This week in history: March 7-13

6 March 2022

25 years ago: German miners occupy Bonn

On March 10, 1997, thousands of German coalminers occupied Bonn, the capital city, blockaded roads, and stormed police barricades in protest against plans to cut government subsidies and carry out massive layoffs in the mining industry.

More than 86,000 miners, members of the IG Bergbau und Energie union, struck and occupied the mines after the government of Chancellor Helmut Kohl announced plans to cut $2.2 billion in subsidies. The result would be the shutdown of seven of Germany's 19 major coal mines and the elimination of 60,000 jobs, together with another 80,000 jobs in the mining supply and machinery industry.

Before marching on Bonn, coalminers occupied town halls, mines, and highways in both the Ruhr basin, the center of the industry, and in the state of Saarland, another mining area on the French border.

Miners chained shut the entrances to the Bonn headquarters of the Free Democratic Party (FDP), Kohl's coalition partner, forcing the party leadership to move a scheduled meeting. The FDP had criticized Kohl's ruling Christian Democratic Union (CDU) for not being tough enough in implementing its austerity policies. There were also angry demonstrations in front of the CDU headquarters.

In the face of the miners' street blockades, which prevented Kohl from reaching a cabinet meeting on March 11, the German chancellor called off talks with union officials scheduled for that day. He declared his refusal to "negotiate under the pressure of the street." When protesters learned that Kohl had called off the talks, thousands stormed police barricades and invaded an area of government buildings where demonstrations were illegal, marching on Kohl's residence and the parliament building.

On March 12, after hours of talks with the miners, union officials and SPD representatives persuaded them to leave the city. The following day the Kohl government and the union announced a "compromise."

The confrontation was part of a general movement of the German working class against record unemployment and the austerity measures that the Kohl government began to implement to meet requirements set by the Maastricht Treaty on European economic integration.

50 years ago: Autoworkers strike at Lordstown GM plant

The week of March 7, 1972, workers at the General Motors plant in Lordstown, Ohio struck the company, demanding an end to recently imposed increases to the line speed that had created unsafe and grueling working conditions. Workers also demanded the reinstatement of 300 workers who had been laid off from the plant in the last two years. The strike, which began on March 5, was in fact a struggle against both the auto industry and the United Auto Workers (UAW) union bureaucracy, which had acceded to the strike only because of overwhelming outrage of the rank-and-file workers, and which immediately began to isolate it in a bid to shut it down.

The Lordstown factory was young both in terms of its construction and workforce. Built in 1966, the Ohio factory employed 13,000 workers with an average age of just 24. Many at the plant were Vietnam War veterans who had been radicalized by the horrors they experienced during the war. The plant was touted by GM as the most technologically advanced factory in the world. It made use of new advances in robotics in a bid to keep up with increasing competition from Japanese manufacturers, who in 1971 had exported over 700,000 cars to the US.

Alongside the robotics also came a restructuring of the labor process and a massive increase in line speed. In the fall of 1971, in order to produce the new Chevrolet Vega, Lordstown fired 300 workers while also increasing the rate of cars per hour from 60 to 101. This was the fastest line speed in the world, far beyond the previous record of 72 cars per hour. As a result, workers now had just 36 seconds to complete each task, down significantly from the standard 60 seconds.

By the end of 1971, workers had filed more than 5,000 grievances. These were ignored by the UAW. Without any other means to fight back, some workers turned to sabotaging machinery to force a pause in the line. The company began frantically suspending or firing workers for arbitrary infractions. "They were throwing guys out even for whistling," one welder in the plant reported.

UAW Local 1112 leaders hoped to avert a strike and kept workers in the dark about negotiations up until the last possible moment before the strike deadline. Despite an unprecedented strike vote—97 percent in favor with a plant turnout of 85 percent—the UAW hoped to declare a bogus settlement to keep workers on the job.

Workers, however, took matters into their own hands and began walking out and forming pickets before their shifts ended and the strike deadline had officially passed. The overwhelming support for the strike and militant attitude of the workers forced the UAW to finally call a strike.

