

# This week in history: February 5-11

4 February 2024

## 25 years ago: World leaders gather at King Hussein's funeral

On February 8, 1999, the public funeral of King Hussein of Jordan was conducted with great pomp and ceremony in the capital of Amman. The funeral was a spectacle that served to underscore the highly flammable and contradictory character of political relations throughout the region and internationally.

Delegations and representatives of 75 different countries were in attendance, a greater turnout than for the funeral of either Yitzhak Rabin, the Israeli prime minister assassinated in 1995, or Anwar Sadat, the Egyptian President who had met a similar fate in 1981. The US delegation included President Bill Clinton as well as three former US presidents—Bush, Carter and Ford—senior officials and policy advisers. French President Jacques Chirac, British Prime Minister Tony Blair and Prince Charles were present, as was Russian President Boris Yeltsin.

The funeral brought together bitter enemies in the strangest of political paradoxes. At the last moment, Syria's President Hafez Assad, who in 1958 had ordered his jet fighters to shoot down Hussein's plane and had set in motion numerous other assassination attempts, arrived in Amman to head his country's delegation. For the first time, Assad took part in a public ceremony alongside a 23-person delegation from Israel, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The significance of the event was two-fold. World leaders were not paying their respects to a representative of the Arab masses, but were mourning the loss of a valuable political asset who for 47 years served as a tool for the machinations of the major powers, including Israel, in the region. The outpouring of praise appeared to be in direct proportion to the subservience of the Jordanian regime. Israel declared a day of mourning to mark Hussein's death and flew its flags at half-mast.

There was also an element of admiration for an autocrat who clung to power for so long, surviving at least 12 assassination attempts and seven coup plots through a mixture of ruthlessness, cunning and sheer luck.

Second, the attendance of world leaders was a mark of the great instability of the times—in Jordan, the neighboring West Bank and Israel, throughout the region and internationally. Just days before his death Hussein conducted what amounted to a palace coup, inserting his 37-year-old son Abdullah as his successor in place of his younger brother Hussan. The new king was a virtual unknown with no political experience, whose only training was in elite schools and colleges in Britain and the US and a career in the Jordanian military.

The region was an arena of intense great-power rivalry for the

control of its oil reserves and routes for potential pipelines. The US, France, Britain, Germany and Japan were engaged in struggle with one another, seeking their own separate deals with sections of the Arab bourgeoisie. In a period of volatility and shifting alliances, the funeral of Hussein provided an ideal opportunity for talks and negotiations, both open and secret.

## 50 years ago: British miners begin national strike

On February 5, 1974, coal miners in the United Kingdom began a nationwide strike against inflation and intense austerity measures imposed by the Tory government of Prime Minister Edward Heath. In an attempt to make the working class pay for the post-Bretton Woods economic crisis, Heath imposed a three-day workweek without pay compensation for the lost days. This translated into a pay cut of 40 percent for 13 million workers.

At the end of January, workers in the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) rejected a below-inflation contract offer and voted to strike by a huge majority of 81 percent. Workers in the other major unions joined in solidarity actions to support the strike with longshoremen refusing to unload coal imported from Poland, railway workers refusing to move cars loaded with coal, and 3,000 workers from the National Union of General and Municipal Workers directly joining the miners' pickets.

The miners' walkout immediately took on the character of a general strike that paralyzed the entire economy. With the country already running an energy shortage bound up with the Arab oil embargo, blackouts throughout Britain were widespread during the strike, with the remaining coal supplies dwindling.

Just two days after the strike began, Heath was forced to call a general election for February 28. The decision for new elections came after workers rejected another bogus contract offer. Heath's plan was to mount an offensive against the workers during February, leading a media campaign to blame workers for the energy shortages and blackouts. He hoped that a Conservative victory in the election would serve as a mandate to carry out the police suppression of the miners and force them to accept massive pay cuts. As he told the press, the issue in the strike and election was, "Who governs Britain?"—the British industrialists and financiers, or the working class.

The millions of British workers were happy to answer that question for him. The strike demonstrated the determination of workers to defend any attack on their living conditions. Miners' pickets faced down and repelled attacks from riot police and

organized large marches calling for Heath's removal. Students also joined in support of the miners, with 20,000 demonstrating in London during one march.

However, the Labour party and the unions sought to channel the strike into a reformist and electoral direction. The mass movement of the working class was diverted to a vote for Labour in the election, and not a revolutionary movement for socialism.

