

This week in history: February 19-25

18 February 2024

25 years ago: Turkey charges Abdullah Öcalan with treason

On February 23, 1999, the Turkish government charged Kurdish guerrilla leader Abdullah Öcalan with treason, one week after the Turkish National Intelligence Organization abducted him in Nairobi, Kenya. This followed a months-long international manhunt backed by virtually every European government.

The persecution and abduction of Öcalan marked a repudiation by governments around the world, first and foremost the US, of the fundamental democratic right of political asylum.

Öcalan was expelled from Syria in October 1998, after the Assad regime relented to pressure from the US and Turkey. He then fled to Russia where he was denied political asylum. In November he attempted refuge in Rome, where the Italian government, headed by Massimo D'Alema, formerly a leader of the Italian Communist Party, rejected Turkish demands for his extradition, but refused to grant asylum. D'Alema worked behind the scenes for Öcalan's expulsion, and by mid-January 1999 he was forced out.

For several weeks Öcalan's whereabouts were the subject of intense speculation, as government after government refused to give him shelter. Germany, with a Social Democratic chancellor and a leader of the Green Party as foreign minister, and the largest Kurdish minority of any country on the European continent, would not let him in.

The PKK leader was denied admission to the Netherlands and Greece, while Italy and Denmark warned him they did not want him on their territory. On February 1, Öcalan's plane was allowed to touch down on the Greek island of Corfu, after arriving from "neutral and democratic" Switzerland.

The following day Öcalan tried to set down in Rotterdam, Holland, in order to appear before the International Court of Arbitration to plead the Kurdish cause. But he was prevented from doing so by the Dutch government, which declared him an "undesirable alien."

As Öcalan's plane was reportedly heading for Greece, a spokesman for the "socialist" PASOK government in Athens said, "Our policy is crystal clear. We do not desire Öcalan's presence in Greece."

Instead the Greek government encouraged Öcalan to fly to Nairobi where he was hidden on Greek embassy premises. It was only a matter of time before various intelligence agencies coordinated with Kenyan and Greek officials and Turkish commandos to drag the Kurdish leader from the embassy and spirit him onto a plane to Turkey. The Turkish leader who presided over the abduction, Bulent Ecevit, was a veteran social democratic politician.

After initially denying any "direct" involvement, US officials acknowledged a week later that Washington played the central role in hunting him down. American FBI agents detected Öcalan's presence at the Greek embassy in Nairobi within two days of his clandestine arrival on February 2. The FBI informed Turkey of the political refugee's whereabouts, setting in motion the chain of events that

ended with seizure by Turkish security forces and his transfer, blindfolded and in chains, to an island prison near Istanbul.

50 years ago: Israel returns control of Suez Canal to Egypt

On February 21, 1974, Israeli soldiers left the west bank of the Suez Canal following the end of the Yom Kippur War. According to the terms of the ceasefire agreement signed January 18, 1973, the entire Suez Canal would be returned to Egypt and all Israeli troops were to be withdrawn to an area deeper inside the Sinai Peninsula.

The canal had been closed for nearly seven years since Israel began its occupation of the Sinai peninsula during the 1967 Six Day War. Since then, in what is sometimes referred to as the "War of Attrition," the Suez Canal area became a heavily militarized zone with Egyptian and Israeli forces engaging in occasional skirmishes, firing on one another from across the canal.

The stalemate was broken in October 1973, when a surprise joint offensive launched by Egypt and Syria delivered significant blows to the Israeli military defenses. Israeli forces would mount a counterattack that penetrated across the canal and laid siege to the city of Suez, destroying two thirds of buildings in the city.

Israel's counterattack was made possible only by a massive military rearmament by the United States. After the war began President Richard Nixon ordered the largest airlift in history to resupply Israel with tanks, ammunition and other military supplies.

The leading Arab nations organized in the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) responded to the US and other imperialist nations' support for Israel with an embargo on oil exports to those countries. The embargo had massive economic ramifications throughout the world, causing already high rates of inflation to skyrocket.

Coming under immense domestic pressure to end the oil embargo, augmented in Britain by a nationwide coal strike, the imperialist countries were prepared to grant concessions to Egypt and the Arab coalition. Most importantly among these was abandoning their long-held hopes to snatch control of the Suez Canal away from Egypt.

Once the canal was back under Egyptian control it had to undergo intense engineering work to make it usable for shipping once again, including the clearing out of explosive mines that had been laid during the war. In June 1975 it would reopen and reconnect the shortest and most direct shipping route from Europe to the Arabian Peninsula, India and East Asia.

