

This week in history: March 14-20

13 March 2022

25 years ago: Worker protests sweep Europe

On March 16, 1997, over 100,000 workers from Belgium and throughout Europe descended on the capital city of Brussels to protest against mass layoffs and the destruction of social conditions.

The Belgian protests were part of a wave of working class protest that swept the continent. Throughout western Europe, working people were confronted with mass unemployment, the destruction of social gains built up over generations, and the imposition of draconian economic programs. In eastern Europe, after a period of shock and confusion in the face of the social catastrophe unleashed by the reintroduction of the capitalist free market, workers began to assert their class interests.

In Russia, March 27 saw the largest working class demonstrations since the Stalinist bureaucracy liquidated the Soviet Union in 1991, with millions of workers going on strike and marching in demonstrations. In Germany, angry coalminers occupied the capital of Bonn for three days to protest government plans to cut subsidies to the mining industry and wipe out thousands of jobs. In France, tens of thousands of interns and residents struck hospitals and staged demonstrations in the last week of March to protest a freeze on health spending. In Italy, over 300,000 workers joined demonstrations against the center-left government of Romano Prodi, demanding an end to attacks on social benefits.

The spontaneous actions in defense of jobs and living conditions provoked crises within several European governments and raised anxiety within ruling circles throughout the continent over the potential for social discontent and working class struggles spilling across national boundaries.

The Belgian protest, in particular, suggested a growing international consciousness among European workers. It came in response to French carmaker Renault's decision to shut down its plant in Vilvoorde, throwing 3,100 workers onto unemployment lines. In the wake of the announcement on the Belgian facility, it was revealed that the automaker also planned to eliminate the jobs of another 3,700 workers at plants throughout France. An estimated 3,000 more jobs were at stake at parts companies which supplied the Belgian plant.

The day after Renault announced plans to cut its French workforce, Belgian workers met and voted unanimously to march on the Renault factory over the border in France to make

a direct appeal to French workers. Official unions, the CGT and CFDT, made no call for strike action, but in response to the appeal hundreds of French workers walked out to join the demonstration by their Belgian counterparts and representatives from the European Federation of Engineering Workers called its first-ever Europe-wide warning strike. Actions then developed far beyond what had originally been planned by the union bureaucracy. Workers also descended on Paris from throughout Europe to demonstrate outside company headquarters.

50 years ago: Striking Spanish shipbuilders fight with police

On March 20, 1972, a strike by Spanish shipbuilders working the El Ferrol Naval Base ended in defeat after escalating into street fighting between workers and the Francoist police over the previous week.

The strike had been called by the local organization of the Workers Commissions (*Comisiones Obreras*) in Ferrol, an important port in the northwest of Spain. Workers Commissions and all independent working class organizations were illegal in Franco's Spain, with the fascist-controlled Vertical Union being the only legal trade union. Despite their illegality, the Workers Commission in Ferrol had massive support among the 4,000 ship workers. The strike was called after the Vertical Union attempted to impose a new contract agreement without a vote. On March 9, the Workers Commission held a meeting in which workers voted to reject the agreement and to authorize a strike.

The next day, the shipyard management fired and locked out several leaders of the Workers Commission. One worker, Ramiro Romero, was attacked by security guards after refusing to sign a penalty notice accepting his firing. In response, workers occupied the shipyard and formed barricades to keep out security guard thugs. By the afternoon of March 10, police were deployed to break the strike. They beat workers and threatened to kill them with revolvers and machine guns. Workers fought back and defended their barricades armed only with stones and iron bars from the yards. In the initial fighting police killed two workers: Rey Rodriguez, a 38-year-old father

of four, and a young worker, Daniel Niebala. Hundreds of others would be injured and arrested. The town of El Ferrol was placed under total police control. Police blocked off several major roadways and bridges to the shipyards and cutoff telephone lines to keep workers isolated from support.

In Franco's Spain, working class struggles, no matter how militant, immediately ran up against the power of the state. Cut off from revolutionary traditions by the weakness of their own organizations, and physically cut off by the Franco regime from the broader population, the workers ended the strike on March 20. There was never any official investigation into the events, and no one was ever held responsible for the killing of Rodriguez and Niebala.

75 years ago: US gains 99-year leases over military bases in the Philippines

On March 14, 1947, Philippine President Manuel Roxas formally signed an agreement granting the US 99-year leases over military bases in the country. The neo-colonial provisions of the deal, which effectively gave the US control over strategic sections of the archipelago, highlighted the sham character of Washington's decision to grant formal independence in 1946.

Among more than a dozen facilities, the agreement granted the US complete control over Clark Air Base on Luzon, the main military airfield in the country. It provided for its expansion to 130 acres. The deal also gave the US Subic Naval Base in Zambales. It would become the largest naval facility in the country, with an area of 262 square miles, roughly the size of Singapore.

All future Philippine governments were also sworn to "enter into negotiations with the United States, at the latter's request, to permit the United States to expand such bases, to exchange such bases for other bases, to acquire additional bases, or relinquish rights to bases, as any of such exigencies may be required by military necessity."

The agreement gave the US extraordinarily broad rights over the surrounding areas of bases under their control, potentially extending to entire villages and even cities. The US could employ "any and all public facilities" in the country, including roads, waterways, infrastructure and virtually everything else, "under conditions no less favorable than those that may be applicable from time to time to the military forces of the Philippines."

The Philippines was also compelled to join any US war at Washington's request, a provision aimed at ensuring the country would function as a key American outpost throughout southeast Asia.

With the Japanese defeat in World War II, the US had moved rapidly to reestablish control over the Philippines. The

archipelago had been among the first neo-colonial possessions of American imperialism, seized in the 1898 Spanish-American War and pacified only after a brutal counterinsurgency war that killed hundreds of thousands of Filipinos.

The US had signed a secret agreement in 1946 with Roxas' predecessor Sergio Osmeña, for the future military bases deal. Shortly thereafter, it permitted the first national elections to be held, and granted "independence." While the Truman administration presented this as a democratic and magnanimous step, the American Congress passed a resolution mandating that the US president could "withhold, acquire and retain" any bases within the Philippines, "by such means as he finds appropriate."

100 years ago: British colonial police kill Kenyan protesters

On March 16, 1922, British colonial police in Nairobi, Kenya, fired into a crowd and killed at least 30 unarmed protesters. The demonstrators had assembled to protest the arrest and detention of nationalist leader Harry Thuku, president of the East African Association (EAA).

Thuku had drawn up a petition to the British authorities on behalf of the EAA against the taxation, land theft and forced labor of African workers and peasants by the colonial government, which was dominated by a small number of white settlers. In response to the petition, the British authorities arrested Thuku and imprisoned him on March 14.

Thousands of Africans assembled at the police station where Thuku was detained to protest the arrest on March 15 and again on the next day. The second protest was led by Mary Muthoni Nyanjiru.

After a delegation of men returned from meeting with Sir Charles Bowring, the Colonial Secretary, and told the protesters that Thuku would receive a hearing, the men in the crowd began to disperse. But Nyanjiru is reported to have shouted, "You take my dress and give me your trousers. You men are cowards. What are you waiting for? Our leader is in there. Let's get him." She then led a group of women to pull down a corrugated aluminum barrier that surrounded the police compound. Nyanjiru was shot by the police or by white settlers who also fired into the crowd.

Thuku was exiled without trial by the colonial regime to Kismayu in what is now Somalia. He was not allowed to return to Kenya until 1931.



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