

This week in history: February 17-23

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.

16 February 2025

25 years ago: Mass demonstration in Austria against far-right coalition government

On February 19, 2000, masses of students, workers, intellectuals, state employees, and artists throughout Austria demonstrated in Vienna's Heldenplatz—the same location where Nazi leader Adolf Hitler gave a speech praising the annexation of Austria in 1938—against the newly formed government of the conservative Austrian Peoples Party (ÖVP) and the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ). It was the largest demonstration in Austria since the creation of the Second Republic after World War II.

The 250,000-strong rally underscored the widespread outrage against looming attacks on jobs, democratic rights, social welfare benefits, and immigrant workers and families. The protesters also opposed the rehabilitation of far-right fascist political parties such as the FPÖ, led by Jörg Haider.

During Haider's election campaign the previous year, the FPÖ had used racist propaganda depicting black people as drug dealers, as well as using Nazi imagery, accusing foreigners of threatening the virginity of the country in posters portraying Austria as a blond-haired, blue-eyed female. Haider also praised Hitler's employment policies and called veterans of the ruthless Waffen SS people of "good character."

The anti-Nazi slogans and banners revealed the fighting spirit emerging throughout Austria and Europe over the re-emergence of fascism and the resolute determination to defend the living standards of the working class: "Against Racism, Against Pension Theft, For Child Care Rights," "Fight Forced Labor and Social Welfare Cuts", "Wake Up!", "Back to the Neanderthal Age With 27 Percent" [the FPÖ's vote], "I Mourn to See the FPÖ in Government," "Our Government? Liars and Psychos!" or "Stop It Before It Grows!"

Yet the official speakers at the demonstration lacked any coherent political perspective, let alone one that might bring down the conservative-far right coalition government. The organizers refused to criticize the right-wing policies and bankruptcy of the Social Democrat governments led by Viktor Klima and Franz Vranitzky, whose policies had paved the way for the victory of the ÖVP-FPÖ.

Protesters interviewed by WSWs reporters clearly pinpointed the political targets responsible for the rise of the far-right into top levels of the government.

Andreas, a stationmaster for Austrian Rail, said the votes for the FPÖ were "a protest against the wheeling and dealing and graft that

dominated the politics of the SPÖ and ÖVP for so many years... The Social Democrats, in particular, acted against the interests of the people they were supposed to be representing... The workers are being sold out... Haider is continuing the same policies with a number of additions. And he can base himself on the anti-foreigner policies of the Social Democrats."

50 years ago: Youngstown steelworkers defy union bureaucracy in wildcat strike

On February 19, 1975, workers at Youngstown Sheet & Tube, a steel manufacturer based in Youngstown, Ohio, launched a wildcat strike against layoffs, marking the first unauthorized walkout at the company in over a decade. Striking rank-and-file workers found themselves in a struggle not just against the company but also against the United Steelworkers of America (USWA) bureaucracy.

The immediate trigger for the strike was the elimination of five positions and layoff of 11 workers at the Campbell Works blooming mill. The layoffs were connected to a new incentive pay schedule introduced by management which was a thinly veiled scheme to slash jobs and intensify exploitation. For years Youngstown Sheet & Tube had been drastically increasing productivity demands, including invasive time-and-motion studies designed to squeeze every ounce of labor from workers.

When news of the layoffs became known the 150 workers at the Blooming mill walked off the job. By mid-week 5,800 workers across all the Campbell Works mills joined the strike, defying union officials who demanded they stay on the job. Roving pickets spread the action to other Sheet & Tube production facilities like the Struthers mill, bringing the company's entire production to a standstill. The workers who organized and joined the strike directly rejected the instructions of local president Russell Baxter who urged them to "abide by the contract."

One worker who spoke with reporters from *The Bulletin*, the US predecessor to the WSWs, said, "This is the only way to stop layoffs. Each day the open hearth is down they lose thousands and thousands of dollars." Another added, "The blooming mill will set the precedent against layoffs. People must do it themselves."

Workers' anger at the USWA leadership had been brewing for

years. Under President I.W. Abel, the union had signed the 1973 Experimental Negotiating Agreement (ENA), which banned strikes and bound workers to arbitration—a major betrayal that emboldened companies to attack jobs and conditions.

The company tried to crush the wildcat strike utilizing both the courts and the union bureaucracy. While Judge Charles J. Bannon issued a back-to-work order outlawing the strike, the USWA bureaucracy took the dispute into arbitration, per the ENA's terms, in a bid to suffocate workers' demands by means of a protracted legal process. Meanwhile, the USWA isolated the wildcat strike, though workers across the steel industry were facing the same conditions. After one week, most workers had returned to work.

