

This week in history: March 31-April 6

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

30 March 2025

25 years ago: British workers march in defense of jobs

On April 1, 2000, over 50,000 workers, families, and supporters marched in Birmingham, UK to protest a massive onslaught on jobs and living conditions. BMW, the German-owned transnational corporation, had planned to put its Rover car brand on the auction block, which threatened up to 16,000 jobs. The cascading effect in the parts and service sector threatened tens of thousands more jobs. Unemployment in Birmingham, the second largest city in the UK, was projected to rise to 13 percent with the axing of 6,000 Longbridge workers.

While widespread defiance of the auto giant's plan to destroy working class living standards found expression in the large turnout, the trade union bureaucracy's defense of its "own" bourgeoisie sabotaged the potential for the class unity of workers in the UK and Germany.

The major unions organizing the strike rallied behind the Union Jack of British imperialism. Tony Woodley, chief negotiator for the Transport and General Workers Union (T&GWU) said: "It is no exaggeration to say that this campaign is now a battle for Britain and British manufacturing and it has struck a chord with the British people." Signs and placards read "British manufacturing" and "British jobs."

T&GWU General Secretary Bill Morris reiterated the nationalist rhetoric: "The T&G is calling on every family in every house in every street to show their feelings of betrayal against BMW by demonstrating their support for Rover workers and British manufacturing."

The union leaders' habitual foray into nationalism and anti-German sentiment concealed the negotiations with the venture capitalist firm, Alchemy, which had been hand-picked by BMW to take the reins of the factories and the industry. According to Alchemy CEO Jon Moulton, the trade unions were already in talks about how many auto workers would be laid off and the amount of compensation to be paid.

The global auto industry was undergoing a crisis of overproduction, amounting to as high as 30 percent. In response, the corporations unsheathed the butcher knife. Japanese workers at Nissan faced a loss of 21,000 jobs and GM slashed over 3,000 jobs at its Opel Plant in Russelsheim, Germany. Honda announced it envisioned a 50 percent reduction in production at its Swindon plant in England.

With the rapid mobility of capital and production in the age of

globalization, the only viable strategy to defend the jobs and living standards of autoworkers was through the international unity of the working class revolving around socialist demands of expropriation and workers control.

50 years ago: US-backed dictator Chiang Kai-shek dies

On April 5, 1975, Chiang Kai-shek, the longtime leader of the Chinese nationalist party, the Kuomintang (KMT), and head of the exiled government in Taiwan, died at the age of 87. His death followed years of deteriorating health, including multiple heart attacks and kidney failure. His son, Chiang Ching-kuo, shortly after consolidated authority on the island and continued the martial law regime.

Chiang Kai-shek was a reactionary figure whose political existence was marked by his service as a key instrument of US imperialism in China.

In 1926, soon after he became its leader, Chiang's KMT launched the "Northern Expedition" military campaign to unify China, which had been splintered among rival warlords after the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911. The effort relied on an alliance with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Stalinist leadership in Moscow, and depended on the subordination of the Chinese working class to the bourgeois KMT. Stalin went so far as to invite Chiang to be an honorary member of the Comintern executive committee, disregarding warnings from Leon Trotsky that Chiang would turn on the CCP and the workers.

The alliance rapidly broke down after workers in Shanghai carried out an uprising in 1927 and took control of the city. Fearing the growth of Communist support in the working class, Chiang ordered the massacre of Shanghai's communist and labor leaders, resulting in the slaughter of as many as 10,000 socialist workers. During these events, Chiang is reported to have said that he would "rather mistakenly kill 1,000 innocent people than allow one communist to escape."

Following Japan's defeat in the WWII in 1945, Chiang again waged a civil war against the CCP, backed heavily by US military and financial aid. But by then the balance of forces had dramatically shifted and with the victory of the Chinese Revolution in 1949 he was

forced to flee the mainland to Taiwan where he established the “Republic of China” military dictatorship, protected by the US navy.

His regime, propped up by American imperialism, ruled through martial law, suppressing dissent through mass executions and imprisonments during the period known as the White Terror. The KMT maintained the fiction that it remained the legitimate government of all of China, though in reality, it could not exist without US military backing.

