

The February Strike of 1941*

The recent protests against the transport of war materiel through the Netherlands for the imperialist invasion of Iraq were called for February 25, the anniversary of the 1941 mass strike that against the World War II German occupation regime and its deportation of Jews. The "February Strike" is annually commemorated in Amsterdam, including by bourgeois politicians, but is little known outside Holland.

The Netherlands were invaded by the Wehrmacht (army) on 10 May 1940. The fighting was over after six days, culminating in the German bombardment of Rotterdam the entire center of the city was destroyed, killing upwards of 30,000. Throughout 1940, Hitler's Reichskommissar, the Austrian Nazi Seyss-Inquart, escalated anti-Semitic repression. When Jews were banned from public employment in November, students launched protests, leading to the occupation of the universities by the Nazi SD. Jews were ordered to register with the occupation authorities.

In early 1941, Dutch fascists of the NSB and its paramilitary thugs of the WA staged provocations in Jewish neighborhoods, smashing windows and randomly beating up Jews. Simultaneously, the occupation government began sending thousands of Dutch workers to Germany as forced labor, leading to protests. Members of battalions of unemployed workers sent into the countryside to repair dikes rioted over their starvation pay and miserable conditions. On February 9, fighting broke out against the Germans in Amsterdam; two days later there was a pitched battle in which 20 NSB fascists were wounded and a WA member later died. In reprisal, the Germans sealed off the old Jewish quarter and machine gun nests were set up in the surrounding streets.

On February 17, workers at the NSM shipbuilding company put down their tools when it was announced that a number of single workers were being sent to Germany; the strike quickly spread

through the shipyards and wharves, and the measures were rescinded. On the weekend of February 22-23, German and Dutch Nazi paramilitary forces occupied the Jewish quarter and rounded up 427 young Jewish men in the Jonas Daniël Meijer Square, from where they were deported to the concentration camps of Buchenwald and Mauthausen. This manhunt sparked general indignation, and on the evening of the 23rd, district leaders of the illegal Communist Party of the Netherlands (CPN) decided to call for a strike.

Even before a call was issued, by the next afternoon (February 24) workers spontaneously went into the streets, with dock workers among the first to go out. In the evening the Communist Party held a protest demonstration of several hundred at the Meijer Square. That night the CPN ran off a mimeographed manifesto calling on working people of Amsterdam to "Protest the Abominable Persecution of the Jews," and ending with the call "Strike!!! Strike!!! Strike!!!" The next day, February 25, the whole city ground to a halt, with some 300,000 people participating in the strike. Most street cars never left the depots; the few that did were waylaid by militant workers who sent them back to the barns. Shops closed and huge crowds gathered in the streets. That evening, the Germans sent in an SS Death's Head battalion making arrests through the night.

The next morning (February 26), the strike at first seemed to be over, but in the afternoon the municipal works, shipyards, Fokker aircraft factory and railway freight yards went out. The strike spread to the Zaanstreek, Hilversum, Haarlem, Utrecht and elsewhere. After a couple of days it was suppressed by massive repression, and an attempt by the CPN to organize a strike the next month fizzled. The Nazi occupation authorities responded by arresting more than 100 workers and others thought to be "ringleaders." Yet two years later, in April-May 1943, half a million Dutch workers again struck against the occupation regime, when the Germans threatened to intern all former Dutch soldiers. Coal miners in Limberg, Phillips electronics workers in Eindhoven, agricultural workers in Friesland stopped work. The Germans

responded by shooting down almost 100 people in the streets; another 80 were executed after summary trials.

The February Strike did not stop the decimation of the Jewish population: Dutch police and the Marechaussee helped the SS round up thousands, holding them in the Westerbork concentration camp until they were shipped east. Of 120,000 Jews in Holland before the war, barely 20,000 managed to escape the Holocaust by obtaining false papers and going underground with the aid and protection of fellow workers and neighbors. But the February 1941 strike and April-May strikes of 1943 demonstrated the tremendous strength and courage of the working class fighting against the most overwhelming odds. These strike movements could have laid the basis for a workers uprising at the end of the war, but what was lacking was revolutionary leadership. Following the Stalinist line of support for "democratic" imperialism, the CPN pushed a nationalist anti-German policy, dropped the demand for immediate independence of Indonesia and chained the workers to the Dutch bourgeoisie through the popular-front Resistance Council (RVV), thus aiding the return of the monarchy.

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<http://www.internationalist.org/rotterdamdemo0203.html>