

## This week in history: February 10-16

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

### 9 February 2025

#### **25 years ago: Voters rebuff new Zimbabwe constitution in blow to Mugabe**

On February 12-13, 2000, voters in the African country of Zimbabwe rejected a new constitution proposed by President Robert Mugabe and his party, the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (Zanu-PF). The changes were a response to an unprecedented economic crisis shaking the foundations of his authoritarian rule. Unemployment hit 50 percent of the country, inflation rose to 60 percent, and 76 percent of people lived in deep poverty.

Almost 700,000 people voted against while 578,000 people voted for the draft constitution. Only 20 percent of the electorate went to the polls. Both the low turnout and the majority opposition vote were huge blows to Mugabe and the Zanu-PF. Though Mugabe postured as a man of the people, saying, I “abide by the will of the people,” a Zanu-PF spokesperson said, “He shall rule this country for as long as he likes.”

Mugabe spearheaded specific provisions in the new constitution to fortify his own power and secure his iron-fisted rule over the impoverished country. While the original constitution proscribed any president from holding more than two terms in office, the new constitution would have allowed him to hold elected office for another two terms. To protect his cronies and the repressive apparatus of the state, military and government officials would have been immune from prosecution for any criminal actions while holding office.

In a demagogic tactic that voters saw through, Mugabe put in a clause enabling the Zanu-PF government to confiscate land held by white farmers and demanded compensation from the British government for decades of repressive colonialism. Land redistribution for the rural masses since official independence in April 1980 proved to be an empty promise by Mugabe and the Zanu-PF. Around 6 million black Zimbabweans were landless, while Mugabe gifted rich land to his political toadies and inner circle.

Zimbabwe’s economy was in a state of financial disintegration and collapse because Mugabe’s authoritarianism and nepotism interfered with the money interests and strategic plans of the IMF and the imperialist powers. Mugabe rewarded lucrative pay rises of up to 300 percent to ministers and local tribal chiefs and elites were given larger compensation for enforcing Mugabe’s diktats.

The IMF and major banks froze hundreds of millions dollars in

loans, fearful that Mugabe’s slashing of public expenditure did not cut deep enough. Furthermore, Mugabe kept the IMF in the dark when he had entered the Second Congo War on behalf of Zimbabwean capitalists to gain control of important mineral reserves. With America, France, and Britain stoking the competing national interests in the region and a potential for a catastrophic continental war undermining the financial interests of the IMF, the imperialist powers backed a United Nations peace deal calling for Zimbabwean forces to withdraw.

#### **Margaret Thatcher becomes leader of UK Conservative Party**

On February 11, 1975, the Conservative Party in the United Kingdom selected Margaret Thatcher as its new leader. Her ascension to leadership of the Tories represented a major shift to the right in British politics. Thatcher replaced Edward Heath, the former Prime Minister who was defeated in the February 1974 general election one year earlier.

Heath’s defeat in the 1974 election came on the heels of a massive miners’ strike that paralyzed the British economy. Heath had attempted to impose a three-day week in major industries to conserve fuel, without compensation for the massive slash in workers’ pay during the energy crisis sparked by the Arab oil embargo.

The setback prompted the party to move further to the right and prepare an offensive against the working class, targeting social spending. Thatcher’s background, first as a conservative MP and then as Education Secretary during the Heath government, convinced the ruling class she was best suited to carry out the austerity plans. By 1971 Thatcher had already become a widely hated figure in the working class. After she slashed the free milk program in elementary schools, she earned the nickname “Thatcher Milk Snatcher.”

At a conference of the Young Conservatives during her campaign for party leadership she called for attacks on workers and blamed the economic crisis on those who carried out strike action. She said, “We should back the workers, not the shirkers” and “economic policies will not work unless the people will.”

Her election was a defeat for the Tory establishment, which had first backed Heath for another term as party leader and then, after Heath lost on the first ballot, William Whitelaw, a high-ranking official in

the Heath government. Heath and Whitelaw were pursuing a policy with the goal of setting up a coalition government with the Labor leaders as the best way to defeat the trade unions in the class battles that were already on the verge of breaking out again.

