

This week in history: March 16-22

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

15 March 2026

25 years ago: US Supreme Court deprives workers of the right to sue for discrimination

On March 21, 2001, in the case of *Circuit City Stores, Inc. v. Adams*, the US Supreme voted by 5-4 to rob workers of their right to sue for discrimination. The right-wing bloc of the majority consisted of Antonin Scalia, Clarence Thomas, Sandra Day O'Connor, Anthony Kennedy and William Rehnquist, while the dissenting justices were John Paul Stevens, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Stephen Breyer and David Souter.

The decision bolstered corporate power against workers, overriding a California state law that provided protections against discriminatory employment practices. The reactionary ideologues like Scalia and Thomas cast aside their pretended deference to states' rights, making it clear that protecting business interests was always their guiding light, not any consistent constitutional theory.

The case arose when a Circuit City employee named Saint Clair Adams filed a discrimination lawsuit under California Fair Employment and Housing Act in 1997. He cited a discriminatory stipulation in the employment application: all employment disputes must be settled by binding arbitration, where a professional third-party arbitrator, almost always aligned with corporate interests, decides the issues.

Circuit City immediately fired back, suing the employee in federal court and obtaining an injunction against the state lawsuit. The court's precedent was a 1925 law, the Federal Arbitration Act (FAA), that directed federal courts to enforce arbitration agreements in commercial contracts. This would have sent the case to arbitration where the right to a jury trial and democratic safeguards did not exist and a single arbitrator made the final decision.

Adams appealed to the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals. Overturning the ruling, the Ninth Circuit said the FAA did not apply to "contracts of employment of seamen, railroad employees, or any other class of workers engaged in foreign or interstate commerce," including Adams' job at Circuit City.

The Supreme Court overturned the Ninth Circuit ruling. Justice Kennedy, writing for the majority, arguing in a manner of pure sophistry, claimed the FAA exclusion applied only to "transportation workers," those actually engaged in the physical movement of goods, not their final handling and sale. Regardless of the legal rationale, the outcome undermined the rights of workers to sue corporations, sharply

restricting their legal recourse.

British Prime Minister Harold Wilson resigns

On March 16, 1976, British Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson announced his immediate resignation. The announcement came just five days after he had turned 60, marking the end of nearly eight years in office across two separate terms.

Publicly, Wilson maintained that his departure was a long-planned decision. He stated, "In March 1974 I decided that I would remain in office for no more than two years. I have not wavered in this decision and it is irrevocable." However the exact timing of his departure was never publicly discussed.

While Wilson attempted to frame his resignation as a purely personal decision, as the *Bulletin* (US predecessor to the WSWS) explained, Wilson's exit was "the clearest political expression of the catastrophic economic crisis of Western Europe." Rather than a personal choice, the resignation was the byproduct of the utter bankruptcy of British capitalism and the politics of the Labour Party.

The mid-1970s was a period of decline for the British economy. The pound had recently plunged below the \$2 mark for the first time in history. The Labour government was under immense pressure from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and global bankers to implement draconian cuts to social services as a condition for a \$2 billion loan. Wilson, who had built his career on the reforms of the post-war boom, was now tasked with presiding over a savage offensive against the working class. His departure signaled that the ruling class required a more ruthless leadership to carry out the dirty work.

Considering Wilson an unreliable instrument for social counterrevolution, elements of the military and MI5 actively conspired to brush him aside in favor of a more ruthless attack dog. At the time, and for decades after, the capitalist press dismissed Wilson's own warnings of "dark forces" at work against him as paranoid or as a result of Alzheimer's, a disease which Wilson would suffer from in later years.

However, shortly after resigning, Wilson and his private secretary Marcia Williams gave testimony to journalists Barry Penrose and Roger Courtiour of his knowledge of plots against him which ranged

from smear campaigns branding Wilson a Soviet agent to discussions of an outright military coup. These tapes laid bare the conspiracy against Wilson, but were not made public until aired as a BBC documentary in 2006.

While not physically ousted, the plots signaled that powerful sections of the British ruling elite had decided that even Wilson's tame calls for reform and links to the trade unions were unacceptable risks as they planned to plunder working class living standards.

