

This week in history: March 23-29

23 March 2020

25 years ago: Thousands mourn Singapore's execution of Filipina maid

On March 26, 1995, more than 40,000 people lined the streets in the Philippine town of San Pablo for the funeral of Flor Contemplacion, a Filipina domestic servant framed up in Singapore for a murder she did not commit and executed after a sham trial orchestrated by the Singapore government. Millions followed the funeral ceremony, which was broadcast on radio and television throughout the Philippines.

The hanging of Contemplacion became a focus for the anger felt by impoverished Filipinos at the brutal exploitation suffered by millions, in a period when nearly 2,000 contract workers per day left the islands' desperate poverty for work in a number of countries as domestic servants, laborers and in other unskilled jobs. There was widespread rage in the Filipino working class over her execution.

Contemplacion, 42, was hanged on March 17 after being convicted on two counts of murder after a trial concocted to deflect suspicion from her Singaporean employer. She was charged with murdering another Filipina maid, Delia Maga, and a four-year-old Singaporean child in 1991. In February 1995, an eyewitness came forward and testified that the child drowned accidentally and the child's father killed Maga in revenge. Another witness said that Contemplacion was tortured into confessing to the crime.

The Singapore government rejected last-minute appeals, including one from the Philippine President Fidel Ramos, for a stay of execution to hear evidence from new witnesses.

Fearing the response of 75,000 Filipino contract workers in Singapore, the authorities posted heavily armed guards outside Changi prison during the execution. The government declared condolence meetings and prayer vigils for Contemplacion illegal and warned that anyone caught participating would be arrested and jailed.

In the lead-up to the May 1995 elections, both the Ramos government and opposition politicians used the case to stoke Filipino nationalism. Ramos established a seven-member commission to examine the case and threatened to break diplomatic ties with Singapore. The inquiry carried out a new autopsy on the body of Maga which cast even further doubt on Contemplacion's guilt. The Ramos government also canceled a visit by Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong and dispatched a military aircraft to Singapore to provide transport for Filipino contract workers wanting to return home.

50 years ago: Air traffic controllers carry out "sickout" strike

On March 25, 1970, hundreds of members of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) staged a "sickout" strike against their employer, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), to protest low wages and poor working conditions. The sickout was triggered when three controllers who played key roles in the PATCO leadership were transferred to new jobs where they would have less influence among workers. The action by over 930 air traffic controllers caused major delays in air traffic, with over 300 flights being outright canceled.

The sickout was strongest in New York City, where a national strike of US Postal Service workers, also waged against the federal government, had begun just one week earlier. Controllers from 19 other cities also called out, including in Boston, Kansas City, Chicago, and Pittsburgh. In some areas the entire controller staff called in sick, leaving supervisors scrambling to manage whole airports single-handedly.

PATCO called the sickout strike in the face of federal law that declared strikes by air traffic controllers illegal. At this time the union was not officially recognized as the bargaining agent of the controllers but still held a membership of 7,000 out of America's 9,000 controllers. At the peak of the sickout, New York and Kansas City saw 60 percent of their controllers out and Chicago had 75 percent of their controllers call out.

The sickout lasted for three weeks and would involve a total of 3,600 workers, as controllers rotated in and out of sick leave, keeping traffic at a crawl. To keep traffic moving at all, supervisors filled in as much as they could, and those controllers who did not call out sick had their 8-hour shifts extended to 12.

The FAA responded by firing over 100 controllers who were leaders and activists in PATCO. The Department of Labor joined the attack by placing fines upward of \$1 million on the organization for carrying out "unfair labor practices." In addition, the Airline Transportation Association (ATA), the airline companies' lobbying group, filed a lawsuit against PATCO for disrupting business. The FAA also threatened individual workers, sending letters to strikers saying they would be fined two days' pay for every day out if they called in sick and fired outright if they did not immediately return to work.