Thatcher based her campaign of nationalist demagogy on an appeal to sections of the ruling class who had become bitterly opposed to Heath for his defeat by the miners in the 1974 strike and not cracking down harder on the unions. Based on the “free market” economics of Milton Friedman, the policies of Thatcher pledged to sections of the upper-middle class a major funneling of funds into private hands by means of tax cuts, selling off public assets, and encouraging market speculation. All these measures were to be paid for by gutting social spending benefiting workers accompanied by union-busting to break up opposition from the working class.

### 75 years ago: Stalin and Mao sign Friendship Treaty

On February 14, 1950, Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong formally signed the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance, an agreement between the USSR and the People’s Republic of China (PRC), at the Kremlin.

In addition to a non-aggression clause that outlined that neither party should participate in “coalition and alliance directed against the other,” the treaty’s main provision was a military pact that deemed “an attack on one as an attack on both to prevent the revival of Japanese imperialism.”

The treaty was meant to remain in effect for the next 30 years, with an additional five-year extension if neither party voiced any objection one year before its expiration. The treaty would formally remain in place for 29 years, expiring on February 16, 1979, one day before China’s invasion of Vietnam, a Soviet ally. However, relations began deteriorating from 1961, as the two bureaucratic Stalinist regimes clashed on a range of foreign policy issues, bound up with their nationalist program of “socialism in one country.”

The signing of the treaty was preceded by a two-month-long stay in Russia by Mao, who urged Stalin to sign a new treaty to replace the older one between the USSR and China when it was ruled by the Kuomintang (KMT) and its leader, Chiang Kai-shek. The KMT, a nationalist bourgeois party, was defeated by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the protracted civil war that followed World War II, culminating in the victory of Mao’s forces and the official proclamation of the Peoples Republic of China in October 1949.

The signing of the treaty underscored the shift that had occurred in the post-World War II period, with capitalism overturned in a substantial swathe of the globe. Neither regime, however, offered any viable perspective for the working class. Stalin represented the mass murder of the entire generation that had led the Russian Revolution and the interests of a counter-revolutionary bureaucracy. Mao, a bitter opponent of socialist internationalism and Trotskyism, advanced a perspective based upon nationalism and peasant radicalism, that had nothing to do with genuine Marxism.

Significantly, while they signed a treaty of military defense, there was nothing whatsoever discussed about the possibility of unifying the Russian and Chinese economies on a socialist basis.

### 100 years: Kurds revolt in Turkey

On February 14, 1925, Kurdish rebels seized the city of Darahini in eastern Turkey near the Euphrates River and declared an independent Kurdish Islamic state in what has come to be known as the Sheik Said Rebellion, after its leader the Kurdish nationalist Sheik Said. Darahini was to be the temporary capital of the new state.

The rebellion had begun on February 8 in the village of Piran after forces loyal to Sheik Said exchanged gunfire with Turkish police who sought to arrest some of his followers. Three policemen were killed and fearing reprisals, Said ordered a mobilization of Kurdish forces. Over the next several weeks, his followers conquered large parts of the Kurdish speaking areas of Turkey.

Sheik Said was associated with the Civata Azadiya Kurd (Society for Kurdish Freedom), the Kurdish nationalist movement that sought a separate state for Kurds comprised of Kurdish communities in Turkey, British-controlled Iraq and French-controlled Syria as well as Iran. In Turkey in the aftermath of the War of Liberation against the imperialist powers, Turkish nationalists sought to suppress the Kurdish language and identity. Like many religious leaders, both Turkish and Kurdish, Sheik Said opposed the secular character of the state as well and sought to reconstruct an Islamic caliphate.

The rebellion followed the Beytû’ebab rebellion in August, the first modern Kurdish revolt against the new Republic of Turkey, when a Kurdish garrison had mutinied. The revolt was suppressed and followed by numerous state provocations against Kurds.

One historian of the Sheik Said rebellion notes, “The insurrection had been a veritable tidal wave. It enjoyed mass popular support, as Turkish observers noted at the time.”

The Turkish state mobilized nearly 80,000 men, and, with the cooperation of French imperialism, poured into the region through Syrian railways to the south. By September the Turks had defeated the forces of Sheik Said and arrested many of the leaders. The repression that followed was bloody. Thousands of Kurdish peasants were killed and hundreds of leaders hanged. Sheik Said was captured and hanged on June 28 along with 47 of his followers and buried in an unmarked grave to prevent him from becoming a rallying point for Kurdish nationalism.



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