Wilson was succeeded by Foreign Secretary James Callaghan, a choice backed by the British banks. Callaghan's selection accelerated the confrontation between the working class and the Labour leadership as he would continue to impose austerity measures on workers in the name of fighting inflation. This trajectory would lead directly to the "Winter of Discontent" and the eventual collapse of the Labour government, paving the way for the rise of Thatcherism.

75 years ago: Iranian oil refinery workers strike against poverty wages and British exploitation

On March 22, 1951, a major strike began by employees of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC, the precursor to BP) in southwest Iran. The strike began in Abadan and grew to include the nearby towns and oil fields.

The immediate cause of the strike was the withdrawal by the British-owned AIOC of special allowances for the workers who lived in areas without adequate housing or amenities. These workers already only earned less than a dollar per day, and most lived in overly crowded slums. The revocation of the allowances was the equivalent of a 30 percent wage cut.

Thousands of workers joined the strike in the next days and weeks, concentrated in the oil-rich province of Khuzestan. By early April, up to 15,000 employees were on strike, around 80 percent of the AIOC Iranian workforce. Students also participated. They hosted meetings in their dormitories to discuss with workers how to continue the coordination of the strike.

The military blockaded these dormitories and prevented food from reaching the people inside. The Shah declared martial law in the military district which included Abadan and other oil refinery towns.

Despite the repression, the strike brought the Abadan refinery to a near-complete shutdown. The AIOC was forced to offer a settlement which offered a 35 percent wage increase to 25,000 workers.

Bound up with the demands of workers and students was an intense hostility to British exploitation of Iran's natural resources. The slogan "Down with Britain!" was commonly used. The strike itself emerged only a few days after both houses of the Iranian parliament passed the oil nationalization bill, a position extremely popular with the Iranian masses.

The British government, on the other hand, promised a "strong" course of action in response. The AIOC was Britain's largest source of overseas profits and the largest source of fuel for the Royal Navy. Britain's response to the prospect of oil nationalization was a harsh series of sanctions, blockades, and eventually the 1953 coup which, conducted jointly with the CIA, ousted the democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh.

100 years ago: Chinese Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-Shek stages coup in Guangzhou

On March 20, 1926, Chiang Kai-Shek, a leader of the Chinese bourgeois-nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) purged the leadership of the KMT of Communist Party officials in what has come to be known as the March 20 Incident.

In what was effectively a coup, Chiang, a member of the KMT's Central Executive Committee, announced that he had accepted the position of Commander-in-Chief of the KMT's National Revolutionary Army (NRA), and, in the words of one historian, "arrested the acting head of the NRA's Naval Bureau, Li Zhilong; placed Canton [Guangzhou] under martial law; and disarmed guards at residences of the Soviet advisors and the offices of the Canton-Hong Kong Strike Committee, which had led a blockade against Hong Kong since June 1925."

Li Zhilong was a member of the Communist Party and the captain of the NRA ship SS Zhongshan, which had sailed the 10 miles from Guangzhou to Changzhou Island in the Pearl River where the KMT's Whampoa Military Academy was located. Chiang later falsely claimed that the warship's movement was an attempt to arrest him.

Tensions between Chiang and Soviet advisers were generated by preparations for the Northern Expedition, an offensive by the NRA from Guangzhou to the north toward Shanghai and Beijing to unify China's populous eastern coastal cities under a nationalist government and break the influence of warlords. More significantly, the Chinese Communist Party, which had entered the KMT in 1923, was in the leadership of mass workers' strikes and opposition to the imperialist powers.

The coup stunned the KMT leadership, but all factions, including its left faction, sympathetic to the communists, fell into line. As Harold Isaacs notes in his *Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution*: "This seizure of power by Chiang Kai-shek in Canton bloodlessly established bourgeois hegemony over the national liberation movement."

Entirely criminal was the reaction of the Stalin leadership in the USSR, which had supported the integration of the Communist movement into the bourgeois-nationalist KMT in China. The coup was kept a secret, including from the Executive Committee of the Communist International. When reports appeared in the bourgeois press, the Stalinists called them lies.

As a lecture at last year's SEP Summer School noted:

"Stalin instructed the Communist Party to remain inside the Kuomintang, despite being politically and organizationally bound hand and foot, and ordered it to assist the Northern Expedition in every way ... In the Soviet Union, Trotsky and the Left Opposition demanded the political independence of the Communist Party from the KMT and warned of the consequences, despite the increasing censorship, provocations and repression of the Stalinist apparatus."



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