

This week in history: February 6-12

This column profiles important historical events which took place during this week, 25 years ago, 50 years ago, 75 years ago and 100 years ago.

5 February 2023

25 years ago: Mass demonstrations in Germany against unemployment

On February 6, 1998, approximately 40,000 people in Germany took part in demonstrations held outside unemployment offices. Their protests coincided with the release of the latest official unemployment figures, which registered a total of 4,823,000 jobless workers, or 12.6 percent of the working population.

An additional 2 million unemployed were not counted in the official jobless figures, either because they were unregistered, or they were covered by early retirement, retraining programs or other government schemes for those unable to find work.

Not since the winter of 1932-33 had so many Germans been unemployed. The jobless rate in east Germany was particularly high, standing at 21.1 percent. The number without work in the east had increased by 180,000 since January 1997, and stood at 1.6 million. In most towns and cities one in four persons of working age was unemployed.

A sharp increase in joblessness was expected in 1998 because expenditures were being cut back sharply by federal, state and local governments. In the east many of the so-called employment schemes were also coming to an end. Some 200,000 jobs in the auto industry were forecast to go, nearly one-third of the workforce.

The protests were largely directed against Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who was being held responsible for the relentless rise in unemployment. When Kohl came to power in 1982, replacing the Social Democrats, unemployment stood at 1.8 million in West Germany. It rose continually since then, and with increasing speed since reunification in 1989.

In the spring of 1991 when Kohl told the east Germans, "I am convinced the east will become a blossoming landscape within three to five years," there were 900,000 unemployed in the former GDR. When unemployment in the east reached the record levels of the 1930s, in the winter of 1995-96, the chancellor, together with the employers and the unions, promised that the jobless rate would halve by the year 2000. Since then, the government, corporate management and the trade union bureaucracy had all distanced themselves from these promises.

50 years ago: Forty workers killed in New York City gas explosion

On February 10, 1973, a natural gas tank owned by the Texas Eastern Transmission pipeline company (TETCo) exploded in Staten Island, New York. The massive explosion killed 40 workers who had been inside the tank for cleaning and repairs.

The tank was used to store liquefied natural gas before it was distributed for use in homes in the New York City area. To make it possible to transport large quantities of the fuel over great distances, natural gas is supercooled and condensed into a liquid form, which also makes the substance far more volatile.

The blast was so powerful that the concrete cap at the top of the tank was blown 30 feet into the air before crashing down on the workers trapped inside. Only 3 workers who had been present at the site of the explosion survived. Among the dead, workers' ages ranged from early 20s to mid-50s.

The entire site was turned to rubble and fires burned in what remained of the tank for several hours. One firefighter told a reporter at the scene, "It was like a science fiction novel, or Dante's Inferno." It took rescue crews 12 days to dig through the rubble and recover all the bodies of the workers.

In response to the blast the New York City government passed laws halting the construction of two similar tanks that had begun. New York state would pass a similar law that remained in effect until 2015. Large-scale liquid natural gas storage remains banned inside of New York City.

The explosion was caused by the negligent lack of safety standards in both TETCo's operation of liquid natural gas facilities and in federal legislation. In 1978 when proposing to Congress the Liquefied Gas Facility Safety Act, New York Representative John H. Murphy told Congress, "My involvement in the Staten Island case has convinced me that we lack any sound, cohesive, and comprehensive program for the siting, design, construction, or operation of liquid gas facilities."

TETCo immediately began denying any responsibility for the disaster. Representatives from the company claimed that the tank had been constructed with materials that were not flammable and could not have caught fire. Later investigations by the US Bureau of Mines proved this claim false.

In 1974, charges of 40 counts of negligent homicide were brought against TETCo. However, no individuals from TETCo were indicted by the court, meaning that no prison terms could be imposed on any executives or managers of the company.