After the strike concluded, negotiations began to recognize PATCO as the official union of all FAA controllers. Only after the 1970 PATCO convention, where the most militant members were forced out of the leadership and a strategy of "conciliation rather than confrontation" was put forward, under which the government could be assured of no strikes, did the negotiations move forward.

In 1971, PATCO was officially recognized as the controllers' union. By putting forward its conciliatory strategy, it would lay the foundation for the disastrous 1981 PATCO strike that resulted in a major defeat for workers. A series of articles discussing that strike can be purchased [HYPERLINK "https://mehring.com/product/thirty-years-since-the-patco-strike/"](https://mehring.com/product/thirty-years-since-the-patco-strike/) \h here.

75 years ago: British and US troops cross the Rhine into Nazi Germany

On March 23, 1945, four Allied divisions, two from the British army and two from the US, crossed the Rhine River between the cities of Rees and Wessel, entering German territory. The action was a milestone in the latter stages of World War II, amid the collapse of the fascist regimes across Europe, including the Nazi Third Reich.

The crossing, dubbed Operation Plunder, was the largest Allied amphibious assault since the D-Day landing in Normandy in June 1944 targeting France, which was then under German occupation. Operation Plunder would eventually involve almost 1.3 million Allied troops, primarily from the British 2nd Army and the US 9th Army, backed by some 5,500 artillery pieces.

Planning for the offensive coincided with Soviet victories capturing large swathes of Poland and Prussia. Over the preceding weeks, German troops had beat a hasty and disorganized retreat on much of the Western and Eastern fronts. Nazi dictator Adolf Hitler had issued an order for the destruction of German civilian infrastructure in areas that could fall to the Allies, in a tacit recognition that a final defeat was approaching.

The Rhine offensive began with a massive bombardment of German positions on March 23. Some 4,000 Allied guns fired for four hours, while British bombers carried out continuous raids on the city of Wessel, preventing German troops stationed there from hindering the crossing.

The US army's 17th Armored Engineer Battalion began the construction of makeshift ramps for the river crossing late on March 23. Over the course of six hours, they laid 93 pneumatic floats and some 351 meters of treadway, facilitating the crossing of Allied trucks and other military vehicles. Allied forces making the crossing initially came under heavy machine-gun fire, however they rapidly gained a foothold as a result of continuous aerial bombardments.

On March 24, the Allies launched Operation Varsity, the largest airborne operation in a single day in history. It involved the successful deployment of some 16,000 Allied troops into north German territory in parachute drops from C-47 aircraft.

The speed and success of the Allied operation was such that on March 25, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and senior British military commanders were able to cross the Rhine and briefly survey enemy territory without any hindrance.

100 years ago: F. Scott Fitzgerald publishes first novel

On March 26, 1920, 23-year-old F. Scott Fitzgerald, one of the most acute observers of American social life and one of the most significant American artists of the 20th century, saw his first novel, *This Side of Paradise*, published by Charles Scribner and Son.

The novel, which was edited by the brilliant Maxwell Perkins, appeared in a first printing of 3,000 copies and was well received by critics. H.L. Mencken called it, "the best American novel that I have seen of late." The novel sold out in a few days after it appeared in bookstores.

The novel concerns Amory Blaine, a young upper-middle-class dilettante from the Midwest who goes east to college. Amory serves in World War I—though the experience does not figure in the novel—and becomes a copywriter for an advertising firm, when several disasters befall him. His love affairs are tainted by wealth and status-seeking, and by the end of the novel he becomes a socialist.

Such a transformation was not unusual at that time, and for decades after. In the aftermath of the 1917 Russian Revolution, 1919 had seen mass strikes across the United States, the founding of the Communist International and its section in the United States, and the vicious reaction by the government in the form of the infamous Palmer Raids which broke up left-wing meetings and imprisoned and deported Communists, socialists and anarchists.

It is worth quoting some of Amory's words toward the end of the book because they resonate with how many young people feel a century later: "This is the first time in my life I've argued Socialism. It's the only panacea I know. I'm restless. My whole generation is restless."



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