In the period shortly before his death, the global position of Chiang’s regime faced a series of setbacks. In 1971 the United Nations revoked Taiwan’s status as the recognized government of mainland China and granted its seat to the Maoist-led government of the People’s Republic of China. The next year US President Richard Nixon made a historic visit to China to meet with Mao Zedong and began the process of normalizing relations.

75 years ago: US longshore union leader Harry Bridges convicted in anticommunist witch-hunt

On April 4, 1950, US union leader Harry Bridges was convicted by a San Francisco federal court jury of perjury in relation to his earlier denial of having links to the Communist Party. The Australian-born Bridges, president of the International Longshoremen’s and Warehousemen’s Union (ILWU), was also found guilty of obtaining American citizenship by fraud.

The trial, which began in November 1949, was preceded by an investigation launched by the Department of Justice and the FBI to determine if Bridges had lied in his 1945 citizenship hearing. During the hearing, Bridges, who arrived in the US from Australia in 1920, swore to not being a member of the Communist Party. In May 1949, a federal grand jury indicted Bridges for committing perjury during that hearing.

Six days after the guilty verdict was handed down, Bridges was sentenced to five years prison time, which he was able to avoid with bail payment. Months afterwards, he was stripped of his citizenship. A Supreme Court decision in 1953 would later overturn both his convictions from 1950 as well as restore his US citizenship.

Bridges had been unsuccessfully targeted twice before for deportation, in 1939 and 1941, on the basis of Roosevelt administration claims he was a “subversive.” Bridges was a key leader in the 1934 San Francisco General Strike, though his role concluded with support for the reactionary AFL leadership which worked to shut down the strike. The Truman administration’s targeting of Bridges in 1949-50 was directly connected to smashing the post-war strike action of the ILWU, as well as the growing crackdown on all left-wing affiliations within the unions.

Bridges never walked back his denial of being a Communist Party member. Nonetheless, his political perspective aligned precisely with that of Stalinism and the orders of the Kremlin. During World War II, Bridges fully backed the no-strike order of the Roosevelt administration, denounced the coal miners engaged in the 1943 national strike, and urged the workers in the ILWU to “do more work and to relinquish certain gains that we have fought for in the past.” His vicious anti-Trotskyism was perhaps expressed most clearly when he supported the political repression by the capitalist state towards members of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP)—then the American

section of the Trotskyist movement—during the Smith Act trials of 1941.

100 years: Sergei Eisenstein begins filming Battleship Potemkin

On March 31, 1925, Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, began filming his masterpiece *Battleship Potemkin*, which depicted the mutiny of sailors in Odessa and mass protests against the Tsarist regime during the first Russian Revolution of 1905.

Eisenstein had completed his first feature film, *Strike!*, which would be released in April 1925, but had already received favorable reviews in the Soviet press. The state Jubilee Commission for the 20th anniversary of the 1905 Revolution approached the 27-year-old Eisenstein and scriptwriter Nina Agadzhanova-Shutko, an old Bolshevik, to make the film. But they were under pressure to complete it during the anniversary year.

Eisenstein originally conceived of the film as an epic about the 1905 revolution as a whole, beginning with the Russo-Japanese War in 1904, including the general strike in St. Petersburg and concluding with the counterrevolutionary pogroms after the defeat of the revolution. The incident of the mutiny on the Potemkin was originally planned to be only a small part of the film.

Eisenstein was still shooting the film in Leningrad in August, when, because of unfavorable lighting conditions, he decided to move the set to Odessa where the decision was made to focus on the mutiny.

The 1905 revolution began after a mass strike on January 21 and the January 22 massacre in St. Petersburg of workers who were petitioning the Tsar for a constitution. The revolution reached its height with the general strike in St Petersburg and Moscow. During the revolution the workers created the first Councils of Workers Deputies, or (in Russian) *soviets*. The St. Petersburg Soviet was led by the 26-year-old Leon Trotsky.

In June 1905, sailors on the Black Sea battleship Prince Potemkin revolted because they were served meat crawling with maggots. The sailors became involved in the revolutionary events in Odessa and eventually were able to find refuge in the Romanian port of Constanta. There they were met and politically educated by Christian Rakovsky, who would later, after the 1917 revolution, become the head of Soviet Ukraine and then a leader of Leon Trotsky’s Left Opposition.

The film, whose images of revolt and state repression expressed an entire era in a few frames, would go on to become one of the classics of world cinema.



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