The return of the Suez Canal to Egypt set the stage for a further rapprochement with Israel. The formal end to the Yom Kippur War was the first step toward the Camp David Accords signed in 1979, when Egypt became the first Arab state to recognize the state of Israel

as a legitimate government. In exchange for the full return of the entire Sinai Peninsula to Egypt, Sadat abandoned the struggle of Palestinians against the Israeli occupation.

75 years ago: Union bureaucrats sell out strike by 11,000 Philadelphia transport workers

On February 20, 1949, union officials orchestrated the sellout of a 10-day strike by Philadelphia transport workers, in the face of substantial opposition from the rank-and-file. The stoppage, which involved more than 11,000 workers, had been met with a vicious campaign of denunciation in the capitalist press, while winning widespread sympathy from workers in the city and more broadly.

The strike was called by Local 234 of the CIO Transport Workers Union (TWU) against the Philadelphia Transportation Corporation, which was seeking to limit contract wage rises to a pittance, and to prevent any change to onerous working conditions. The stoppage involved workers across the city's street car, bus and subway networks, as well as taxi drivers, bringing most transportation to a halt.

In a February 16 article outlining the issues in the dispute, *The Militant*, publication of the Socialist Workers Party, then the American section of the world Trotskyist movement, stated: "It may come as a shock to some people that American workers today should be forced to strike for such elementary demands as the 40-hour week, overtime pay for overtime worked, extra compensation for weekend work, not to mention decent wages. But it's true."

The corporation was seeking to maintain a system where workers were forced to clock on multiple times throughout the day to receive an eight-hour wage, compelling unpaid overtime. It was also trying to force through a three-cent wage increase, under conditions where workers were earning barely enough to keep up with the still substantial increases in prices. The workers countered with a demand for a 20 cent rise, together with basic rights, including overtime and penalty payments and modern labor conditions.

The TWU, together with the union leadership as a whole, isolated the stoppage, ensuring that it did not spread to other cities or encompass other sections of the working class.

The Militant reported that the company offer was forced through by skullduggery and intimidation on the part of the union officials. When the company offer was put, it was voted down 23-9 by the local executive board. National TWU President Michael Quill then called a membership meeting, at which the agreement was vociferously denounced by striking workers, who voted it down by a two-thirds majority.

Quill "recessed" the meeting to the next afternoon. At that meeting, he and the local executive leadership steamrolled the agreement through. They restricted speakers against the sellout, called a secret ballot and declared the deal accepted and a return to work in order.

The brazen betrayal typified the role of the union bureaucrats. They had stymied and suppressed a massive movement of the American working class in the immediate postwar period, and by 1949 were determined to enforce full-scale industrial peace in keeping with their alignment with the Democratic Party administration and the striving of American imperialism for untrammelled global hegemony.

100 years ago: Mussolini demands African territory from Britain

On February 22, 1924, the Italian fascist dictator Benito Mussolini sent a diplomatic note to the British Foreign Office demanding that Britain cede to Italy the region called Jubaland, on the northeastern edge of its Kenya colony, in what is now southern Somalia.

The note was prompted after the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Arthur Ponsonby, declared in the House of Commons that no settlement regarding Jubaland was possible unless Italy returned the Dodecanese Islands in the Aegean off the coast of Turkey to Greece.

Italy had occupied the Dodecanese after the Italo-Turkish War of 1912. The islands were an important staging area for Italian imperialism's colonial ambitions in southern Anatolia after the end of World War I and the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire. These plans were thwarted by the development of the Turkish nationalist movement led by Kemal Ataturk after 1919 and the expulsion of foreign troops from Turkey.

Some British politicians sought to transfer the islands to Greece, a British ally (as Greece demanded), a goal accomplished only in 1947 after the Axis powers were defeated in World War II. In the case of the 1924 proposal by Ponsonby, this was soon smoothed over by the Labour government.

Italy was anxious to hold its overseas possessions and continued to seek the spoils of the 1914-1918 imperialist war wherever it could. The award of Jubaland, which was adjacent to its territories in Italian Somaliland, had been a secret condition for it entering World War I on the side of the Allies in 1915. Italy had ruled "Somalia Italiana" as a unified colony since 1908 after years of military incursions. Its rule was particularly brutal: In 1911 it legalized slavery in the colony.

Britain, eager to placate Italian imperialism, transferred Jubaland, including the port of Kismayo, to Italy in 1925. Italy soon after began to harass and undermine the adjacent independent state of Abyssinia (Ethiopia), which would result in the full-scale invasion of the country in 1936.



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