This week in history: February 17-23

17 February 2020

25 years ago: Algerian regime massacres prisoners after uprising

On February 21, 1995, an uprising by Islamic political prisoners at the Serkadji prison in the Kasbah neighborhood of Algeria began, resulting in the death of four guards. This was followed by a brutal crackdown in which dozens of inmates were slaughtered. Official reports counted the prisoner death toll at 96, while other sources maintained that up to 110 prisoners were killed in the suppression of the rebellion.

On the morning of February 21, an initial group of prisoners, having received help from a guard, killed four security personnel and began breaking cells open to free others. Prisoners attempted to negotiate amnesty for those who had not participated in the rebellion, but the government refused and stormed the facility. Shootouts and grenade fighting continued through February 23.

Some human rights groups insisted that after resistance was crushed, the government's security forces executed inmates, including the wounded, without due process. Later inquiries resulted in eight more executions among the prisoners.

The *New York Times* reported that in the weeks leading up to the Serkadji Prison rebellion, 500 politicians, security officers and cultural figures had been killed by Islamist rebels seeking to topple the military government that had been installed in 1992 to forestall the election victory of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) and maintain the grip on power of the National Liberation Front (NLF). The death toll between 1992 and 1995 was estimated at over 30,000.

Human rights groups estimated that in 1995 anywhere from 15,000 to 30,000 militants were being held in detention centers by the Algerian Army. The Kasbah neighborhood, where the Serkadji Prison is located, was a major working-class stronghold in the 1960s during Algeria's war for independence. Approximately a dozen leaders of various Islamist rebel groups were imprisoned at Serkadji by the time of the uprising.

50 years ago: Thousands of workers march to support striking Newark teachers

On February 23, 1970, thousands of workers from various sections of industry gathered at the Military Park Hotel and staged a march through downtown Newark. The demonstration was one of the largest of its kind ever seen in Newark. The 3,800 teachers had been striking since February 2nd against low pay and budget cuts. Teachers in Jersey City were also on strike. having begun their picket the week after their peers in Newark.

Workers from 27 unions joined the march, including electrical workers, hospital workers, the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, the Seafarers International Union, steel and rubber workers, among many others. Hundreds of teachers also joined the march coming from Connecticut, Rhode Island, and New York.

The march was called in response to reactionary measures leveled against the striking teachers. A court injunction had been imposed on the teachers ordering them back to work and the strike illegal. Teachers defied the order, and by the time of the march about 200 were arrested and faced charges of up to three years in prison.

The workers who attended expressed immense support for the teachers. One worker interviewed by *The Bulletin ,* newspaper of the Workers League, a forerunner of the WSWS , said, "The rank and file are determined to see this thing through. It's a question of survival … it's also a question of civil rights." A teacher participating in the march remarked, "Conditions in the schools have been so bad, there comes a point when you have to stand up and fight for what's right. How can we have a good school system when they keep slicing the budget?"

The teachers had put forward demands for a $10,000 starting salary and a $2,000 raise for all teachers. In addition, teachers called for an increase in funding to create better teaching conditions and more effective schools. Central to these demands was a call for smaller class sizes and funding for classroom materials that teachers had to pay for out of their own pocket.

The strike would continue until February 25 when Newark teachers voted to ratify a one-year contract agreement that provided a $2,200 raise and an $8,000 minimum salary for teachers. The new contract stipulated that class sizes would max out at 30 students, but it included a caveat, "where and when space is available." This meant that school administration officials could still force teachers into larger classes if proper resources hadn't been made available. A few weeks later

© World Socialist Web Site

Jersey City teachers would end their strike under a nearly identical contract.

75 years ago: US and Japan fight in Battle of Iwo Jima

On February 16, 1945, the US Navy and Marine Corps launched a massive assault on Iwo Jima, a volcanic island about 1,300 kilometers due south of mainland Japan, in preparation for a landing on February 19. The ensuing five-week conflict, known as the Battle of Iwo Jima, would be one of the fiercest in the Pacific theatre of World War II.

Plans for the US offensive were hatched amid a crisis of Japanese imperial forces throughout Asia. US troops had made substantial headway in securing control of the Philippines, after an invasion was launched in late 1944. This imperiled Japan's conquests in South East Asia, and diverted substantial naval and military forces.

The US military began bombing Iwo Jima, a heavily fortified outpost garrisoned by some 21,000 Japanese troops, in June 1944. Aerial raids and naval bombardment would continue for some nine months. They were intensified dramatically in the lead-up to the landing. On February 16, a flotilla of heavy warships, numbering, along with support ships, some 450 vessels, conducted a six-hour bombing campaign which covered the entire island. While poor visibility hampered the onslaught, it succeeded in destroying a number of bunkers and underground hideouts.

The first landing party of Marines disembarked onto the island's beaches on the morning of February 19. They were confronted with difficult conditions, stemming in part from the unstable character of Iwo Jima's volcanic ash, which created problems in establishing any redoubts to protect against Japanese fire. Military vehicles were unable to ascend the terrain, forcing troops to march up the hills of the beaches on foot.

The heaviest Japanese resistance to the landing was at a beach near the island's quarry. Of the 900 US Marines who had landed, only 150 were still able to fight on the evening of February 19. Over the following weeks, the Japanese would mount a series of desperate "banzai charges," during which hundreds of troops would charge towards American positions at night in a series of waves.

In a brutal five-week campaign, concluding with an American victory on March 26, the 110,000 US marines, soldiers and naval forces involved in the operation would suffer over 26,000 casualties, with 6,821 killed and 19,217 wounded. Japanese losses were catastrophic. Up to 18,000 were listed as killed or missing at the conclusion of the conflict.

The heavy casualties would trigger a heated debate within US ruling circles and the media as to whether the operation had been worthwhile. Critics disputed the strategic importance of the island, which had been presented by military command as a potentially decisive staging ground for offensive operations against the Japanese mainland.

100 years ago: Imperialist powers claim Turkish territory

On February 17, 1920, representatives of Britain, France and Italy—convening at the Conference of London, an outgrowth of the Paris Peace Conference, which founded the League of Nations—declared that the Dardanelles and the Bosporus in Turkey, key strategic straits to the Aegean and Black seas respectively, would become "international" territories. They would be controlled by the League of Nations and no longer under the authority of the Ottoman Turkish government, which had surrendered to the Allies in 1918. The capital of Constantinople (modern Istanbul) had been occupied by French and Italian troops in 1918.

The Conference also restricted the residence of the Turkish Sultan to Constantinople, drew up plans for an Armenian state and considered Greek claims to areas with large ethnic Greek populations, such as the city of Smyrna. The conference decided not to deprive Turkey of Constantinople but empowered the Royal Navy's Admiral John de Robeck to warn the Turks that attacks on the Armenian population might result in revisions to the conference's decisions. These and other actions laid the basis for the Treaty of Sèvres in August.

The Conference of London, followed by the San Remo conference in April, and the Treaty of Sèvres, were the final phases in the imperialist carve up of the Ottoman Empire. The secret Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1917 between the British and the French—revealed to the world by Trotsky and the Bolsheviks—had given Syria to the French and Mesopotamia and Palestine to the British. Both these acquisitions were rubber-stamped by mandates of the League of Nations. The British ruled much of Mesopotamia as the state of Iraq, and supported Zionist settlement in Palestine after the Balfour Declaration of 1917.

The imperialist decisions of 1920, however, sparked the Turkish War of Liberation, led by the bourgeois-nationalist leader Kemal Ataturk, and to the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne, which revised the peace terms with the Allies, and the declaration of the Republic of Turkey in 1923.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site