

This week in history: January 17-23

16 January 2022

25 years ago: Curt Flood dies, baseball player who challenged owners' control

On January 20, 1997, Curt Flood, the all-star centerfielder who was the first Major League Baseball player to challenge the owners' control of the game and pave the way for free agency, died in Los Angeles at the age of 59. The cause of death was pneumonia related to the throat cancer which struck him the previous year.

Flood spent most of his career with the St. Louis Cardinals, where he was considered the finest-fielding outfielder in an era that included Willie Mays. He set a record, playing 226 consecutive errorless games, and once went an entire season, in 1966, without an error. He won the Gold Glove for best fielding seven years in a row, batted over .300 six times, and played in the World Series in 1964, 1967 and 1968.

In 1969, the Cardinals sought to trade him to the Philadelphia Phillies. Flood refused to report, instead filing a lawsuit challenging the "reserve clause," which was then standard in every player's contract, under which team owners had an absolute right to dispose of their services. As Flood said at the time, players were "treated like pieces of property."

The result was that players had virtually no bargaining power and were grossly underpaid compared to the revenues they generated for the owners. Flood, for example, a perennial all-star for a championship team owned by brewing magnate August Busch (Budweiser), never made more than \$90,000 a year.

Congress had exempted major league baseball from antitrust laws in 1922, and this exemption had been construed to legalize the reserve clause. A US District Court ruled against Flood after a 1970 trial, and the case was unsuccessfully appealed all the way to the Supreme Court, which backed the owners on a 5-3 vote.

A second legal challenge to the reserve clause, brought by California Angels pitcher Andy Messersmith, was ultimately successful, and free agency became the norm for all professional athletes. But this came too late for Curt Flood, whose career essentially ended when he filed his lawsuit. He sat out the 1970 season, then quit the Washington Senators after a few weeks in 1971 and never played again.

While most players of his caliber have been offered positions at one level or another of baseball management after their

playing days are over, Flood was a pariah to the owners. He never worked as a scout, coach, manager or instructor. After living abroad for a number of years, Flood returned to the United States and operated a youth center in Los Angeles.

50 years ago: Striking New York teachers defy anti-strike Taylor Law

On January 18, 1972, teachers in Portchester, NY went on strike, shutting down eight schools in the area. The teachers went on strike in open defiance of New York's Taylor Law that bans public sector workers from striking under the threat of heavy fines.

The teachers walked out of classrooms after the Board of Education had offered them a raise of just 5.5 percent when they had demanded at least an 11 percent increase. Teachers in the working class Portchester schools were being paid far less than their counterparts in neighboring districts.

One striking teacher told the *Bulletin*, the US predecessor to the *World Socialist Web Site*, "We have been working since last September without a contract. Our last contract ended in June 1971. Up until now the Board refused to make any offer at all, and the last offer was 5.5 percent. Our demand of 11 percent is entirely justified. We are insisting only on being at the level of the other teachers in Westchester County. Starting salaries here are \$7,900."

Another teacher elaborated on the details of the proposed agreement, "You have to understand the 5.5 percent includes a normal increment built into the contract (based on seniority and education level). So that for most of us, the annual increase would be 2.2 percent."

The other major demand of teachers was a limit on class size. Teachers at the picket lines outside of a junior high school reported some class sizes as large as 37 students. The teachers' contract up to the strike contained no limit on how many students could be crammed into one classroom. "They can give us an increase and double our class size," said one teacher.

Teachers spoke out against the Taylor Law used to threaten them back on the job. One teacher said "The Taylor Law to me is totally unjust, and the only recourse I have is to break the law. The law is supposed to work both ways, but it really works

against us and for the Board.”

Significantly, high school students came out in support of their teachers and staged a walk out after being called by their school administration to a special assembly in the auditorium. It became clear quickly that the assembly was called in an attempt to warehouse students in the building so that the administration could claim schools remained open despite the strike. Many students showed their support by standing side by side their teachers on the picket lines.

75 years ago: Mass casualties in shipwreck dubbed the “Greek Titanic”

On January 19, 1947, the SS *Heimara*, a passenger vessel, sank after striking a reef on its journey from the port of Piraeus, near Athens, to Thessaloniki, the largest city in northern Greece. At least 383 were killed, but the real toll was as high as 400, in what was Greece’s worst maritime disaster outside of a direct military engagement.

The *Heimara* had been built in the first decade of the 20th century. It had originally carried parcels but had served as a hospital ship and a mine layer for the German army in World War I. The aged vessel was given to Greece at the end of World War II, as part of reparations supervised by the US, Britain and the other Allied powers for the crimes of the Nazi regime.

The ship was carrying around 550 passengers and almost 90 crew members. Amid a thick fog in the South Euboean Gulf, it struck a reef close to the Verdugia islets. The rudder was severely damaged, preventing further movement, the radio system was taken down and the ship took on water. It was more than an hour and a half before it would sink.

Despite the shore being a mile off, there was no coordinated evacuation or rescue operation. Passengers were left to fend for themselves in a panic, with many perishing in the icy early morning waters.

The incompetent handling of the disaster reflected political developments. Greece had been decimated by a joint German-Italian occupation during World War II. Tens of thousands of civilians had died of starvation, basic infrastructure had been laid waste and more than 20,000 members of the partisan resistance had been killed at the hands of the fascists.

In the wake of World War II, civil war had erupted and was ongoing when the disaster occurred. The Hellenic Army, composed of fascist collaborators and the conservative ruling elite, was supported by Britain and the US as it waged a brutal war against partisans of the Communist Party-backed Democratic Army of Greece. According to some reports, more than thirty of those who perished on the *Heimara* were political prisoners of the Hellenic Army, being transported to Thessaloniki.

100 years ago: First successful use of insulin to treat diabetes.

On January 23, 1922, Canadian physician Frederick Banting and his assistant Charles Best successfully administered a second dose of the hormone insulin to treat a patient with type-1 diabetes, 14-year-old Leonard Thompson, who was dying from the condition, at the Toronto Hospital.

Banting and Best had administered insulin to Thompson on January 11, but the medication apparently had impurities and caused an allergic reaction in Thompson. After the second attempt, using a more refined extract of animal insulin, he was able to live another 13 years with daily doses of the medication.

Insulin is a hormone found in most vertebrates that regulates the amount of blood sugar in the body. It is normally produced in humans by the pancreas but in some cases the pancreas is unable to produce it in sufficient quantities (type-1 diabetes) or the cells of the body lose the ability to respond to the insulin the pancreas produces (type-2 diabetes).

The role of insulin in physiology and its production by the pancreas had been discovered by scientists toward the end of the 19th century and it had been successfully extracted from mammals between 1906 and 1916 by several researchers.

With the assistance of biochemist James Collip, Banting and Best were able to extract insulin from dogs and eventually from fetal calves, refine it, and apply it to use in humans by 1921.

After their success with Leonard Thompson, the drug was applied to patients in the United States. Scientists at Eli Lilly and Company developed a process of producing insulin in large quantities, and it was marketed by 1922, saving thousands of lives. Frederick Banting was awarded the Nobel Prize for medicine in 1923.



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