After two years in court TETCo was ordered to pay a total of \$11 million in settlements. Some of the individual settlements provided workers' families with as little as \$60,000 in compensation. The court decided that the value of a worker's life depended on "the victims age, number of dependents and earning power, as well as the earning capability of a victim's widow."

75 years ago: Southern Democrats rail against civil rights proposal

This week in February 1948, leading Democratic Party politicians from the American South began a revolt against extremely limited proposals by President Harry Truman to recognize the civil rights of African Americans. The campaign included threats to try to scuttle Truman's candidacy as Democratic Party nominee in upcoming presidential elections.

On February 2, Truman had delivered a speech to a joint session of Congress, in which he spoke in general terms on the importance of civil rights. The only concrete measures he canvassed were for increased federal protections against the murderous practice of lynching, the establishment of a permanent Fair Employment Practices Commission to guard against racial discrimination in hiring and measures to ensure that the right to vote was respected. The speech nevertheless provoked substantial opposition, above all from Southern Democrats.

On February 9, Democratic Party Senator from Mississippi James Eastland first raised the suggestion of a Southern challenge to Truman's candidacy in response to the potential civil rights measures. In a hysterical speech, Eastland combined open racism with anti-communist redbaiting:

"We find the national Democratic leadership today attempting to barter the South's social institutions for the political favors of mongrel Northern minority groups in politically doubtful states. We are expected to remain docile while the pure blood of the South is mongrelized by the barter of our heritage by Northern politicians in order to secure political favors from Red mongrels in the slums of the cities of the East and Middle West."

On February 12, Eastland and his colleagues convened a meeting in Mississippi attended by some 4,000 Democrats. It passed a resolution calling on "all true white Jeffersonian Democrats" to prepare a national convention to consider a Southern nominee for the presidency who would prosecute the struggle against even minimal steps towards racial equality.

The reaction again highlighted the historical basis of the

Democratic Party, in an alliance between a corrupt political machine in the East Coast states, and the racist Southern elite that had no differences with, and in some cases furnished the membership of, the fascistic Ku Klux Klan.

Truman was hardly a radical. In the aftermath of World War II, he had overseen the efforts of the federal government to beat down a major movement of the working class, including through the illegalization of strikes. He would mobilize the military and the National Guard in various states to defeat struggles by workers. Internationally, Truman led the turn to a Cold War policy of aggressive confrontation with the Soviet Union, aimed at securing the untrammelled hegemony of American imperialism. The anti-communist purges of Hollywood and other segments of American society were the domestic counterpart to this aggressive and militarist foreign policy.

100 years ago: Irish Free State offers amnesty to IRA insurgents

On February 8, 1923, Defense Minister and Commander-in-chief of the Irish Free State's National Army, Richard Mulcahy offered a ten-day amnesty to members of the Irish Republican Army who were engaged in an insurgency against the government in opposition to the Anglo-Irish treaty of 1921. The Free State was supported militarily and diplomatically by British imperialism.

The offer of an amnesty had been preceded by the announcement by the army that Liam Deasy, the deputy commander of the insurgents, who had been captured in January, had called on anti-Treaty leader Eamon de Valera to begin negotiations with the Free State for surrender. Deasy was under threat of execution, which the army had stayed because of the announcement. He was widely denounced as a traitor by insurgents. Later in life, Deasy argued that he had opposed the war and would have called for negotiations between the two sides anyway.

The Free State had imposed the death penalty for all insurgent prisoners. At least 34 had been executed in January.

On February 11, a group of Anti-Treaty IRA soldiers and their commander surrendered in County Cork, one of the traditional centers of Irish nationalism, although denunciations of Deasy by anti-treaty nationalists continued. Irregulars fired on a church service attended by members of the National Army in Clonmel, County Tipperary.

The amnesty marked the beginning of the end of the Irish Civil War. By March, some leaders of the IRA were prepared to surrender but were held in check by the IRA Chief-of-Staff, Liam Lynch. Lynch was killed in military action on April 10, and by May 24, the anti-Treaty IRA had declared a ceasefire.



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