

This week in history: March 13-19

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.

12 March 2023

25 years ago: CIA confirms Contra-cocaine link

On March 16, 1998, a high official of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) revealed that there was an agreement between the CIA and the Justice Department during the Reagan administration, whereby CIA officers concealed allegations of drug trafficking against its counterrevolutionary proxy army, the Nicaraguan Contras.

CIA Inspector General Frederick R. Hitz made the admission at a hearing before the House Intelligence Committee which was devoted to clearing the spy agency of charges that it deliberately pumped crack cocaine into south central Los Angeles and other impoverished inner-city areas in the 1980s in order to raise money for the far-right Contra insurgency against the Sandinista government of Nicaragua.

The charges received wide publicity after a series of articles appeared in the *San Jose Mercury-News*. There were calls for a congressional investigation, and at a public meeting in south central Los Angeles CIA Director John Deutch was heckled by a hostile crowd. The agency then prepared a 600-page classified report on the issue, which was submitted to Congress later.

Hitz made important revelations. He said that in 1982 Attorney General William French Smith and the CIA had agreed that CIA officers should not be required to report charges of drug trafficking against their Contra associates, as long as the Contras were not directly employed by the agency. This secret agreement meant that the CIA would pursue a policy of looking the other way as long as the drug traffickers—including pilots ferrying arms to Contra guerrillas based in Honduras and Costa Rica—were not on its own payroll.

This policy remained unchanged until 1986, when Congress restored official US funding for the Contras and made drug-running an unnecessary as well as potentially embarrassing sideline for the anticommunist guerrilla group. This arrangement made it possible for the agency to declare, as Hitz told the House Intelligence Committee, that there was no evidence “of any conspiracy by CIA or its employees to bring drugs into the United States.”

Hitz went on to admit that the CIA had been aware of allegations against “dozens of people and a number of companies connected in some fashion in the contra program,” and that “there [were] instances where CIA did not, in an expeditious or consistent fashion, cut off relationships with individuals supporting the contra program who were alleged to have engaged in drug-trafficking activity or take action to resolve the allegations.”

50 years ago: Liam Cosgrave sworn in as Prime Minister of Ireland

On March 14, 1973, Liam Cosgrave was sworn in as the Prime Minister (Taoiseach) of Ireland. Cosgrave had been elected at the end of February after his liberal Fine Gael party formed a coalition with the Irish Labor Party to win a majority of seats in the Irish parliament, known as the Dáil.

Fine Gael won 54 Dáil seats. This was actually fewer than the 69 seats won by the conservative Fianna Fáil party led by the incumbent Prime Minister Jack Lynch. Brendan Corish’s Labor Party took 19 seats. But with 73 seats required for a majority no party was able to form a government independently. By forming the National Coalition, as the Fine Gael and Labor governing agreement was called, Cosgrave appointed 11 of his supporters to cabinet positions while Labor was able to choose the remaining five. The election was the first since 1957 in which Fianna Fáil lost control of the government.

Cosgrave had been a longtime bourgeois political insider, having first been elected as a Fine Gael candidate for the Dáil at 23 years old. His father, W.T. Cosgrave, was a founder of the Irish Free State government that collaborated with the British government to suppress the Irish Republican Army during the Irish Civil War.

As Taoiseach, Cosgrave and his Labor Party backers oversaw a regime committed to imposing the austerity demands of British and European capital on the Irish working class amidst the world inflationary crisis of the 1970s. In addition, Cosgrave would capitulate to the demands of British imperialism in Northern Ireland, where thousands of Irish Catholics were being imprisoned without trial and tortured by the British Army for suspected association with the IRA.

A little more than a year after the formation of Cosgrave’s government, in May 1974, bombs were detonated in Dublin and Monaghan by pro-British loyalist paramilitaries. The bombs killed 33 people. There has long been suspicion that the British government had knowledge of or directly assisted in the bombing of the Irish capital. However, Cosgrave’s administration refused to carry out a serious investigation and suppressed crucial evidence collected at the scene until long past the point where forensic science could be used to determine the bombs’ origin.

In 1976 Cosgrave’s government passed an Emergency Powers Bill following the assassination in July of the British Ambassador to Ireland. The assassination would be used by Cosgrave to justify the

suppression of newspapers and radio stations that were critical of the government's position on the situation in Northern Ireland.

75 years ago: Mass strike by US packinghouse workers

On March 16, 1948, more than 100,000 packinghouse workers throughout the United States walked off the job in a strike that would last two months. In that time, the strikers would be faced with repeated court intervention, thug violence and the perfidy of the trade union bureaucracy.

