

# This week in history: February 8-14

7 February 2021

## 25 years ago: IRA bombs London Docklands

On February 9, 1996, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) bombed the London Docklands, killing two people and injuring over 100 others. In the incident also known as the South Quay bombing, the IRA had sent warnings prior to detonating the truck bomb, but the area was not completely evacuated.

The explosion took place just a few hundred yards from the Barkantine housing project on the Isle of Dogs, one of the most oppressed working-class neighborhoods in London. Windows were smashed and residents were showered with glass. Thousands of children attending a basketball game at the nearby London Arena narrowly missed serious injury. That the bomb did not result in a massive loss of life was purely accidental.

On February 18, a second bomb ripped apart a London bus traveling through the theater district of the city, killing the bomber himself and seriously injuring others aboard, including the driver.

The bombing campaign marked the end of a ceasefire that had lasted about 17 months. The ceasefire was agreed to in 1994 on the grounds that Sinn Féin, the IRA's political arm, would be involved in peace talks. However, as a precondition to formal talks, the British government had demanded a full and unilateral IRA disarmament. The IRA refused and eventually ended the ceasefire.

The bombings, carried out with total disregard for the lives of innocent working class people, were the acts of a politically bankrupt petty-bourgeois nationalist organization. The IRA was attempting, through means of random violence, to restore its bargaining position at the imperialist negotiating table. Its aim was to pressure the Tory government of Prime Minister John Major.

The conflict centered on Northern Ireland, which, comprising most of the province of Ulster, had remained in British possession after the Irish War of Independence concluded 75 years earlier. Catholics, predominately working class and comprising roughly 40 percent of the population, faced oppression in Northern Ireland at the hands of its right-wing Unionist government and British imperialist forces.

The IRA's targeting of the working class in Britain was not accidental. While claiming to represent the "national interests" of the oppressed Catholic minority in Northern Ireland, the IRA/Sinn Féin was actually representative of a very thin layer of the Catholic middle class which feared most of all united working-class action against the British government.

The violence was also directed at suppressing any political challenge to the claim that the IRA alone represented the Catholic minority in the North. Just a few weeks earlier, on January 30, the

IRA assassinated Gino Gallagher, chief of staff of the Irish National Liberation Army, a rival nationalist group which had refused to support the ceasefire.

## 50 years ago: San Fernando earthquake kills dozens in southern California

On February 2, 1971, a massive earthquake rocked the San Fernando Valley of southern California, killing 64 people and causing extensive damage to homes, hospitals, power lines, dams and other structures. The 6.6 magnitude quake hit just after 6:00 a.m. and lasted for 12 seconds, making it California's third-largest earthquake in history after the quakes in San Francisco in 1906 and Long Beach in 1933.

The two most deadly building collapses were at Veterans Administration (VA) hospitals at Olive View and San Fernando, which housed hundreds of soldiers convalescing from America's imperialist war in Vietnam.

The VA at San Fernando saw the most fatalities, with 44 deaths. Twenty-six buildings at the hospital campus were built before 1933, when new construction regulations had been put in place following the Long Beach disaster. Four hospital buildings totally collapsed. A nurse, Betty Van Decar, witnessed the earthquake just after leaving night shift. She spoke of the events in an interview with the *Los Angeles Daily News* on the 45th anniversary of the earthquake. "It buckled down, caved in, the whole building," Van Decar recalled. "There was an awful sound—you could hear the ground rumbling. I thought: They're not going to make it."

At Olive View, where three died, most of the buildings in the hospital complex had been built before 1933. Damage was concentrated in the basement and first floor, along with several stairwells. Two of the deaths were attributed to power outages that shut off life sustaining support to patients. A hospital worker was struck by falling debris as she attempted to evacuate the building.

Another structure that sustained significant damage was the Van Norman Dam. In the days after the earthquake 80,000 people living below the dam were forced to evacuate until the water could be pumped out. Engineers estimated that if the earthquake had happened one year earlier when the dam was full with 6.5 billion gallons of water, as many as 100,000 people living in the San Fernando Valley would have been killed.

