This week in history: February 21-27

20 February 2022

25 years ago: Cape Breton workers rebel against mass unemployment

On February 24, 1997, hundreds of workers from across Cape Breton Island, in the province of Nova Scotia in Atlantic Canada, demolished a non-union building site.

Five hundred construction workers and their supporters converged on the building site in Sydney, Cape Breton's largest city, outraged by mass unemployment and union-busting, and frustrated by the failure of traditional forms of protest. They chased away two security guards and 17 non-union building workers, then set the unfinished apartment complex on fire. As news of the action spread, the crowd quickly swelled to over 1,000 participants.

For two hours the protesters prevented firemen from putting out the blaze. Fearing that they would be overwhelmed in a confrontation, Cape Breton Regional Police contented themselves with videotaping the protest and preventing more workers from joining.

Unemployment on Cape Breton, historically a center of trade union and working class political action in Canada's Maritime provinces, was at 26 percent. All of the island's main industries—coal mining, steel making, and fishing—had been dramatically downsized throughout the early 1990s. Out of a total population of 170,000, over 14,000 were unemployed.

Due to cuts to unemployment insurance, over 1,000 jobless construction workers were forced onto welfare. Unionized construction workers were also the target of a government-sponsored drive to promote the spread of cheap labor. In 1994, the Liberal provincial government enacted legislation to bar unionized workers from refusing to work with workers employed by non-union contractors.

The eruption in Sydney expressed the exasperation of the rank-and-file with the program of the trade unions and their ally, the social-democratic New Democratic Party. In response to the ruling class assault on jobs, union rights, and social programs, the official labor movement coupled impotent protests with ever-deepening class collaboration.

Union officials decried the protest, joining with the press in labeling it "Black Monday." Cliff Murphy, head of the Cape Breton Island Building and Construction Trades Council, blamed the protest on "a few radicals." At a meeting with the Sydney mayor, Murphy and other union leaders vowed to prevent any further such protests and to join with business and government in seeking to attract investment to the island.

50 years ago: Coal slurry dam break kills 125 in West Virginia

On February 26, 1972, after days of heavy rain, a coal slurry dam in Logan County, West Virginia burst, sending a massive flood down Buffalo Creek that killed 125 people, injured over 1,000, and made more than 4,000 homeless.

The failed dam was owned by the Pittston Coal Company. It impounded about 132 million gallons of hazardous wastewater from the coal production process. After the initial dam gave way, two other dams downstream also burst, unable to contain the rush of coal slurry. It poured into the main river, already high from rainfall, and then gushed down into inhabited areas, sweeping away and crushing houses in its path.

There were numerous warnings that the dam was in danger of failure, yet no effort was taken by the coal company or the government to make repairs or warn residents. The West Virginia Department of Natural Resources had conducted inspections in the years and months leading up to the disaster. Many of them found that the impoundment dams had little to no actual engineering behind them. One report found that the company installed a pipe that it called an "emergency spillway," but that it served no real function besides trying to fool concerned workers and inspectors.

In the days leading up to the disaster there were clear signs that the dam would fail. Workers and residents in the area made numerous complaints to the coal company of the danger. Company officials dismissed the concerns and insisted that there was no reason for fear.

In a book on the disaster, Gerald M. Stern recounted the stories of many workers whose lives were devastated. One miner, Ronald Staten, described how he narrowly survived by jumping from the roof of his home while holding onto his son just before the house was swallowed up. He was unable to save his pregnant wife who was trapped inside, "When I looked back and saw her, she said, 'Take care of my baby'… That's the last time I saw her."

After the disaster and the public becoming aware that the Pittston Coal Company knowingly ignored warnings of dam failure, mass outrage forced the West Virginia government to launch an investigation. The state sued the company, originally asking for $100 million in damages. But with government representatives fully in the pocket of the company, a settlement was eventually reached for just $1 million. While the report made clear that the company was responsible for the 125 deaths and other devastating impacts of the flood, no criminal charges were ever filed.

The tragedy, and the indifference of the company and the state to it, contributed to a mood of militancy among coal miners in West Virginia and beyond, who, over the next decade, fought bitterly for decent wages and safety. Logan County had long been a center of the coal mining industry, and home to one of the most exploited and militant sections of the American working class. It was the site of the Battle of Blair Mountain in 1921, in which thousands of miners took up arms against local police and company thugs, prompting the Harding administration to deploy the Air Force against them.

of Red Army

75 years ago: Fritz Von Papen, accomplice of Hitler, sentenced to hard labor

On February 24, 1947, a "denazification" court in US-controlled West Germany sentenced Franz von Papen to eight years hard labor for his central role in the coming to power of Adolf Hitler, and his unending support for the fascist regime that resulted. Papen's fortune was to be seized, but his conditions of labor were to be suited to his advanced age.

