This week in history: March 1-7

28 February 2021

25 years ago: Spanish right wins narrow victory

On March 3, 1996, the right-wing Popular Party won a narrow victory in Spain's national elections. It was only the second time in history that power passed from one party to another since the Spanish Civil War and the coming to power of the fascist dictator Francisco Franco.

The election brought an end to more than 13 years of rule by Spain's Socialist Party and its leader Felipe Gonzalez. Yet the Popular Party and its incoming prime minister, Jose Maria Aznar, whose father and grandfather were prominent Franco supporters, won by a margin of just 1.4 percent of the vote, barely 340,000 out of the more than 25 million ballots cast.

The outcome left the Popular Party 20 votes short of a parliamentary majority and without any plausible claim to a popular mandate to enact new policies. Aznar's only hope of governing was to win the support of the Catalan Nationalists and Christian Democrats of Convergencia i Unio, a party which he had denounced throughout his campaign for its support of the Socialist Party government.

While far less sweeping than anticipated, the defeat of Gonzalez's Socialist Party was rooted in the deep economic and social crisis facing the Spanish working class and the series of political scandals which had been enveloping the government. At the time, the unemployment rate in Spain was the highest in all of Europe, at 22.7 percent. Meanwhile, Gonzalez's former Interior Minister Jose Barrionuevo was indicted on charges of organizing a secret campaign of police assassinations of Basque separatists in the 1980s.

The Spanish and European bourgeoisies supported a change in government. Having played a critical role in containing the movement of Spanish workers in the aftermath of the Franco dictatorship, Gonzalez and the Socialist Party had outlived their usefulness.

50 years ago: Two million workers walk out in UK against anti-strike law

On March 1, 1971, two million workers in the Britain mounted a one-day strike to oppose the Tory government of Edward Heath's proposed Industrial Relations Bill. The strike was led by workers organized in the Amalgamated Engineering Union, which was made up of workers in the auto industry, shipbuilding, the dockyards, and publishing. The strike took place amid two other major strikes by Post Office workers and Ford auto workers, who were going into their seventh week and fifth week of strike action, respectively.

The strike shut down the docks and major manufacturing plants. No major newspapers were published on account of the printers' strike. Quickly, smaller general manufacturing plants were forced to close when the workers in these factories refused to cross picket lines and joined the strike.

The Industrial Relations Bill was a major piece of union-busting legislation focused on limiting workers' right to strike. The law tightened legal restrictions on unions and imposed narrow conditions on when a strike could be considered legal. The law effectively banned wildcat strikes. To have legal rights, unions would be required to register with the government. Even then, the law granted the businesses and corporations more room to impose "no strike" clauses into workers' contracts and to scuttle legal strikes once they had started. Registered unions would be subordinate to the National Industrial Relations Court, which would be empowered to settle labor disputes and outlaw "injurious" strikes.

The bill was widely despised by workers who saw it as a direct attack on their democratic right to withhold their labor. Mass opposition was demonstrated by the historic size of the March 1 strike and other demonstrations against the bill. Workers in London on February 21 had mobilized against the bill, holding a large protest march that saw 140,000 pour into Trafalgar Square. The demonstration was the biggest convened in London since the 1926 General Strike.

Despite mass support among workers to extend the one-day strike into an indefinite strike to oppose the Industrial Relations Bill, the Trade Union Congress (TUC) bureaucracy feared more than anything else the development of a revolutionary confrontation with the Heath government. In the aftermath of the March 1 general strike and responding to calls from workers to deepen the struggle against the Tories, the TUC issued a statement to workers saying that continuing the general strike would, "harden public opinion against the unions."

The Socialist Labour League (SLL), the British Trotskyist movement at the time, articulated the revolutionary program of the working class. It rejected the strategy of the TUC, which was in effect to throw up its hands and allow the bill to be passed. The SLL called for an indefinite general strike aimed at both ending the Industrial Relations Bill and removing the Tories from the government outright.

75 years ago: Winston Churchill delivers “iron curtain” speech

On March 5, 1946, former British prime minister Winston Churchill delivered a speech entitled, “The sinews of peace,” at Westminster College, in Fulton, Missouri, before an audience that included US President Harry Truman. Churchill, who had served as British prime minister from 1940 to 1945, warned against the growing influence of the Soviet Union throughout Eastern Europe, and called for close British and US ties to combat the threat, in an oration viewed as one of the opening volleys of the Cold War.

