

This week in history: March 4-10

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25 years ago: Supreme Court delays Clinton plans to deport immigrants

On March 8, 1999, the US Supreme Court decided to leave unchanged a series of lower court rulings that challenged the legality of 1996 laws used to deport legal immigrants for minor criminal offenses without judicial review. The Clinton administration urged the Supreme Court to overturn the legal protections, arguing that the lower courts' rulings had "led to significant delays in the removal of such aliens" despite "Congress' clear intent that removal of criminal aliens be expedited."

The Clinton administration had argued that immigrants who committed nonpolitical crimes outside the US should not be eligible for refugee status, even if they faced the danger of severe persecution or death.

The case stemmed from government attempts to deport a former Guatemalan student leader, Juan Anibal Aguirre-Aguirre, who entered the US illegally in 1993. Aguirre was one of the leaders of protests in Guatemala against the US-backed military government's mistreatment of students.

Aguirre was originally granted asylum by an immigration judge based on findings that he would face severe persecution if returned to his country. The Board of Immigration Appeals overturned the decision, arguing that Aguirre had committed serious, nonpolitical crimes, thus making him ineligible for asylum. He had been charged in Guatemala with vandalism and the burning of buses.

The Aguirre case drew considerable international attention. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees filed a brief with the US Supreme Court stating that the court's decision could become the guide for how other countries interpret their obligations to refugees as signers of the United Nations Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees.

In 1996 the Republican-controlled Congress, with the full support of President Clinton, passed the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act. Among other things, the two laws stripped noncitizen residents of the right to appeal deportation orders to federal courts and eliminated most deportation waivers due to mitigating factors, such as separation from children and other family.

The laws gave the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) unprecedented powers to deport immigrants who had lived in the US for many years, in many cases with their families, even for the most minor infractions. This led to a 70 percent increase in the number of immigrants detained by the INS.

At the time of its passage, Congress did not stipulate whether the new law could be applied retroactively, and shortly afterwards, the INS Board of Immigration Appeals ruled that only those who committed crimes after the law was implemented could be deported. In February 1997, however, Attorney General Janet Reno overturned the board's ruling and issued an executive order declaring that the new treatment applied to all infractions that a noncitizen committed in the past, even if they did not merit deportation at the time.

50 years ago: City workers' strike shuts down San Francisco

On March 7, 1974, 15,000 San Francisco city workers went on strike, bringing the economy of the California city to a halt. The strike involved nearly all city municipal workers who were organized under the Service Employees International Union (SEIU). At the same time, San Francisco teachers in the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) also walked out, causing schools in the district to close.

The strike had an immediate and major impact. The city workers included those of the Bay Area Rapid Transit system, which was forced to close. Its shutdown impacted hundreds of thousands who used the system to travel to work, forcing other industries and businesses to close or slow down to a trickle. The transit drivers were not covered directly by the contracts under dispute but refused to cross picket lines and joined the strike in solidarity.

In response to the strike, San Francisco's Democratic Mayor Joseph Alioto declared a state of emergency and appealed to the courts to pass injunctions against the strike. He specifically demanded that the city's sanitation workers immediately return to work, saying that no negotiations would move forward until the sewage plants were reopened.

Ronald Reagan, then governor of California, threatened to declare a statewide emergency and to send in the National Guard if Alioto did not sufficiently suppress the strike on his own. Reagan said he would order the California highway patrol to intervene in the strike and break up certain picket lines.

The unions had been forced to call the strike due to the massive anger and militancy of workers who had taken massive cuts to their pay from the massive global inflationary crisis. Workers demanded an across the board \$80 per month increase for all city employees.

From the outset, workers were concerned that a sellout was being planned by the SEIU and AFT bureaucracies. Just after

rejecting a last-minute deal offered in an attempt to avoid the strike, one worker told the *Bulletin*, the US predecessor to the *World Socialist Web Site*, “I’m sure they have the whole thing planned to just use the threat of a strike and not carry it out. But the plan got ripped up tonight. We’ve got to have a new leadership in this union before the strike is over.”

