

This week in history: March 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

1 March 2026

25 years ago: Fireworks explosion in Chinese elementary school kills 50 children

On March 6, 2001, sacks of gunpowder and bundles of fireworks caught fire, blowing up classrooms at an elementary school in the village of Fanglin, located in Wanzhai county, Jiangxi province. The catastrophic blast, obliterating four classrooms of the two-story building and shattering glass hundreds of yards away, killed 50 children aged 9-11 and four adults; dozens of children suffered severe burns or crushed limbs as frantic parents and rescuers dug through the rubble searching for survivors.

The classroom had been turned into a sweatshop; the children its unpaid workers. The corrupt network involved the school principal and a teacher, whose father held the rank of secretary in the Fanglin Communist Party, and who received a kickback from the profits. The children's tasks included putting fuses into the fireworks and filling them with gunpowder. The children were required to remain at the school until production quotas were met. Parents had raised objections, but the operations continued.

Schools throughout China were saddled with large budget shortfalls—a result of the restoration of capitalism. To remedy the shortfalls, officials of the Chinese Communist Party adopted the policy of establishing commercial enterprises in the classrooms, dubbed “school businesses.” A government report boasted that enterprises run by primary and secondary schools had generated \$US37 billion from 1991 to 1995. It stated that 710,000 primary and secondary schools, or 93 percent of all schools in China, had some sort of commercial enterprise.

After the explosion and mass public outrage, Premier Zhu Rongji attempted to whitewash the incident, pinning the blame on an insane person, sealing off the town and barring the media from reporting on the tragic incident. But no amount of censorship and scapegoating could bury the truth of that horrible day. A short time later, the people of Fanglin staged a protest demanding the arrest of complicit officials and calling Rongji's remarks a pack of lies.

50 years ago: The Vitoria Massacre and the Spanish general strike

On March 3, 1976, Spanish Armed Police carried out a bloody massacre in the Basque city of Vitoria-Gasteiz, killing five workers and wounding over 150. The event marked a decisive turning point in the so called “Spanish Transition,” revealing the murderous lengths to which the post-Franco regime would go to prevent the emergence of a revolutionary working class movement.

The massacre followed a two-month labor struggle that began in Vitoria's industrial belt. Workers at factories such as the Forjas Alavesas steel plant and the Mercedes-Benz Mevosa factory had walked out in January to protest a government-imposed wage freeze and record setting inflation that was then wracking the global economy. By early March, the movement had developed from a local wage dispute into a developing regional general strike involving at least 18,000 workers.

On March 3, thousands of workers gathered for a peaceful assembly at the Church of San Francisco de Asís. While workers were inside, armed police surrounded the building and fired tear gas canisters through the windows. The police opened fire with submachine guns and pistols as workers attempted to flee the gas-filled church.

Police radio recordings captured the brutal character of the assault, with officers heard laughing and boasting that they had “produced a massacre” and “contributed to the greatest beating in history.”

As reported by the *Bulletin*, the newspaper of the Workers League (US predecessor to the SEP), the Vitoria events shattered the myth of a “peaceful transition” to democracy by the Juan Carlos monarchy. The *Bulletin* wrote:

The present wave of strikes for political and union rights is developing rapidly into a general strike that will bring down the monarchy. Even the military, which is the heart of the fascist regiment, is divided. Nine officers belonging to the Union of Democratic Military ... are on trial in Madrid on charges of ‘inciting rebellion.’

The massacre took place in the shadow of the 1974 “Carnation Revolution” in neighboring Portugal, which had overthrown the Salazar-Caetano dictatorship. The Spanish ruling class and its international backers feared that the worker-led strikes in Spain could link up with Portuguese workers and reignite the recently suppressed factory committees that had been built in the previous two years.

The *Bulletin* report added that the massacre in Spain and other repressions “are a desperate attempt to buy time that only reveal the extreme weakness of the monarchy. Time is running out for the dictatorship. After weeks of violent repression, the Spanish working class, far from being intimidated, is gaining confidence and strength.”

