

This week in history: February 7-13

6 February 2022

25 years ago: French neo-fascists win local elections

On February 9, 1997, the French neo-fascist National Front (FN) of Jean Marie Le Pen won an election in the small town of Vitrolles near Marseille. The victory in Vitrolles came after the 1995 FN wins in Orange, Marignane, and Toulon.

FN candidate Catherine Mégret was elected mayor with 52 percent of the ballots cast. Her only opponent, the Socialist Party (PS) council leader Jean-Jacques Anglade, obtained just 47.5 percent of the vote. Total voter turnout was very high, at 82 percent.

The new mayor announced the launching of a “France First” campaign. She told the press, “We here in France are now in a state of emergency. Our voters wanted us to scare people who don’t belong.” She immediately announced the closure of eight community centers that were mainly used by immigrant and anti-racist French youth. Immigrants were also subjected to stepped-up policing and ID checks in the streets.

For nearly 15 years, Anglade had presided over a deepening social crisis in Vitrolles. At the time of the election, 22 percent of the population and over 30 percent of youth were unemployed.

In the first round of the election, Mégret obtained 46.7 percent, Anglade 37 percent, and Jacques Chirac, the candidate of the RPR, Gaullist government party, only 16 percent. The RPR withdrew and together with its coalition partner, the UDF, made a show of antifascism, urging its supporters to vote for the PS in the second round. They called it a “republican front” for “the defense of the republic against the extreme right wing.” This led to conflicts within the right-wing political milieu of the ruling parties, who called for their support base to vote FN.

But the main factor in the FN victory was the relatively high vote for the fascists in working class neighborhoods that once voted solidly for the Socialist Party (PS) and the Communist Party (PCF). Opinion polls predicted that in a general election, one in three workers and one in three unemployed people would cast a ballot for the FN, placing its vote above that of the PS and the Stalinists of the PCF.

Vitrolles was not a local phenomenon. The rise of the fascists was the product of two interconnected phenomena throughout France and all of Europe. First was the dramatic economic and social decay of capitalism. Second was the rottenness of the

traditional parties and trade unions in the workers movement which blocked any progressive way out of the crisis for the working class.

50 years ago: UK state of emergency against miners strike

UK Prime Minister Edward Heath declared a state of emergency throughout the country on February 8, 1972, as a nationwide coal miners strike continued to paralyze heavy industry and the electricity supply. The emergency declaration, the third such strikebreaking order under Heath in three years, was used to mobilize the military, with army vehicles transporting coal and conducting “essential work.”

The February 9 funeral of miner Fred Matthews, killed February 3 on the picket line by a scab truck, was attended by at least 6,000 workers. The strike then reached its point of highest tension at what became known as the Battle of Saltley Gate. Miners, who had been picketing at the Birmingham fuel storage depot since the day of Matthews’ death, battled police who attacked strikers and carried out scores of arrests. Workers at Saltley Gate were subject to repeated attacks by trucks ramming through their picket lines in the same manner that had killed Matthews.

On February 10, hundreds of miners picketing at Saltley Gate were joined by over 20,000 workers from other industries, forcing the closure of the depot. One miner at Saltley Gate, Tony Morris, told the Trotskyist newspaper *Workers Press*, “We will stay on strike till Ted Heath gets down on his hands and knees. This strike can be won. We’ve suffered five weeks, and we’ll suffer another five.” Speaking on the solidarity of other workers he continued, “We have had one pledge from one factory that if they reopen the gate tomorrow 5,000 will be here.”

There was massive support for the miners in the British working class. Heath’s declaration came as 115,000 power supply workers were gearing up to join the coal strike, posing the potential of the development of a nationwide general strike. Fearing that situation could spiral out of control, the UK government conceded pay increases of around 27 percent on February 18, bringing the strike to an end. Presented by union officials and Labour politicians as a victory for workers, the

pay increase was a great bargain for the British ruling class. The trade union bureaucracy, in ramming through the concession, had once again come to the rescue at a moment of revolutionary peril.

75 years ago: Paris Peace Treaties with Nazi allies formally end World War II

On February 10, 1947, the Paris Peace Treaties were signed, defining the position of five states that had aligned themselves with Nazi Germany during the Second World War. Overseen by the Allied powers victorious in the war, the US, Britain, France and the Soviet Union, the Treaties were one of the final international conventions formally ending the conflict, which had concluded almost two years before.

The Treaties were the subject of the 21-nation Paris Peace Conference, held from July 29 to October 15, 1946. The deliberations were bound up with the formation of the United Nations and the new postwar order of international relations. The nations directly affected by the treaties were Italy, Romania, Hungary, Bulgaria and Finland.

Italy lost most of its colonial possessions, including those seized before and during the war. Among them were territories in East Africa and Libya in the north of the continent, as well as the Italian concession in the Chinese city of Tianjin. Italy's designs on Albania were quashed, with that country's independence formally recognized. The Dodecanese Islands were returned to Greece and the French border with Italy slightly adjusted in France's favor. Finland also lost territory, with the treaties upholding the border established in the Winter War of 1940 with the Soviet Union. Romania, Hungary and Bulgaria were also returned to their prewar borders.

The Paris Peace Conference had been held when the Allies were still administering Germany through four separate zones, with a modicum of cooperation between the imperialist powers and the Soviet Union. It was one of the last major international forums to end its deliberations without sharp conflicts between the Soviet Union and the US. By 1947, the Truman administration was pivoting to an aggressive Cold War policy, aimed at asserting US hegemony throughout Europe and internationally.

100 years ago: Dutch arrest Indonesian Communist leader

On February 13, 1922, Dutch colonial authorities arrested Tan Malaka, a leader of the PKH, the Communist Union of the Indies (the forerunner of the PKI, Communist Party of

Indonesia) for seeking to expand a strike of government pawnbrokers into a general strike of Indonesian workers. The Dutch initially sent Malaka into exile in Timor but later allowed him to go to Holland.

Malaka, the son of a relatively well-to-do employee of Dutch agricultural firms, had studied in Holland from 1914 to 1919, where, under the impact of the 1917 October Revolution, he had begun reading key Marxist works. After his return to Indonesia, Tan Malaka began to teach the children of tea plantation workers and sought to establish independent Indonesian schools. He began writing in left-wing and liberal journals, depicting the conditions of agricultural workers. He contacted the ISDV, the Social Democratic organization in Indonesia founded by Henk Sneevliet, which was to become the PKH in 1920 and affiliate with the Communist International. Malaka also participated in nationalist Islamic organizations and was elected as a part of left-wing slate to the colonial Indonesian parliament.

Tan Malaka joined the PKH in 1921 and became the leader of the Printing Workers Association, playing an important role in the young Indonesian trade union movement. He became chair of the party but sought to permit dual membership between the Communist movement and Islamic nationalist organizations.

During his exile in the Netherlands, Malaka joined the Dutch Communist Party (CPN) and attended the Fourth Congress of the Communist International in Moscow in November 1922, where he proposed collaboration between Pan-Islamism and the Communist movement.

He became a representative of the Comintern in Asia, based in the Philippines, but was disoriented by the increasing Stalinization of the International. An abortive revolution led by the PKI in Indonesia in 1926, inspired by the Comintern and opposed by Malaka, led to a major defeat for the party.

Subsequently Malaka drew further away from the party into bourgeois nationalist politics. He participated in the Indonesia War of Independence against the Dutch and other imperialist powers after 1945 and was executed by a faction of the nationalist government's military in 1949.



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