This week in history: February 14-20

13 February 2022

25 years ago: Detroit newspaper strike ends in betrayal, defeat

On February 14, 1997, the 19-month-long Detroit newspaper strike collapsed in defeat after being betrayed by the union leadership.

The strike of 2,500 *Detroit Free Press* and *Detroit News* workers began in July 1995. They faced the most concentrated union-busting attack in the city in decades. Gannett Corporation and Knight-Ridder, owners of the two papers and, at the time, the two largest publishing chains in the country, were determined to destroy hundreds of jobs, slash health care benefits, and impose brutal working conditions.

The attack was part of a broader campaign to destroy jobs and increase profits in the media industry. One day after the Detroit workers first went on strike, the Times Mirror company announced the closure of *New York Newsday*, destroying 800 jobs. A further 700 jobs were cut from that company's flagship daily, the *Los Angeles Times*. A few days later the Gannett Company announced that they were acquiring Multimedia Inc. for $1.7 billion.

Pressmen, mailers, truck drivers, journalists and others had already been facing years of wage freezes, concessions and job losses as members of the Teamsters and The Newspaper Guild. When the workers refused the companies' new demands, including the imposition of a merit-pay system on Newspaper Guild members, the corporations went on the offensive.

All the institutions of big business were brought in behind the newspaper publishers throughout the months-long battle. The city's administration, under Mayor Dennis Archer, ordered police to escort scabs past picket lines. One worker was driven off a highway by security guards the first night. Strikers were subject to harassment, arrests and mace.

After failing to mount an effective struggle against the strike-breaking operation, the union leaders betrayed and ended the strike. As the Detroit unions were announcing their unconditional back-to-work offer, the AFL-CIO's Executive Council was assembling for its winter meeting in Los Angeles. It declared the capitulation "a bold new strategy." On December 17, 2000, the last of six union locals ratified an agreement sanctioning huge wage and job cuts.

50 years ago: British House of Commons votes to join the Common Market

On February 17, 1972, the Parliament of the United Kingdom narrowly voted to join the European Economic Community (EEC). The EEC was the predecessor to the European Union that established a "common market" among member states, allowing for unrestricted trade and movement throughout the continent. Joining the EEC made relevant British laws subject to Common Market regulations.

The House of Commons voted by a majority of just eight votes, 309-301, to approve the bill that would grant the UK accession into the European Community. The parliament was split down party lines, with the ruling Conservative party in favor of joining the EEC and the Labour opposition voting against. Pushing the vote over the edge were the five sitting members of the Liberal Party, who joined the Conservatives in approving the measure.

Initially, some Conservative members also opposed the bill, and their rejection would have prevented its passage. However, Prime Minister Edward Heath turned the vote into an effective vote of confidence by pledging to resign should the measure fail. In a speech before Parliament just before the vote, he declared,

> I believe that our friends would find it incomprehensible if we were to tear up the agreement. … For years to come they would understandably ask whether any trust could be placed in Britain's role in any future international agreements. Our influence in world monetary and trade discussions would be destroyed. … Therefore, if this House will not agree to the Second Reading of the Bill tonight … my colleagues and I are unanimous that in these circumstances this Parliament cannot sensibly continue.

Knowing that there was virtually no chance that the Conservatives could win should a general election be called while a national miners' strike continued, the holdouts fell in line with the majority. In fact, the morning before the vote, crowds of striking miners and their supporters gathered outside parliament to protest the Heath government, with the chant, "Heath out now!" being the most prominent.

Entry into the EEC was a manifestation of the decline of British capitalism. Having lost its sprawling empire after World War II, British industry was increasingly shouldered out of global markets, reflected in mounting pressure on the pound sterling. The British ruling class could no longer buy off a privileged labor aristocracy with the crumbs of imperialist plunder, as it had a century earlier. The miners' strike, then underway, posed the threat of revolutionary confrontation. Under these conditions, the British

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capitalists ran into the arms of their continental rivals.

Workers Press, the newspaper of the British Trotskyists at the time, called it "The most decisive vote in the life of this parliament" and wrote, "There is no doubt that a clear majority of the people in Britain are totally opposed to membership."

