

This week in history: February 23-March 1

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

22 February 2026

25 years ago: US Supreme Court upholds \$45 million fine on pilots union

On February 26, 2001, the United States Supreme Court upheld a crippling fine of \$45.5 million—or \$70–90 million in inflation-adjusted current dollars—on the Allied Pilots Association (APA). The decision, issued through a denial of *certiorari* by the Rehnquist court, left intact a lower-court ruling that imposed the massive penalty. Without comment or dissent the justices—Rehnquist, Stevens, O’Connor, Scalia, Kennedy, Souter, Thomas, Ginsburg, and Breyer—allowed one of the largest fines ever levied against organized labor in American history to proceed.

The case arose from a rank-and-file-led sickout in February 1999, when American Airlines pilots collectively called in sick to protest plans for unsafe restructuring, outsourcing and the introduction of a two-tier pay system. Defying both the APA’s leadership and a back-to-work order from federal judge Elton “Joe” Kendall, the job action grounded more than 6,000 flights and paralyzed operations nationwide.

Within 48 hours, Judge Kendall imposed the \$45 million fine under contempt laws, denouncing the pilots as a “Mafia ring” engaged in a “shakedown” of American Airlines. He claimed “a radical element” had seized control of the union and was “driving American into the side of a mountain.” He further declared, “No one can make someone else fly an airplane... But what a federal judge can do, and what I will do, is make people pay for what they break.”

The Supreme Court’s refusal to even hear the case, combined with the severity of Kendall’s original decision, illustrated the class role of the court system under capitalism. For the ruling class, the judicial system functions as a policing mechanism, rather than an unbiased entity, handcuffing any attempts of workers to break through the stifling bureaucratic apparatus of the official unions and the state. A factor of intimidation was inherent in this assault on the pilots’ rights to strike. In upholding the punitive fine, the case served as a dark reminder to those willing to organize resistance to corporate power that the judicial system would defend the right of corporations to make profit.

50 years ago: British Government criminalizes Irish Republican

activity in Northern Ireland

On March 1, 1976, the British Labour government officially rescinded Special Category Status (SCS) for prisoners convicted of paramilitary offenses in Northern Ireland. The decision marked a fundamental shift in British state policy, moving away from the de facto recognition of the political character of the conflict toward a strategy of “criminalization.”

Introduced in 1972 by William Whitelaw, the first Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, SCS had been a concession to the reality of the armed conflict. It granted detainees convicted of political conflict-related offenses privileges akin to those of prisoners of war, including the right to wear their own clothing, exemption from prison work, and the right to associate freely within their own paramilitary organizations.

The abolition of SCS was based on the 1975 report of a committee chaired by Gerald Gardiner, former Lord High Chancellor of Great Britain. Gardiner argued that the status legitimized paramilitary activity, writing that it “meant that a large number of prisoners are not under the same degree of control as they would be in a normal prison.”

In the years preceding, the British government introduced a policy of internment without trial. Between 1971 and the end December 1975, nearly 2,000 people were detained—the vast majority of whom were from the Catholic, Republican working class.

At the height of the policy in 1973, over 700 men were being held in the Long Kesh internment camp. The abolition of SCS in March 1976 represented a tactical pivot: the state moved from mass extrajudicial detention to a less extensive but more repressive “criminalization” strategy, using the Diplock Court system—which operated without juries—to process political prisoners through a framework of ordinary criminal law.

Using the Gardiner report as its pretext, the British ruling class sought to delegitimize the Republican struggle by branding all political opposition to British rule as criminal activity. By treating militants as ordinary criminals, the state aimed to isolate them from their social base in working-class communities suffering from deep economic deprivation.

Ruairí Ó Brádaigh, then president of Sinn Féin, denounced the policy as a British attempt to “depoliticize the national struggle” and strip it of its historical and social context. The Provisional IRA echoed

this, stating that their members were “political soldiers” and that the British government was attempting to “brand as criminals those who are resisting the illegal occupation of our country.” They warned that any attempt to force political prisoners into criminal uniforms would be met with total non-cooperation.

The removal of SCS led directly to a five-year cycle of escalating prison protests. The first prisoner sentenced under the new rules, Kieran Nugent, refused to wear the prison uniform, famously stating, “If they want me to wear a uniform, they’ll have to nail it to my back.” This began the “blanket protest,” which evolved into the “dirty protest” in 1978 and culminated in the 1981 hunger strikes, resulting in the deaths of ten prisoners.

