

This week in history: February 2-8

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

2 February 2026

25 years ago: London Underground workers strike against privatization scheme

On February 5, 2001, public train drivers in the United Kingdom launched a one-day strike that virtually shut down the entire London Underground (LU) transportation system. Around 92 percent of the Underground shut down; only 40 out of 476 trains managed to run. The strike, though limited to a single day, paralyzed the capital, disrupting the transit system for some 2.5 million daily users.

The job action—organized with widespread support among rank-and-file train drivers—had originally been planned as a series of three staggered one-day walkouts by members of both the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF) and the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT), the two principal trade unions representing train drivers and other rail industry employees in the United Kingdom. But following the union bureaucracy’s inking of pro-company agreements, the RMT union quickly complied with anti-worker legislation introduced under the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher and later reinforced by the Labour Party. Facing government threats of a £3 million fine per day, RMT General Secretary Jimmy Knapp ordered train drivers not to strike, shattering the alliance with workers in ASLEF and weakening the potential impact of the strike.

At the heart of the conflict was the Labour government’s scheme to privatize the London Underground through a so-called Public-Private Partnership (PPP). This proposal endangered the jobs and safety of train drivers and the public by subordinating operations to the pursuit of private profit.

The Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, an icon of the British pseudo-left, tactically opposed the PPP scheme to win support among Londoners and defeat Labour’s official candidate in the mayoral election the previous year. Once in office, however, he used his political influence to push an “alternative” version of the scheme that still prioritized private capital, despite his public promises to “join the picket lines.” His transport commissioner, Bob Kiley, collaborated with the Labour government, LU management and private contractors to redraft the PPP proposals in favor of big business.

Both the RMT and ASLEF had endorsed Livingstone’s campaign and refused to challenge his revised plans, which further eroded public ownership of the Underground. The union bureaucracy, eager to preserve its role within the management structure, called for a joint

management?union “safety board” rather than mobilizing genuine opposition. While many rank-and-file drivers struck to resist privatization altogether, the union leadership deliberately narrowed the struggle’s aims, focusing instead on maintaining their position within the negotiation process and the state apparatus.

50 years ago: Over 22,000 killed in Guatemala earthquake

On February 4, 1976, a magnitude 7.5 earthquake struck Guatemala, centered on the Motagua Fault. While the seismic event was a natural phenomenon, the resulting catastrophe—which claimed over 22,000 lives and left more than one million people homeless—was a social crime.

The devastation was almost entirely concentrated in the barrios of Guatemala City and the impoverished rural highlands. While the reinforced concrete homes and high-rise hotels of the ruling elite remained largely standing, the adobe hovels of the working class and peasantry crumbled instantly. When the quake struck the sleeping city at 3:01 a.m., these houses, built of mud brick with heavy tile roofs, became death traps. In addition to the dead, over 76,000 people were injured.

Witnesses described a scene of total social collapse. In the slum of El Gallito, survivors were forced to dig through the rubble with their bare hands to find family members. One survivor, who was interviewed by the *New York Times* while standing amidst the ruins of a neighborhood where thousands had died, described the sound of the earthquake as a “subterranean roar” followed by the screams of those trapped under heavy tiles. The scale of the carnage was such that many victims had to be buried in mass graves.

The international response exposed the underlying political interests of the major powers. While the Ford administration sent a paltry four military helicopters to transport supplies and help “restore order,” the Guatemalan military junta, led by General Kjell Laugerud García, prioritized political posturing over human life. García’s regime was a direct descendant of the 1954 CIA-backed coup that overthrew the reformist government of Jacobo Árbenz to protect the interests of the United Fruit Company.

Most notoriously, García refused a substantial offer of aid from Great Britain, including a field hospital and engineers, because Britain

refused to recognize Guatemala's territorial claim over neighboring Belize. This decision effectively forced thousands of the now homeless survivors to suffer without medical care or shelter to maintain a nationalist political facade.