Writing on the strike, the *Bulletin*, the American predecessor to the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote, "Heath intends to use the mass unemployment that will develop during the strike to place the blame for the British economic crisis on the miners. ... Harold Wilson's Labour Party has entered this campaign without any policy to meet the dangers which flow from the breakup of capitalism in Britain.

### **75 years ago: Iranian Shah leads crackdown on opposition after assassination attempt**

On February 5, 1949, the left-wing Tudeh Party was outlawed and its leading members arrested as part of a crackdown on political opposition overseen by the Shah or monarch of Iran Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. The stated reason was an assassination attempt on the Shah the day before, but the real aim was to use the unsuccessful hit to suppress a developing movement of the working class and to undermine nominal parliamentary rule.

At an award ceremony marking the anniversary of the establishment of Tehran University, on February 4, Fakhr-Arai had fired five shots at the monarch from near point-blank range. Despite the proximity, only one of the bullets grazed the Shah's cheek. Immediately, the government and the Shah's representatives asserted that Fakhr-Arai was a Tudeh Party member, and used that to illegalize the organisation. There was no evidence of this and it appears that Fakhr-Arai was actually affiliated with hardline Islamists who were themselves intensely hostile to the Tudeh.

The Tudeh Party had been founded in 1941 by a group of leftist intellectuals. In the immediate post-war period, it grew rapidly, becoming Iran's first mass political party. The Tudeh had a significant base in sections of the industrial working class and in the trade unions. While its initial program was of a vague social-democratic character, it would later identify itself with socialism and communism.

The Shah was seeking to strengthen the position of his family dynasty under difficult circumstances. In 1941, Britain and the Soviet Union invaded and occupied Iran. While claiming neutrality in the war, Iran had a deepening relationship with Nazi Germany. The Allied invasion forced Pahlavi's father into exile.

In 1946, the Soviet Union withdrew from Iran. Pahlavi, who had replaced his father, was Shah in a nominally democratic and parliamentary monarchy. He agitated against purported Soviet influence and was fearful that he would be sidelined entirely. Pahlavi and his advisers viewed the developing US Cold War against the Soviet Union as an opportunity to strengthen his grip.

After the outlawing of the Tudeh Party, they would push for a royal prerogative providing the Shah with the power to dismiss the entire parliament if he so chose.

The Tudeh Party would continue political work underground. While it had mass support, the party was incapable of providing any way forward for the masses. Its ostensible turn to communism had in fact been a turn to the program of Stalinism, advanced by the Soviet bureaucracy. In countries of a belated development, such as Iran, the Stalinists advanced a Menshevik-inspired program of a two-stage revolution. The task, they insisted, was first a bourgeois revolution, with the fight for workers' power consigned to the indefinite future.

In practice, this meant seeking out alliances with bourgeois parties and leaders. In the 1950s, the Tudeh would align with left bourgeois-nationalists, whose rule was only a prelude to the institution of an absolute dictatorship of Pahlavi.

### **100 years ago: American and British companies in dispute over Persian oil**

On February 7, 1924, Hussein Alai, the imperial legate of Persia [now Iran] in Washington D.C., clarified the terms with which the Persian government was dealing with American oil companies, in a letter published in the *New York Times*. The letter was a response to an article published in the *Times* on February 4 that had claimed that Standard Oil of New Jersey was seeking to combine with a British company, Anglo-Persian Oil, to push out an American rival, Sinclair Oil.

Alai's letter confirmed that the Persian government had indeed preferred Sinclair to Standard because of an attempt by Anglo-Persian to lay claims to an area in Northern Persia in which oil had been discovered. Anglo-Persian had negotiated terms with the ruling Qajar monarchy in 1920. But British imperialism itself had helped to overthrow the Qajars in 1921 with the help of White Russian forces stationed in Persia.

The new leader, Reza Shah Pahlavi, soon to be the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty (overthrown by the Iranian Revolution in 1979), nevertheless refused to allow concessions to the British for oil rights.

He had repudiated the Qajar treaty with Soviet Russia and oriented Persia to American and European imperialism, but sought to play the various great powers off each other. The dispute between Standard Oil, which had allied itself with the British, and Sinclair was a part of a long, drawn-out struggle by the imperialist powers for access to Persian oil in which the bourgeois regime of Reza Shah sought the most favorable terms.



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