75 years ago: 22nd Amendment to the United States Constitution ratified

On February 27, 1951, the 22nd Amendment to the United States Constitution was formally ratified, establishing term limits for the office of the US president. It declared that no person can be elected as President more than twice, or in the case of an individual who has been acting president for more than two years, they cannot be elected more than once.

No such term limits appeared in the original Constitution. The earliest presidents such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, figures associated with the American Revolution, stepped down voluntarily after serving two terms in office, viewing a long-serving executive as little different than the monarchical system against which they had fought for independence. This established a tradition that was largely adhered to for the next century and a half.

The four-time election of Franklin D. Roosevelt during the Great Depression and World War II upended this system. Roosevelt served an unprecedented 13 years before his death in office in 1945.

The proposed amendment to the Constitution to prevent such a situation from occurring again was approved by the Senate and sent out to the states for ratification in 1947. After four years of deliberation, Minnesota became the 36th state to ratify in February 1951, which fulfilled the prerequisite of ratification by three-quarters of states for the amendment to be included in the Constitution.

In total, 41 out of 48 states at the time approved the amendment. Massachusetts and Oklahoma rejected it, while Arizona, Kentucky, Rhode Island, Washington and West Virginia abstained from the ratification process.

The underlying motive for the amendment was not concern for democracy, but the opposite. Republicans, joined by many southern Democrats, sought to prevent any future president from using broad popular support to secure a long tenure in office and push through further social reforms, as FDR had done.

This same basic political constellation had only recently enacted the Taft–Hartley Act, a law that sharply restricted trade unions and curtailed key forms of labor militancy. Adopted amid the early Cold War climate of loyalty programs, congressional inquisitions, blacklistings, and surveillance, the 22nd Amendment formed part of a broader rightward turn in American politics in which anticommunism played the central, organizing role.

100 years: Trial of American communist for blasphemy concludes

On February 27, 1926, final arguments were made in the Brockton, Massachusetts trial of Anthony Bimba on charges of violating a 144-year-old Massachusetts law against blasphemy. Bimba was the editor of the Lithuanian-language *Laisv?* (Freedom), published in Brooklyn by the American Communist Party. He was the last person in the United States to be tried for blasphemy.

On January 23, Bimba had given a speech at the Lithuanian National Hall in Brockton, where he was heckled by a group of Lithuanian anticommunists. A member of this group had already alerted police about the event.

Bimba spoke extemporaneously and although no stenographic report was made of his remarks, he allegedly said, “People have built churches for the last 2,000 years, and we have sweated under Christian rule for 2,000 years. And what have we got? The government is in control of the priests and bishops, clerics and capitalists. They tell us there is a God. Where is he?”

He was arrested after the meeting and charged with sedition and with violating the Massachusetts Blasphemy Act of 1782 which made it a crime “to willfully blaspheme the holy name of God by denying, cursing or contumeliously reproaching God.”

The act was almost identical to the state’s 1697 Act against Atheism and Blasphemy, written five years after the Salem Witch Trials. The 1782 law changed the law’s punishments—placement in the public stocks, whipping, boring through the tongue with a red-hot iron or being branded on the forehead with the letter “B”—to a fine or jail. Massachusetts had legally enacted freedom of religion in 1780.

Bimba was also charged under the Massachusetts Sedition Act of 1919 with advocating the overthrow of the government.

The prosecution tried to portray Communism as an irreligious and violent movement. Although the state was widely ridiculed for the blasphemy charge, it was still clearly an attempt to marginalize the Workers (Communist) Party, which still led a semi-legal existence.

Bimba was defended by the communist-affiliated International Labor Defense organization, as well as the American Civil Liberties Union, in what was widely seen as a freedom of speech fight. Massachusetts authorities prohibited defense meetings in Boston, Brockton and Worcester. Bimba was acquitted of blasphemy charges but fined \$100 for sedition. The sedition charge was dropped on appeal.

Bimba was well known as a writer and editor and authored a *History of the American Working Class* in 1927. He remained in the Communist Party until his death in 1982. He became a lifelong defender of the Stalinist line. He was in the news again in 1963 when the United States tried, unsuccessfully, to deport him.



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