Workers on the picket like who spoke to the *Bulletin*, the US

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predecessor to the *World Socialist Web Site*, said, “The International (of the UAW) looked like it didn’t want a strike. But now that we’re out there’s no going back until we win everything.” Speaking to the importance of the strike another worker said, “If they can push us back at Lordstown, they can do it everywhere in General Motors and in all industries.”

To read more, see The fight to defend jobs and the lessons of the 1972 Lordstown strike and The shutdown of GM’s Lordstown plant.

75 years ago: US Secretary of Labor proposes ban on Communist Party

On March 12, 1947, US Secretary of Labor Lewis B. Schwellenbach told a congressional hearing on changes to industrial laws that it would be necessary to “ban” the Communist Party. Schwellenbach had been installed in 1945 by the Democratic Party administration of President Harry Truman and oversaw the government’s aggressive response to a wave of working class struggle at the end of World War II.

During the hearing, Republican Congressman Gerald Landis asked Schwellenbach about the need to purge communists from the trade unions. He replied that such repression did not “go far enough” and asked “Why should we recognize the Communist Party in the United States? Why should they be able to elect people to public office, and, theoretically, elect members of Congress?”

According to media reports, Schwellenbach told the press after the hearing that he had been “indirect” in his response but stated “he is direct in advocating that the Communist Party be outlawed.” The difficulty was identifying who was actually a member of the Communist Party.

On March 26, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover took up the theme in a speech before the House Un-American Activities Committee. Hoover warned of “communist infiltration” of the unions and the entertainment sector. He cited extensively from the writings of Russian revolutionary leader Vladimir Lenin, seeking to establish that the Communist Party sought the overthrow of the US government.

In reality, the Communist Party was a Stalinist organization that had repudiated the revolutionary program upon which it was founded years earlier. It functioned as an adjunct of the foreign policy interests of the Soviet bureaucracy and oriented to the Democratic Party.

From the time of US-Soviet alignment during World War II in 1941, the Communist Party had actively supported the American imperialist war effort, including by supporting a ban on strikes. In 1941, it supported the Roosevelt administration’s prosecution of American Trotskyist leaders under the Smith Act, which outlawed calls for the overthrow of the government.

The turn against the Communist Party was an expression of the intensifying Cold War, as the Truman administration sought to ensure US hegemony in Europe and internationally, including through aggressive confrontation with the Soviet Union. Schwellenbach’s comments foreshadowed the leveling of Smith Act charges against Communist Party leaders in 1949, and the McCarthyite witch hunts of the 1950s.

100 years ago: Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic founded

On March 12, 1922, three soviet republics in the Caucasus that had been established during the Russian Civil War—the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic, the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic, and the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic—combined to form the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (TSFSR). Each of the federating republics represented national minorities that had been oppressed under the former Tsarist regime, often called “the prison house of nations.”

After the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the breakup of the Tsarist empire, the bourgeois nationalists of the region had established a capitalist Transcaucasian Federation in 1918, which broke up after a few months under the impact of nationalist rivalries and imperialist intervention. It was only during the Civil War that Azerbaijani, Armenian, and Georgian communists, with the assistance of the Red Army, were able to lead workers and peasants in the overthrow of the ruling classes and establish genuinely independent states in alliance with the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.

Each of the republics in the TSFSR remained autonomous and granted national rights to minorities within its boundaries. The TSFSR joined the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in December 1922.

The leadership of the new state was made up of the executives of each republic, Nariman Narimanov for Azerbaijan, Polikarp Mdivani of Georgia, and Alexander Miasnikian of Armenia. Each of these men was an “old Bolshevik” who had fought the Tsarist regime in illegal Bolshevik organizations. Each had spent time in Tsarist prisons, each played a significant role in the civil war, and each was known for his role in the development of socialist culture.

Narimanov died of natural causes in 1925 but Miasnikian died in a suspicious airplane crash in 1925, sometimes attributed to Stalin’s supporters, and Mdivani was murdered by Stalin in 1937. Mdivani had opposed Stalin’s policies on the rights of oppressed nationalities in 1922.

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