In the aftermath of the earthquake engineers carried out investigations that concluded that current building codes for dams, bridges, highways, hospitals and other large buildings were

dangerously inadequate to meet the threat of a major earthquake. Legislation was subsequently passed that created new building codes, restricted development near fault zones, and created the California Strong Motion Instrumentation Program which allowed scientists to collect needed data to develop buildings that can withstand stronger earthquakes.

### **75 years ago: US seizes Bikini Atoll for nuclear tests**

On February 10, 1946, the US governor of the Marshall Islands, in the central Pacific Ocean, informed all 167 residents of the Bikini Atoll that they would be permanently relocated as their former home became the scene of American military testing of nuclear weapons.

Over the following weeks, all civilian structures, including homes and a church, were dismantled and the villagers were permanently moved to Rongerik Atoll, some 125 miles away. Rongerik had long been uninhabited, due to inadequate water and food supplies. The Bikini Atoll residents were initially left there with only a few weeks of supplies.

The US seizure of the Bikini Atoll took place in the context of an emerging nuclear arms race following World War II. In the last stages of the war in the Pacific, the US had dropped atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in August 1945. In addition to terrorizing the Japanese population, the attack was a threat to US rivals among the old colonial powers like Britain and France, but above all to the Soviet Union.

At the conclusion of the war, the US administration of President Harry Truman rapidly drew up plans for expanded testing of nuclear weapons. Experiments in the Pacific were particularly focused on how the devices could be used as an adjunct to naval warfare.

Between 1946 and 1958, the US military detonated 27 nuclear devices in and around the Bikini Atoll, including on the reef, underwater, on land and in the air. One of the first tests, in July 1946, involved the detonation of a massive nuclear bomb 95 feet under water. Dubbed “Baker,” the operation was described by one Atomic Energy Commission official as the “the world’s first nuclear disaster,” after it resulted in widespread radioactive contamination. The tests would render the Bikini Atoll uninhabitable.

### **100 years ago: Soviet revolution in Menshevik-controlled Georgia begins**

On February 11, 1921, workers and peasants led by communists seized control of strategic locations in the Lori province of the Democratic Republic of Georgia, a capitalist state headed by the Social Democratic (Menshevik) Party. Lori, a predominantly Armenian-speaking region claimed by Georgia, had been occupied

by the Georgian army after the withdrawal of Turkish forces in November 1920.

The uprising set up a Revolutionary Committee in the town of Shulaveri, led by the veteran Georgian Bolshevik Filipp Makharadze. The Committee sought to expand its influence into the rest of Georgia. It called upon the Soviet government to intervene and by February 14 the Red 11th Army had been sent to Georgia. After fierce fighting, the Red Army entered the capital of Tbilisi on February 25 and established the Soviet Republic of Georgia.

Menshevik-ruled Georgia, established in 1918, became a toehold of European imperialism in the Caucasus. The regime at first placed itself under German protection. It permitted German troops to occupy strategic areas and allowed Germany the unrestricted use of Georgian railways and ports. By June 1918, the German military was parading down the main thoroughfare of Tbilisi.

After the defeat of German imperialism in November 1918 by the Allies, Menshevik Georgia allowed British troops to enter the country in December.

The regime committed other crimes, including the suppression of the minority South Ossetians. It opposed land reform in South Ossetia by backing the local Georgian landowners. In a conflict between the South Ossetians and the Menshevik government in 1920, roughly 5,000 Ossetians were killed in a wave of ethnic cleansing.

Leon Trotsky summed up the Soviet experience with bourgeois Georgia in his famous work, *Between Red and White* (1922):

What took place was the result of long preparation. It was what, owing to the logic of events, could not but take place. The history of the relations between Georgia and Soviet Russia is only a chapter in the book of the blockade of Russia, of military interventions, of French gold, of British ships, and of the four fronts on which the best elements of the working class have been sacrificed. This chapter cannot be eliminated from the book. The Georgia which is being described today by the beaten Menshevik commanders of the civil war never existed. There has never been either a democratic, or a peaceful, or an independent, or a neutral Georgia. There was a Georgian fortress in the all-Russian class struggle. That fortress is today in the hands of the victorious proletariat.



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