

# This week in history: March 15-21

14 March 2021

**25 years ago: Canadian police attack striking government workers**

On March 18, 1996, riot police mounted a brutal attack on striking Ontario government workers, acting on orders from Ontario's Tory government. One picketer was knocked unconscious and three more were hospitalized after police clubbed and shoved their way through a picket line outside the Ontario Legislature.

The attack came without warning. Members of the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) riot squad burst out of police vans and nearby government buildings and immediately began hitting the pickets with truncheons and riot shields. According to the president of the Metro Toronto Police Association, other Toronto cops overheard OPP constables boasting that they planned to "whack 'em and stack 'em" just before they charged.

Solicitor-General Bob Runciman, the representative of the ultra-right Progressive Conservative government of Premier Mike Harris, rejected all criticism of the OPP. He said that the riot squad acted with "remarkable restraint."

The provincial workers strike was part of a groundswell of working-class opposition to the Tory government's class-war program. On February 23, workers in Hamilton, Ontario's third-largest city, staged a one-day strike to protest the Tories' assault on social programs, government services, and trade union and democratic rights. The next day, Hamilton saw one of the largest demonstrations in Ontario history, as workers from across Ontario rallied outside the Tories' annual convention.

The attack on the picket line demonstrated that the Harris government wished to make an example of the workers. However, the greatest threat to the strike itself came from the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) and Ontario Federation of Labor (OFL) bureaucracies, which segregated the Ontario government workers strike from the broader anti-Tory movement.

The strike consisted of 55,000 members of the OPSEU. The Harris government was attempting to lay off at least 13,000 of its total 81,250 employees. OPSEU President Leah Casselman took the government's negotiating offer of axing 9,400 jobs instead of 13,000 as an opportunity to claim victory for the workers on strike.

Both the OPSEU and OFL leaderships accepted the key elements of the government's agenda—the elimination of thousands of Ontario government jobs and the privatization of government services and agencies—and were looking for a means to end the strike.

**50 years ago: Fascist coup plot exposed in Italy**

On March 18, 1971, *Paese Sera*, a left-wing journal, published details of an unsuccessful coup attempt by Junio Valerio Borghese, the founder of Italy's fascist National Front party. The public learned details of a December 8, 1970 plot in which hundreds of fascist members of the military seized key strategic buildings and infrastructure, plotted to kidnap Italian President Giuseppe Saragat and establish a fascist state.

The Borghese coup demonstrated the immense danger of a fascist resurgence in unstable postwar Italy, just 25 years after the overthrow of Mussolini's fascist state. Borghese, from an aristocratic Roman family, was a lifelong fascist and had remained loyal to Mussolini to the end. After a short prison sentence at the end of World War II he immediately entered into neo-fascist politics, first joining the Italian Social Movement and then forming the National Front in 1967.

The late 1960s and early 1970s were a period of major class struggles in Italy. Strikes in the large industries were met with attacks from police and the far right. There were seemingly endless wildcat strikes as workers became dissatisfied with both the bourgeois government and the Stalinist Communist Party leaders, who held the second largest number of seats in parliament. Fearing a workers' uprising like that of France in May 1968, the fascists under Borghese's National Front conspired with active military members, the Sicilian Mafia and the CIA to prepare the coup.

The attempt was nearly successful. The fascist forces marched on Rome late at night and captured the national broadcasting center, where they announced over the radio the overthrow of the government and the establishment of a new regime. An armory was raided and several government buildings occupied. The National Front members believed that they would be backed by the US, which would send NATO forces to prop up a new fascist government. This did not materialize.

Borghese fled to Spain where he was given asylum by Franco's dictatorship. Shortly after the story in *Paese Sera* was published, the Italian government arrested a handful of the coup plotters. In 1978, 46 conspirators were convicted. However, after an appeal in 1984 all of the defendants were acquitted by the Italian Supreme Court.