Churchill famously warned that an “iron curtain” had “descended across the [European] Continent,” and declared that “Behind that line lie all the capitals of the ancient states of Central and Eastern Europe. Warsaw, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, Bucharest and Sofia, all these famous cities and the populations around them lie in what I must call the Soviet sphere, and all are subject in one form or another, not only to Soviet influence but to a very high and, in many cases, increasing measure of control from Moscow.”

Churchill stated that this was “not the liberated Europe we fought for” in World War II, “nor is it one which contains the conditions for permanent peace.” Expressing the fears of the English ruling elite over the decline of British imperialism, Churchill called for a “special relationship” between the United Kingdom and a US, which he declared “stood at the pinnacle of world power.”

It would be necessary, Churchill insisted, for Britain and the US to ensure a unified response of the capitalist states in Europe, aimed at containing the threat of a further extension of Soviet influence. In a thinly veiled call for military aggression, Churchill insisted that there was “nothing which they [the Soviets] admire so much as strength, and there is nothing for which they have less respect than for military weakness.” At the same time, the stance of hostility towards the Soviet Union would serve to bring Europe together, and, Churchill argued, would prevent a return to the inter-imperialist conflicts that had resulted in two imperialist wars and revolutionary upheavals over the previous decades.

The speech was well received in Britain. The Stalinist bureaucracy responded with a mixture of resentment and fear. Under Stalin, it had collaborated with the imperialist powers in seeking to stabilize capitalism in Western Europe and had signed deals in the latter stages of the war providing for the carve-up of Europe and the world. This entailed the conscious betrayal of revolutionary movements around the world, including in Greece and Italy—a crucial service provided to Washington and London.

100 years ago: Kronstadt rebellion begins in Soviet Russia

On March 1, 1921, a sailors’ revolt against the Soviet state began in the island-fortress of Kronstadt in the Gulf of Finland, outside of Petrograd. A crowd of 15,000 people assembled in the island’s main square and demanded free elections to soviets without Bolshevik candidates and freedom of the press for anti-Soviet socialist and anarchist publications. They further demanded changes to the rationing system and the disbandment of special Bolshevik units in the Red Army.

The next day sailors formed a Provisional Revolutionary Committee and arrested 326 Bolsheviks. Bolshevik leaders were forced to flee the island for their lives.

Over the next two weeks of the revolt, French imperialism began to organize supplies for the rebels, and they received at least verbal support from various White Guard forces that had been driven from the country. The Soviet government was adamant that the rebels had to lay down their arms and surrender.

While by 1921 the Red Army had defeated the counterrevolutionary armies across four fronts, and the imperialist armies of the American, British, French, and Japanese had been forced to withdraw, seven years of world war, revolution and civil war had dislocated the economy of the country.

Many years later the Trotskyist writer John G. Wright described the situation at the beginning of 1921: “Vast sections of the population faced the immediate prospect of dying from hunger or freezing to death. With industry in ruins, transportation disrupted, millions of men demobilized from the army, the masses on the point of exhaustion, fertile soil was indeed available for the intrigues of the counterrevolution.”

The rebellion was a part of a broader discontent by the peasantry and the middle class more generally in response to the extreme hardships of the civil war. By one count, there were 155 peasant uprisings across Russia in February 1921.

On March 7, during a severe snowstorm, Red Army units commanded by Mikhail Tukhachevsky crossed the ice from Petrograd and assaulted the fortress but were driven back. Finally, on the 15th, Red Army forces were able to retake the fortress during the night and under conditions of fog. The American consulate estimated that 10,000 Bolsheviks died, including 15 delegates to the ongoing 10th Congress of the Communist Party. While the casualties among the rebels appear to have been much lower, the Bolsheviks took about 2,000 prisoners, many of whom were executed.

The revolt has been used by anarchists and anti-Communists in the decades since to falsely associate Bolshevism with Stalinism. But Leon Trotsky accurately summed up the class dynamics of the episode: “the Kronstadt uprising was nothing but an armed reaction of the petty bourgeoisie against the hardships of social revolution and the severity of the proletarian dictatorship.”