75 years ago: US begins Voice of America radio broadcasts into the Soviet Union

On February 17, 1947, Voice of America, the radio station operated by the US State Department, broadcast its first Russian-language program into the Soviet Union. While the initial episodes reportedly contained limited political content, the move was part of the Truman administration's turn to an aggressive Cold War strategy, aimed at the containment of the Soviet Union's influence in Europe and the assertion of US hegemony.

Voice of America had been established during World War II to promote American imperialist intervention in the global conflict. By the conclusion of the war, in 1945, it had a network of 39 transmitters and broadcast in 40 languages. In the initial postwar period, when the Allied imperialist powers and the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy were collaborating in the restabilization of capitalism in Europe, the US refrained from direct broadcasts into the Soviet Union.

By early 1947, the alignment had broken down, after a series of diplomatic crises provoked by the US. Power sharing arrangements for occupied Germany effectively collapsed in late 1946 and the US increasingly asserted that it was fighting for "democracy" in Europe, in opposition to the Soviet regime and its satellites.

The Voice of America broadcasts would combine relatively factual news, popular music, including jazz, and the promotion of US foreign and domestic policy.

A March 1948 US Army bulletin to commanders, to assist them in "informing their personnel" spelt out the aims of the station. "By telling the facts about us, they can help counteract propaganda against us" it stated. The bulletin gave the example of Voice of America programs denying Soviet reports of rising unemployment and social crisis in the US, and rejecting claims that big business was engaged in US-backed profiteering in the German zones under American control.

The bulletin cited Secretary of State James F. Byrnes, who said the times when the US could be "unconcerned about what other people thought of us" were over. "We shall be making decisions in the United Nations, and independently, that will have repercussions affecting the lives of ordinary people all over the globe," he said. "Our attitude and actions—and rumors thereof—will be matters of concern everywhere. As never before, we shall have to explain ourselves…"

In April, 1949, as the broadcasts became increasingly provocative, the Soviet Union activated jamming devices in a bid to block the program. Its satellite states in Eastern Europe would take similar actions over the following years.

100 years ago: Leader of Mississippi anti-secessionist insurgency dies

On February 16, 1922, Newton Knight, a soldier who deserted the Confederate Army during the American Civil War in 1862 and formed an anti-secessionist insurgency, known as the Knight Company, in Jones County Mississippi, died in nearby Jasper County.

Knight was born in Jones County, probably in 1829-30, the grandson of a slaveowner. He and his father did not own slaves and Newton's religious principles led him to oppose slavery. He owned a small farm after 1858 with his wife in Jasper County.

He was conscripted into the Confederate military in 1861, despite opposition in Jones County to secession from the Union. By October 1862, Knight had deserted from the Confederate Army, probably because of his opposition to the Twenty-Negros Law that allowed families who owned 20 slaves or more to exempt one member from military service.

He returned to his farm, later saying, according to the historian Victoria Bynum, "if they had a right to conscript me when I didn't want to fight the Union, I had a right to quit when I got ready." Knight was arrested by the Confederate authorities and his farm was burned. He was returned to the army by force, but deserted again and escaped in May 1863.

After the strategic fort in Vicksburg, Mississippi fell to Ulysses S. Grant on July 4, 1863, the ranks of Confederate deserters swelled in Jones County, and Newton Knight organized a band of insurgents who fought Confederate troops, called the Knight Company. With support of local slaves and white farmers, the band conducted over 14 actions against the Confederates and protected local farms from levies by the authorities. Knight's insurgents appear to have controlled Jones County by the spring of 1864.

Soon, Confederate troops launched an assault on the Knight Company and executed several insurgents, including members of Knight's family. Knight himself evaded capture.

After the war, Knight worked with the Union army in supplying food to the residents of Jones County. He joined the Republican Party and married an African American woman, Rachel, who had helped to supply the Knight Company during the war. After 1872 he was appointed colonel of an all-Black regiment that helped to suppress armed remnants of secessionist supporters. At his death in 1922, despite a law that prohibited common interment of blacks and whites, he was buried with Rachel. His gravestone read, "He lived for others."

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