The Trade Union Alliance for a Labor Party (TUALP), a rank-and-file opposition group led by the Workers League, the predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party, put forward demands that answered the objective needs of the steelworkers. The TUALP called for a nationwide general strike of all steelworkers to stop layoffs in the industry, utilizing mill occupations as a chief tactic, for the immediate restoration of all laid off workers, the abolition of ENA, and the immediate renegotiation of the steelworkers' basic contract to restore wages lost to inflation.

75 years ago: Egypt and Israel agree to armistice line for Gaza border

On February 22, 1950, Egypt and Israel signed a modus vivendi defining the boundaries of the Gaza strip.

The preamble of the agreement declared that its purpose was to “avoid the possibility of friction between the local inhabitants and the armed forces in certain localities of the Gaza-Rafah area.” It split the Gaza strip into three zones, one controlled by Israeli forces, the other two by Egypt. The agreement required each nation's military to limit the number of soldiers patrolling their respective zones to “30 men armed with light automatic weapons.”

The deal was a complement to the 1949 Israel-Egypt Armistice Agreement, part of a series of agreements Israel signed with neighbouring states including Lebanon, Jordan and Syria. The agreements effectively, though not officially, ended the war between Israel and those nations that had broken out in May 1948.

The war was rooted in the founding of the Israel state itself, and the brutality meted out to the Palestinian population by the Zionist forces as part of it. In October 1947, the United Nations General Assembly voted in favour for the partition of Palestine into a Jewish and an Arab state. The founding of Israel the following year was carried out alongside the forced expulsion of thousands of Palestinians from their homes. Many were forced into refugee camps, including in the Gaza Strip, which for decades had been part of British-controlled Mandatory Palestine, but was included as part of the proposed Arab state in the 1947 partition plan.

By the end of the war, Israel occupied almost 5,000 square kilometers more than the 1947 partition plan had allocated. The armistice line that separated the Egyptian and Israeli forces was then established. Control of the Gaza Strip was transferred to Egypt, where it would remain until Israel seized Gaza and the whole of the Sinai peninsula, East Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Golan Heights, during its 1967 war of expansion.

The Egypt-Israel deal, carried out without the slightest input from the Palestinians, and following on from the effective recognition of the Israeli state by Egypt and the other Arab states, underscored the perfidious and reactionary character of the Arab bourgeoisie. Hostile to the aspirations of the Palestinians and acutely fearful of the masses in their own countries, the Arab bourgeoisie were anxious to remain on good terms with the imperialist powers, while tacking between US imperialism and the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

100 years ago: Last Chinese emperor becomes Japanese asset

On February 23, 1925, the last emperor of China, Puyi, was relocated by the Japanese from Beijing to Tianjin, the Chinese port city.

Puyi had abdicated as a child in 1912 after the First Chinese Revolution of 1911 and again after a brief restoration in 1917, but he and his court had remained in the Forbidden City, in the center of Beijing, with his retinue of eunuchs and a generous state income.

In October 1924, the warlord Feng Yuxiang, as a part of a Civil War raging in northern China, attempted to curry popular favor by removing Puyi's title and privileges. He gave him only three hours to leave the Forbidden City. Puyi was steered in the direction of the Japanese by a pro-Japanese warlord, and by Puyi's Scottish tutor Reginald Johnston. The Japanese soon moved him to Tianjin, where there were large legations controlled by the various imperialist powers.

In Tianjin Puyi schemed with various warlords and imperialist representatives, seeking to be restored to the throne. In 1931 he approached the Japanese government for help in becoming monarch again. Shortly afterwards, the Japanese manufactured the Mukden Incident in which Japanese operatives destroyed a part of a Japanese-owned railway line in Manchuria, in far northern China, and blamed it on a Chinese warlord's army. The incident was a pretext for the Japanese invasion of Manchuria. The Japanese secret police connived to install Puyi as the head of the Manchurian puppet state, renamed Manchukuo.

Puyi was the last representative of the Qing dynasty that had originated in Manchuria. The Japanese gave him the title of emperor in 1934. He served as a figurehead for the brutal Japanese occupation until the invasion of Manchuria by the USSR and the collapse of Japanese imperialism in 1945 at the end of the Second World War. Puyi was imprisoned by the Soviets and later repatriated to the Peoples Republic of China, where he was again imprisoned for nine years and finally “rehabilitated,” ending his life as a private citizen in 1967.



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