The packinghouse workers were among the most poorly paid industrial workers. They had previously carried out a mass nationwide strike in 1946, as part of the major upsurge of the American working class in the immediate aftermath of World War II. In 1948, the problems of that period had not been resolved, despite pay raises from the 1946 stoppage. Workers confronted ongoing inflation and price gouging, while the major corporations sought to restrict wages, which had been frozen throughout the war.

The 1948 strike was provoked by the major packinghouse companies, Swift, Armour, Cudahy and Wilson. In contract negotiations, they offered a raise of just nine cents per hour. The United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA) countered with a demand for 29 cents.

The obstacles confronting the workers were even greater than in 1946. The government had in 1947 enacted the Taft-Hartley Act, which significantly eroded the right to strike while attacking workers' ability to organize. The legislation meant the UPWA had to give some 60 days notice of the stoppage. After mounting nominal opposition to the law, the major American union federations, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), fell in line.

In the lead up to the stoppage, the leadership of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen union, affiliated to the AFL, accepted the nine cents offer. The union refused to participate in the strike. Despite this, more than 100,000 workers walked off on March 18, affecting up to one-third of packinghouse facilities across the country. The movement was especially strong in Saint Paul, Minnesota and Chicago, Illinois.

Over the course of the stoppage, the companies would take multiple court actions under Taft-Hartley, alleging the strike to be unlawful and seeking injunctions to end it. These particularly targeted the picketing operations of strikers as a supposed breach of the rights of companies and scabs. The union leaders would repeatedly wind back pickets, only to be countermanded by the strikers who insisted on a militant struggle. Significant violence would occur during the strike, including the deaths of at least two workers in confrontations with scabs.

The unions, however, isolated the strike. The AFL was hostile to it, while the CIO did nothing to mobilize other sections of workers, including in the meat industry. The workers were inevitably worn down. In May, the UPWA called off the stoppage and sought to push through a sell-out deal which included the original company pay offer of a nine cent raise.

On March 14, 1923, the imperialist Conference of Ambassadors, one of the governing bodies of the League of Nations, awarded Eastern Galicia, a multi-ethnic region that included Ukrainians and Poles, as well as Jews, Hungarians, and other ethnic minorities, to Poland. The area was a part of the Austro-Hungarian empire until 1918. The region's largest city, Lwow (today's Lviv) was predominantly Polish speaking. The area is now a part of the contemporary state of Ukraine.

The inclusion of the region into the bourgeois states that emerged after the breakup of the Austro-Hungarian and Tsarist Empires in the aftermath of World War I was a vexed issue. Eastern Galicia had become a nationalist statelet in 1918, the Western Ukrainian Republic, which allied itself with the bourgeois Ukrainian Peoples Republic of Symon Petliura in 1919 in an anti-Soviet alliance. The two states, both funded by the imperialist powers, were allied, but mutually antagonistic, with the Petliura regime tending toward the Poles for aid against the Bolsheviks, and the Western Ukrainian Republic hostile to the Poles. Petliura and other strongmen in Ukraine fought a brutal war against the Soviet Red Army until Soviet Ukraine was firmly established after the end of the Russian Civil War in 1920. A Galician Soviet Socialist Republic ruled parts of East Galicia briefly in 1920, granting equal status to the Ukrainian, Polish and Yiddish languages.

In the aftermath of a Polish-Ukrainian War from 1919-20, Polish troops occupied Eastern Galicia. The region was ceded to Poland by the Treaty of Riga in 1921 between Poland and the Soviet Republic. The League of Nations, wanting to keep Eastern Galicia under capitalist rule—not least because of large oil reserves outside of Lwow—made Eastern Galicia an “autonomous” part of Poland. Ukrainians were, however, treated as second-class citizens by the Polish authorities. The region saw a growth of the Communist Party of the Western Ukraine in the 1930s as well as of Ukrainian fascism.

Eastern Galicia was occupied by the Red Army during the Stalin-Hitler pact in 1939. After the Nazi invasion of the USSR in 1941, it became a site of the Holocaust with the extermination of its Jewish population. This was facilitated by Stepan Bandera's faction of the fascist Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), who organized the notorious Lviv pogrom of 1941. OUN's armed wing, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, also perpetuated exceptionally brutal massacres of Poles from 1943 to 1945 in Eastern Galicia.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the Stalinists in the USSR organized a forced population exchange between Poland and Ukraine, largely removing Poles from Eastern Galicia.



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100 years ago: League of Nations cedes Eastern Galicia to Poland