, including North America, Western Europe, Australia and Japan, the highest number at the time since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Tens of millions more were unemployed in “developing” countries of Latin America, Africa and Asia, where there had been a huge growth in the working class during the post-World War II period.

In Russia and other Eastern European countries, the reintroduction of capitalism accelerated and increased job losses. While the Soviet Union reported an “official” unemployment rate around 1 percent, the ILO claimed it was actually closer to 10 percent. “The worst aspect of the economic restructuring is the appalling growth in the number of people living in poverty,” it said, estimating the number of poor in the former Soviet Union at 100 million at the end of 1991.

The report also stated that workers were spending at least a year unemployed while searching for new jobs, longer than ever before. “When people are out of work for more than a year, they lose skills and work habits and cease to be attractive to employers.”

There was a “disturbing” increase in the number of part-time, low-paid laborers, called “precarious” workers, in the agricultural sector, including sugar, coffee, cotton, fruit and vegetable harvest workers internationally. The report noted the rise in workers participating in the “informal economy,” meaning those who scrape by through begging or selling petty goods and trash on the street in order to make money for their families.

## 50 years ago: NLF launches offensive in Vietnam

On February 24, 1969, less than five weeks after the inauguration of President Richard Nixon, the National Liberation Front (NLF) launched a major offensive against US forces in South Vietnam. The NLF simultaneously attacked Saigon and more than 100 other points in the South.

The targets included 17 provincial capitals, 28 towns and 60 military installations. Several rockets hit the center of Saigon, including one that landed next to an apartment building housing high-ranking US military officers. One hundred US soldiers died in the first 15 hours of the offensive. By the end of the week, US casualties stood at 453 killed.

In contrast to the massive Tet Offensive of 1968, in which the NLF suffered heavy losses from frontal assaults on US military strongpoints and efforts to hold key cities like Hue, the NLF operation focused its efforts on harassing and demoralizing American forces rather than seizing territory. Where it carried out ground assaults, the NLF chose only the most vulnerable points.

In one such assault, about 1,000 NLF fighters briefly broke through the defense perimeter of the Third Brigade of the 25th Infantry Division in Binhduong Province. The US command had to bring in helicopters and tactical air strikes to repel the attack.

US Marines suffered heavy casualties in a battle several miles south of the demilitarized zone separating North and South Vietnam. NLF fighters broke through the perimeter of one fire base and held on in hand-to-hand fighting that lasted over an hour. In three hours of fighting, the Americans suffered their highest losses for a single engagement in over six months.

In response to the attacks, Nixon ordered an investigation to determine if they violated the agreement that ended the bombing of North Vietnam. The offensive convinced Nixon that the US must ramp up attacks on NLF strongholds in Cambodia.

In his book *The White House Years*, Henry Kissinger would write that Nixon “suddenly ordered the bombing of the Cambodian sanctuaries of the Viet Cong guerrillas,

without consulting relevant officials” and “in the absence of a detailed plan for dealing with the consequences.” Two days later, Nixon decided to cancel the order, but attacks on Cambodia would again resume on March 18.

### **75 years ago: Norwegian blast hits Nazi nuclear program**

On February 20, 1944, an explosion set by commandos of the Norwegian resistance dealt a major blow to Nazi Germany’s efforts to develop atomic weapons. The blast ripped through the bow of a ferry, the *SF Hydro* on Norway’s Lake Tinnsjø, causing the ship to tilt forward and dump into the lake railway cars carrying nearly 15 million kilograms of various concentrations of “heavy water,” deuterium oxide, a key component in the production of plutonium.

The German nuclear weapons program, which began in 1939, had opted to use heavy water as a mediator in the nuclear fission process. Before World War II, the only place in Europe where heavy water was produced in large quantities was at Vemork in the southern Rjukan valley of Norway. The already disorganized and underfunded nuclear program, which would remain only in its preliminary stages throughout the war, was therefore dependent on the ability of the plant to continue to produce large quantities of heavy water.

In February 1943, a small group of Norwegian resistance fighters, under the direction of Britain’s Special Operations Executive, skied in from their mountain hideouts and sabotaged the facilities for producing heavy water at the Vemork plant, as well as destroying 3,000 pounds of the chemicals. German technicians managed to repair the plant’s equipment.

A year later, Hitler ordered the immediate evacuation of the remaining supplies of heavy water to Germany. He feared that the intense Allied bombing campaign now targeting the plant would destroy the remaining supplies of heavy water.

Large forces of German regular and SS troops, along with police of Norway’s fascist Quisling regime, lined the transit route while spotter planes watched for any resistance movement coming down from the mountains. But where the heavy water was transferred to the ferry at Lake Tinnsjø, three Norwegian resistance fighters infiltrated and planted an explosive device on the boat, timed to sink it at the lake’s deepest point, to prevent retrieval of the cargo.

### **100 years ago: Bavarian Prime Minister Kurt Eisner assassinated**

On February 21, 1919, Kurt Eisner, the Bavarian prime minister and a member of the Independent Socialist Party (USPD), was assassinated in the streets of Munich by a right-wing aristocrat, Count Arco-Valley. Eisner was on his way to the opening session of the provincial assembly. Valley had been expelled from the proto-Nazi Thule Club for keeping quiet about his Jewish mother.

Early in his career, Eisner had made a name for himself primarily as a journalist and a drama critic. In the Social Democratic Party, he belonged to its right wing. The war pushed him to the left and into the USPD, the centrist party which split off from the SPD under the pressure of the working class. In January 1918, Eisner was arrested for his role as a strike organizer.

When the November 1918 revolution broke out in Munich, Eisner played a key role. The Bavarian royal government gave the official SPD permission to hold a demonstration, primarily as a safety valve for the anger of the masses. The SPD march went off as planned, but Eisner led an equally large crowd into the north of Munich to the army barracks.

On November 7, the first Workers and Soldiers Councils were organized, the first meeting of the councils held, and Eisner nominated as prime minister. He worked over the next two months to incorporate the workers councils into the bourgeois state apparatus by “anchoring” them in the new constitution.

A major crisis developed in the week before Eisner’s assassination. The parliamentary parties—the Social Democrats, the Bavarian Popular Party (forerunner of the present-day Christian Social Union) and Liberals—met in one wing of the assembly building, the councils were in session in another. The leadership of the workers council threatened a “second revolution” if parliament attempted to abolish them. Eisner was on his way to offer his resignation when he was murdered.



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