In the days following the massacre, solidarity strikes erupted across Spain, involving over 500,000 workers. In the Basque Country and Navarre, the movement took on a near insurrectionary character. The strike’s immediate impact was a state of total paralysis in the industrial centers of northern Spain.

On March 8, over 100,000 people attended the funerals of the murdered workers in Vitoria, turning the procession into a massive political demonstration. Throughout the following month, the regime was gripped by a deep internal crisis. Manuel Fraga, the Interior Minister, was forced to visit Vitoria in a conciliatory gesture, visiting the wounded in the hospital and admitting that the police had to “accept part of the responsibility.”

In an attempt to de-escalate the tension, the government ordered the release of most of the arrested workers, while simultaneously maintaining a heavy military presence. None of the police murderers were ever prosecuted.

75 years ago: Iranian Prime Minister Haj Ali Razmara assassinated

On March 7, 1951, Iranian Prime Minister Haj Ali Razmara was assassinated during a memorial service at the Shah Mosque in Tehran. The assassin, Khalil Tahmassebi, a member of the Islamic fundamentalist group Fadayan-e Islam, fired three shots which fatally wounded Razmara before being subdued and arrested by police.

Razmara, a former military general, was appointed by the Shah as prime minister in 1950 at the behest of the British Foreign Office and the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC), which was at the time Britain’s largest source of overseas profits and the largest source of fuel oil for its Royal Navy. Razmara was one of the few politicians remaining in parliament who openly opposed the nationalization of the AIOC. He instead sought to negotiate a supplemental agreement between Iran and the British corporation to replace the 1933 agreement, which generated hundreds of millions of pounds in profits for the UK while Iranian people received nothing in return.

Under these conditions, broad masses of the Iranian population were intensely hostile to the AIOC and the British imperialist plunder of Iran’s oil resources. The agreement being negotiated by Razmara, which failed to be ratified before his death, was widely opposed.

Razmara’s assassination killing occurred only one month after an attempted assassination of Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi and largely eliminated the last remnants of opposition to nationalization of the AIOC in the Iranian parliament, which voted unanimously later that month for the AIOC to be nationalized.

100 years: German imperialism sets conditions for joining League of Nations

On March 2, 1926, German Chancellor Hans Luther delivered a speech from the Hamburg City Hall that was broadcast by radio throughout Germany. He warned that Germany’s membership in the League of Nations was contingent on its sitting on the governing Council of the League as a permanent member, alongside the major imperialist powers of France, Britain, Italy and Japan. He suggested that if other nations were admitted as permanent members, Germany would not join the League at all.

Luther complained that the German government had learned from press reports that Spain, Brazil and Poland had also demanded seats on the Council as permanent members. While Brazil and Spain had their own reasons for demanding inclusion, Poland was suggested by French imperialism as a counterweight to Germany.

Following the 1925 peace treaties known as the Locarno Treaties, Germany, which had gone through several revolutionary upheavals since its defeat in World War I in 1918, and whose Ruhr region had been occupied by French troops to extract war reparations from 1923 to 1925, had been temporarily stabilized by an infusion of American capital in the Dawes Plan in 1924.

Germany had formally applied to join the League of Nations, with the explicit promise of a permanent seat on its powerful Council. This elevation was intended to welcome Germany back as a Great Power and stabilize Europe. However, as the Special Assembly in Geneva on March 8 approached, an effort was made to dilute Germany’s influence before it even arrived.

In his March 2 address, Luther laid out a clear “red line.” He warned that Germany’s entry was contingent on the Council’s structure remaining unchanged. If Poland—a nation with major territorial disputes with Germany—were to enter as an equal, Luther’s fragile coalition government in Berlin would be toppled by domestic nationalists.

At the Special Assembly, while Britain and France tried to broker a compromise, Brazil remained immovable, eventually exercising its veto as one of the non-permanent, rotating members of Council. The week ended in what British Foreign Secretary Austen Chamberlain described as a “tragedy”—the session was adjourned, and the “rehabilitation” of German imperialism was delayed for six months.



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