The far-right Catholic politician had been a prominent figure in German politics dating back to the First World War. Papen entered politics in direct opposition to the revolutionary struggles that erupted at the conclusion of that conflict. When workers under the leadership of the Communist Party carried out an uprising in the Ruhr in 1920, Papen took command of a Freikorps division that oversaw their violent suppression.

He would go on to become a prominent leader of the Centre Party, rejecting any collaboration with the reformist Social Democrats on account of their base in the working class and association with socialism. Amid the social crisis and political upheaval of the Great Depression, Papen was appointed German Chancellor by President Paul von Hindenburg in June 1932. Papen formed a right-wing government dubbed the "cabinet of barons." He was in constant discussions with the Nazis. Following the November 1932 election, Papen was removed as Chancellor, having failed to secure a majority of support in the Reichstag. He continued to meet regularly with von Hindenburg, agitating against General Kurt von Schleicher, another far-right figure, his replacement as chancellor.

Papen held a meeting with Hitler in January 1933, at the home of top banker Kurt Baron von Schröder, at which the two agreed to collaborate against Schleicher. Later in the month, it was secretly decided that Papen would serve as vice-chancellor in a Hitler government. Hitler revealed his plans to dissolve the Reichstag, enact emergency powers and institute a dictatorship. Papen sought to dampen down the concerns of his political associates. He helped convince Hindenburg to name Hitler chancellor, giving the Nazis state power, on January 30, 1933.

The decision expressed the will of key sections of the German ruling elite. They had decided to bring the Nazis to office in order to combat the threat of social revolution and smash the working class. Only three Nazis held cabinet positions in Hitler's first government, alongside eight traditional bourgeois politicians such as Papen who had thrown in their lot with the fascists.

Papen would be sidelined but continued to serve as a functionary in the Nazi regime as it marauded across Europe and committed genocide against the Jews. He was acquitted in the Nuremberg Trials. His arrest and prosecution in the "denazification" proceedings coincided with a US bid to consolidate its rule in western Germany, amid the first stages of the Cold War. Papen, however, was released on appeal just two years after his sentencing in 1949. He lived as a free man until 1969, dying at the age of 89.

100 years ago: Workers in Moscow celebrate fourth anniversary

On February 23, 1922, in what the *New York Times* called the "largest review since the days of the emperor," the Soviet Commissar of War, Leon Trotsky, reviewed the Moscow garrison of the Red Army from a platform in the Kremlin's Red Square, on the fourth anniversary of its founding.

The Workers' and Peasants' Red Army had been founded only four months after the 1917 October revolution at a time when the White Guard armies and foreign military intervention threatened the new Soviet Republic from every side. The Red Army had been built up from armed workers' militias and remnants of the Tsarist army by Trotsky, who began by recruiting socialist workers and workers in general, and then the poorest peasants.

Over four years, it succeeded in beating back not only British, French, Japanese and American imperialist armies on the territory of Russia, but also the various counterrevolutionary armies of Denikin, Kolchak, and Yudenich that sought to destroy the revolutionary regime during the Russian Civil War—over a front stretching thousands of miles from Ukraine and the Baltic in the west to Siberia in the east to the Caucasus in the south.

The Red Army not only fought the enemies of the Soviet republic but taught its soldiers to read and gave them a basic education in socialist ideas. In the course of the Civil War, Trotsky and the Bolsheviks were able to educate an outstanding cadre of commanders. As the *New York Times* was forced to recognize, the army on display in Moscow, "was as different from the tattered, undisciplined Red Army of 1918 as the Concord farmers of 1776 were from [World War I American] General Pershing's picked battalions."

At the Moscow assembly, Trotsky spoke from the podium, summing up the international situation and the future of the world revolution. Within this context he placed the development of a professional and class-conscious workers army:

> Each warrior, whether he be worker or peasant, must know and understand that at the basis of the world lies the law of change of matter, that … man has taken … his destiny into his own hands, that he is going forward, opening up new worlds, casting down all rulers from their thrones both heavenly and terrestrial, and saying: "No, I do not need any sovereign lords—I am man, organized in socialism, I am the master and the ruler of all things."