

# This week in history: February 15-21

15 February 2021

**25 years ago: Wildcat strike over safety issues shuts down Warren Truck plant**

On February 17, 1996, workers at the Warren Truck Assembly Plant, located in the northeastern suburbs of Detroit, went on a wildcat strike. The three-day walkout cost the company 1,800 units of production and came as a response to the firing of two union officials for opposing Chrysler's speed-up drive.

The company terminated United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 140 President Randall Pearson and committeeman Herman Ector on the grounds that they had instigated an illegal strike on February 9, when they ordered workers to go home with one hour left on their shift. Union officials said they took the action because of safety concerns.

According to a Chrysler spokesman, the firing of Pearson and Ector had the support of the UAW international leadership.

When workers on the February 17 day shift learned of the victimizations, they walked off the job and turned away second shift workers at the gate. When workers stayed home February 19, UAW's Chrysler director, Jack Laskowski, issued a statement to the press declaring that the strike had not been authorized by the international union. He ordered Local 140 members to report to work immediately. Only about 450 of the plant's 4,100 production workers obeyed the February 19 instruction.

Management had imposed brutal speed-up in the months leading up to the job action in order to drive up production. The Dodge Ram and Dakota assembled at the Warren Truck plant were among the company's best-selling and most profitable vehicles.

Warren Truck workers complained that management often required them to shift production from one model to another without permitting any slowing of the line, almost an impossible task.

Since the 1993 contract just three years prior, Chrysler had hired hundreds of younger workers at the Warren Truck plant, taking advantage of the lower starting wage negotiated by the UAW while simultaneously attempting to drive out older workers.

**50 years ago: US-orchestrated invasion of Laos bogs down**

During the week of February 15, 1971, intense fighting continued in Laos after the invasion one week earlier of South Vietnamese ground troops backed by United States air support. The invasion by the South Vietnamese puppet troops was an attempt to break up North Vietnamese supply routes that brought arms and other military support to National Liberation Front (NLF) fighters in South Vietnam.

Under the recently passed Cooper-Church amendment, which followed massive anti-war protests opposing the US invasion of Cambodia, US troops were not permitted to directly enter Laos. Only South Vietnamese military forces entered Laos on the ground. However, the US military organized and commanded the invasion. The US military gave direct orders to the South Vietnamese forces, collected military intelligence, organized logistics, and provided weapons and direct support from the US Air Force.

The invasion of Laos had been preceded by years of secret bombing missions carried out into the country. As early as 1964 the US mounted numerous bombing raids that dropped huge amounts of explosives on the small, impoverished country. While the pretext was to destroy "the Ho Chi Minh trail" supply line, the main result of the US raids was to kill and maim Laotian civilians.

The US aerial bombardment was so extensive that Laos became the most bombed country in world history. Despite being officially neutral in the Vietnam War, Laos was hit with the equivalent of one planeload of bombs every eight minutes for nine years. By the end of the war in 1975, at least 200,000 Laotians, or one in 10 of the total population, had been killed, and one in four were made refugees. Yet despite the massive death toll and destruction, the American bombing raids had been largely ineffective at disrupting the supply lines of the NLF, which spanned nearly 10,000 miles from North Vietnam through Laos and Cambodia.

The land invasion aimed to achieve what the bombings had failed to do: break the Ho Chi Minh trail supply route. Instead, it turned into another debacle for the US intervention. During the first week, the South Vietnamese and their US air support were able to force a retreat of North Vietnamese and NLF forces and capture some weapons caches. However, by February 18 the North had begun its counterattack and stalled

the advance of the ground invasion force.

On February 25 an even larger counteroffensive was launched, forcing the South Vietnamese ground troops to begin a retreat back into South Vietnam. Despite claims by Nixon to the media of a “Vietnamization” victory and that the Ho Chi Minh trail had been disrupted, by the end of March 1971 the South Vietnam invasion force had been repelled back across the border with the North retaining the vast majority of their supplies and in control of the trails connecting North Vietnam to South Vietnam.

### **75 years ago: Indian naval mutiny against British colonial rule**

On February 18, 1946, around 1,100 sailors in the Indian Royal Navy stationed at the HMIS Talwar and the Signal School, both in Mumbai, launched a hunger strike against the conditions imposed upon them by the British colonial authorities. This was accompanied by a “slow down,” involving a refusal to carry out duties promptly.

The protest, organized by a group of 20 sailors, or “ratings” as they were known, would quickly spread. At the conclusion of World War II, Britain began sacking ratings, including those who had been compelled to take dangerous actions during battles in the conflict. Ratings were provided poor accommodation, were often given demeaning tasks, and were subjected to the racism and tyranny of British naval commanders. Commander Arthur Frederick King, in charge of the Talwar, had a reputation as a stern disciplinarian.

The protest spread within days and quickly involved some 20,000 sailors. The rebels effectively took control of 74 ships, stationed not only in India, but throughout the region and internationally, including in Indonesia and Yemen.

The mutiny triggered a movement in the working class, with a major sympathy strike erupting in Mumbai on February 22. Public transport in the city ground to a halt, and mass demonstrations were held. The unrest spread, including to Karachi, and rioting against British occupation broke out.

The British responded with a brutal crackdown. Attacks on protests, including colonial police opening fire on demonstrators, killed up to 300 civilians and wounded as many as 1,500. Ratings on the Talwar and other nearby ships surrendered on February 23, but in more distant areas, the unrest continued for weeks.

The sailors had demanded the immediate liberation of India from British colonial rule, and the replacement of the British ensigns on their ships with the flags of the bourgeois oppositional Congress Party and the Muslim League, as well as the Stalinist Communist Party. The mutiny was one part of a wave of opposition to colonial rule, throughout Asia and

internationally, in the wake of World War II.

### **100 years ago: British government report advises independence for Egypt**

On February 18, 1921, an important and long-awaited report on Egypt was issued by a commission headed by Alfred Lord Milner. Milner was the former Colonial Secretary of the British cabinet who negotiated on behalf of British imperialism at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. The Conference had assigned Egypt to Britain as a protectorate and rejected the appeal of Egyptian nationalists for independence.

When the British then sought to exile nationalist leaders, the result was a mass uprising in Egypt in March and April 1919. While British imperialism was able to suppress the revolution, it was profoundly shaken, and by November had sent the Milner Commission to investigate conditions in the country.

The report—“a document of forty closely written pages,” according to the *New York Times* — suggested that Egypt would become ungovernable by the colonial regime. The *Times* continued, “The spirit of nationalist Egypt, [the report] notes, cannot be extinguished ... and an attempt to govern the country in the teeth of a hostile people is a difficult and disgraceful task.” (Two days after the *Times* published these words, it reported that British forces had murdered 13 IRA fighters in County Cork in Ireland.)

Milner’s conclusions were that Egypt should be given formal independence with guarantees to British interests, set down in a peace treaty between Egypt and the British government. The report stated: “It is essential to ensure that independent Egypt does not pursue a foreign policy hostile or prejudicial to the interests of the British Empire.” It continued, “We do not attempt to conceal our conviction that Egypt is not yet in a position to dispense with British assistance in her internal administration.” The commission had concluded that “[the Egyptians] insisted that internal order was a matter for Egyptians themselves.”

The report was critical in the decision of Britain to issue the Unilateral Declaration of Egyptian Independence in February 1922, which set up the Kingdom of Egypt that year. The Kingdom, however, was only nominally independent, with the British controlling foreign relations, the military, and the region to the south of Egypt known as the Sudan.



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