In the aftermath of the earthquake, the military government feared that the emergency would give life to new forms of political opposition and intervened to block it. Workers formed mutual-aid committees and community defense groups to organize the distribution of supplies and to defend against looting. Military units were dispatched to survey, disarm, and break up these local organizations.

The horrific death toll was the result of decades of imperialist plunder. As the *Bulletin*, the newspaper of the Workers League (US predecessor to the SEP), noted on February 10, 1976: "The deaths of millions of people as a result of earthquakes, floods, or droughts in the colonial and semi-colonial nations is not so much the result of 'natural disasters' but of the decay of the capitalist system, which is incapable of providing the most elementary protection or aid."

75 years ago: South Korean military executes 1,400 civilians in two separate massacres

On February 7, 1951, the first of two massacres that collectively killed over 1,400 civilians began in South Korea. The killings were conducted by a battalion of the Republic of Korea (ROK) Army's 3rd Division, supposedly conducting a counterinsurgency mission to eliminate North Korean guerilla fighters.

The first of these mass murders took place in the districts of Sancheong and Hamyang. At least 705 unarmed citizens were gunned down and killed by soldiers, with estimates of up to 85 percent of the casualties consisting of women, children and elderly people.

Only two days later, ROK troops committed another atrocity on a similar scale, this time in the county of Geochang. An estimated 719 people were killed over three days, among them 385 children. In both instances, the killings were widespread and indiscriminate, with the only people spared being the families of certain ROK public officials and army officers.

As with many other massacres committed by the ROK Army and its United States ally, the Sancheong/Hamyang and Geochang killings were covered up by the South Korean government. The perpetrators used an explosive detonation on a nearby mountain slope to bury the hundreds of bodies and hide all evidence of the crime.

The effort failed to completely conceal the incident, and the massacre did come to light, with the key perpetrators being court-martialed and sentenced to prison. However, South Korea's President Syngman Rhee, who bore primary responsibility for thousands of executions aimed at suppressing opposition to his deeply unpopular regime, granted clemency to the individuals, who were all released after only a short time in prison.

100 years ago: Sean O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars* premiers in Dublin

On February 8, 1926, Irish playwright Sean O'Casey's play *The Plough and the Stars* premiered at Dublin's Abbey Theater. The play, which depicts events during the 1916 Irish uprising against British imperialism, was the object of protests and condemnation after its first performance, largely because it was seen as disgracing Irish nationalism and the events of 1916.

On the fourth night of the performance, a riot broke out in the theater which prompted poet W. B. Yeats to get on stage and tell the audience "You have disgraced yourselves again," referring to the riots after the performances in 1907 of J. M. Synge's play *Playboy of the Western World*.

The play is the concluding part of O'Casey's Dublin Trilogy, which includes *The Shadow of a Gunman* (1923), which takes place during the Irish War of Independence (1919-1921) about a case of mistaken identity in which a tenant in a building is thought to be an IRA assassin, and *Juno and the Paycock* (1924), that takes place during the Irish Civil War (1922-23) and follows the disintegration of an impoverished family because of a lost inheritance, an unplanned pregnancy, and the violence of political upheaval.

In four acts, *The Plough and the Stars* depicts the lives of revolutionaries and members of the Irish Citizen Army, the forerunner of the Irish Republican Army, and their families in Dublin's slums. The first act takes place in one of the militants' homes, the second act in a bar outside of a nationalist rally and the final two acts show the rising itself, and the looting in its aftermath.

The play shows the genuine confusion and uncertainty in Dublin among some of the poorest Irish people, alongside the revolutionary sentiments of others. The spouses are afraid for the lives of the men who are fighters, and some characters exhibit callousness to others in need. Act II was particularly objectionable to many because one character is a prostitute and because Irish nationalist flags are brought into the bar, widely regarded as a dirty and profane place.

Several tragedies ensue as the play goes on including shootings, a stillbirth, and cowardice.

O'Casey had broken with the Irish Citizens Army and its leadership before the 1916 rebellion, though he still considered himself a republican and a socialist.

He later came into the orbit of the Stalinist Communist Party of Great Britain and defended the crimes of Stalinist bureaucracy.



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