**75 years ago: Last US internment camp for Japanese-Americans closes**

On March 20, 1946, the US government decommissioned the Tule Lake War Relocation Center in California, where tens of thousands of Japanese Americans had been interned during World War II. The facility was the last of a network of 10 concentration camps on the West Coast to be shuttered. Its closure came more than six months after the conclusion of the war.

The Democratic Party administration of President Franklin Roosevelt had ordered the mass roundups through Executive Order 9066 shortly after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, part of a broader assault on democratic rights as the US prepared to enter the war.

On March 19, the last 449 prisoners at the camp were transported to an immigration detention center in Crystal City, Texas. In February, 4,406 inmates had been sent to Japan. They included 1,116 adults who had renounced their US citizenship, 1,523 Japanese nationals, and 1,767 who remained American citizens, most of them children. Another 2,737 were released in California, but were placed in a legal limbo, having been stripped of their citizenship.

Many of the inmates had been coerced into renouncing their citizenship in December 1944. After several years imprisonment, they were informed that the internment camps were closing within 12 months. By becoming “renunciants,” they were told that they would remain in the camp until its closure, thereby avoiding separation from their family. Others renounced to express their hostility to their brutal treatment.

A mass deportation of all remaining inmates, including those who did not want to leave the US, was only halted in November 1945, by a court order obtained by civil liberties attorney Wayne Collins. He charged that the renunciation program had been based upon the duress of indefinite imprisonment and had violated the constitutional rights of those affected. The US authorities responded by seeking to settle the cases of those detained through hasty administrative hearings. Only in 1968 did Collins succeed in restoring the citizenship of 4,978 Japanese Americans who had been caught up in the program.

Throughout its existence, Tule Lake was notorious for its harsh conditions. In July 1943, it was designated a “segregation center,” where inmates from other camps who had fallen foul of a “loyalty questionnaire” were dispatched. When the detainees protested their treatment in November 1943, martial law was declared at the camp, leading to months-long curfews, searches and the end of all normal daily activities.

At its height, almost 20,000 Japanese Americans were held at Tule Lake. In total, some 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry, 62 percent of whom were US citizens, were detained during the course of the war.

## 100 years ago: German Communist Party initiates mass actions

On March 18, 1921, *Die Rote Fahne* (the Red Flag), the newspaper of the Communist Party of Germany (KPD), called for

workers to take up arms in response to the decision on March 14 by the governor of the state of Saxony, Otto Hörsing, a Social Democrat, to send troops to the mining region of Mansfeld to “restore order.”

The international situation was fraught. In February, the French had threatened to invade Bavaria if Germany did not come to terms on war reparations. On March 20, a plebiscite was set in Upper Silesia, one of the chief coal mining regions of Germany, to decide if it would be a part of Germany or Poland.

When troops arrived in Mansfeld, a center of support for the KPD, a general strike was declared on March 22 in the region. But it met with only partial success. The KPD sought to deliver an ultimatum to non-Communist workers and soon was seeking to foment an armed uprising in central Germany. Mass demonstrations also occurred in Hamburg and other regions.

The KPD called for a national general strike on March 24, which was only sporadically followed by workers. Armed workers under the influence of the KPD sought to occupy factories. Supporters of the party were driven from the docks in Hamburg by police, who killed 22 workers. Government troops shelled one factory in Mansfeld on March 28 and the workers were forced to surrender.

By April 1, the KPD leadership was forced to call off the strike in what had amounted to a setback for the party. Tens of thousands of strikers lost their jobs. Thousands were imprisoned and eight were sentenced to death.

The “March Action,” which had not been preceded by the preparation of the German masses in advance, became the topic of a broad discussion in the international Communist movement. As Trotsky remarked later, “At the Third World Congress the German Communist Party with its March Action occupied the central point of discussion. The International was compelled to issue new slogans and to declare that the task of the European Communists did not consist in capturing power today or tomorrow, but in winning the majority of the working class and in creating the political preliminaries for the seizure of power.”



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