The strike lasted until March 15 when the SEIU rammed through an agreement that provided an increase of just \$45 per month, falling far short of workers’ demands. The agreement was passed by a vote of 740 to 241. Out of the 15,000 members on strike, fewer than 1,000 voted and approved the agreement to end the strike and return to work.

The SEIU agreement also ended the strike before the teachers’ contract had been settled, in an intentional decision to divide the strike and leave educators isolated as their fight continued.

75 years ago: End of the first Arab-Israeli war

On March 10, 1949, the first Arab-Israeli war effectively came to a conclusion, with the newly established, imperialist-backed Zionist state conducting its last operation and fighting having ended. With the backing of Britain, and above all the US, Israel had seized vast swaths of Palestinian land in a conflict that had begun the previous year.

The war was sparked by the announcement of the establishment of Israel in May 1948. Achieved through ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians and terrorist campaigns against them, the creation of the Zionist state also threatened Arab nations in the vicinity with an immediate expansionist danger. Several states responded by launching a war immediately.

Ten months later, after a series of truces and UN-brokered ceasefires punctuated by further outbreaks of military conflict, the war had almost ended. The last Zionist offensive, Operation Uvda, was an expedition formalizing Israeli control over sections of the southern Negev desert that had been claimed by Jordan. The Jordanian forces peeled away without any fighting, with the Israeli advance of a largely ceremonial and propagandistic character.

On March 10, Israeli troops raised a hand-drawn flag over the police station in the town of Umm Rashrash, where the Israeli city of Eilat would be built. That act is generally marked as the formal ending of the war.

In addition to the extensive imperialist backing of Israel, the outcome of the conflict underscored the extremely limited character of opposition to the Zionist state on the part of the bourgeois Arab states. Throughout the war, the Arab coalition had been rent with various divisions and conflicts reflecting the competing interests of rival sections of the Middle Eastern ruling elite.

The Arab states increasingly acceded to various UN proposals, including for ceasefire and peace talks, which were based on an acceptance of Israel’s existence as an imperialist beachhead, and the theft of Palestinian land. By the conclusion of the war, Israel had secured all of the territory assigned it under an imperialist

1947 partition proposal, along with 60 percent or more of what had been earmarked for a proposed Palestinian state.

100 years ago: Mine explosion in Utah kills 171

On March 8, 1924, an explosion at a coal mine owned by the Utah Fuel Company in Castle Gate, Utah, about 90 miles from Salt Lake City, killed 171 miners. The first blast occurred at 8:00 a.m. and tore through the mine approximately 7,000 feet (2,100 m) from the entrance. A foreman investigating a gas leak attempted to relight his lamp, which had gone out, and ignited gas and coal dust that had not been properly dampened in the previous shift. A second blast occurred when survivors attempted to relight their lamps and a third shortly thereafter.

The force of the explosions launched telephone poles, the 800-pound gate at the mining entrance, and mining equipment for over a mile from the mine and filled the canyon in which it was located with gas and dust. Fire spread over 3,200 feet (975 m) of the mine opening. The leader of a rescue crew died of asphyxiation from carbon monoxide. Other rescuers were overcome with fumes but survived.

The *New York Times* described the scene: “The one street in this little town was crowded with relatives and friends of the missing and large numbers gathered at the entrance to the Castle Gate Canyon where the mine is located ... all roads leading to Castle Gate were crowded with automobiles. Huge fires were built at many places and around these men, women and children huddled, anxious for news of their missing.”

In the weeks before the disaster, all the single men working at the mine had been laid off because of falling coal prices and only married men were working; the disaster left 110 widows with 264 children. The workers were a typical mixture of nationalities for that period in the United States and included immigrant Greeks, Italians, British, Japanese and South Slavs, as well as American-born workers, both black and white.



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