

Poland 1980: Won't Get Fooled Again / Meet the New Boss

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Poland 1980: Won't Get Fooled Again!

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The world has just witnessed the largest workers revolt since the May-June 1968 events in France. Only this time the spectre of intense class war occurred in one of the mythical “workers” states of the Soviet dominated Warsaw Pact. This has made the mass strikes of the Polish workers a development of historical importance to the international workers’ movement an event which rivals the 1956 worker-student revolution in Hungary.

This inspiring struggle was sparked by the announcement of sharp increases in meat prices at the beginning of July — an attempt by the bureaucratic ruling class to shift Poland’s deep economic crisis onto the backs of the workers. Strikes, were immediate in a number of centres resulting in almost immediate wage increases. In some places management’s fear of the workers led to wage increases where strikes had not yet occurred.

An example was set for others to follow. Consequently, there was another series of strikes in mid-July. The Eastern city of Lublin in particular was engulfed by a general strike lasting almost two days.

Then, for a short time, the strikes seemed to dissipate without ever having gone beyond economic demands. There were still strikes in progress like those of the sanitation and transit workers in Warsaw, but the state chose to refrain from using open repression, so as not to further provoke a situation that had become serious enough to prompt Edward Gierek to go to the USSR on a ‘working vacation’.

On August 14th the strikes took on a much more radical character as 16,000 Gdansk shipyard workers struck and seized control of the Lenin Shipyards. These same workers had been instrumental in toppling Gierek’s predecessor Wladyslaw Gomulka. Poland’s rulers now had good reason to be terrified because in a short time the strike action spread beyond the yards until it involved almost 50,000 workers in and around Gdansk. Strikes flared up in other parts of Poland as well.

Critically, the workers’ demands soon involved much more than economics. This was a predictable development as Gdansk has been a focal point for activists engaged in developing the movement for free trade unions. The shipyard strike was initiated in response to the firing of Anna Walentonowicz — a free trade union activist — and the re-instatement of all workers who had been victimized since the 1970 strikes became a central demand of the strikers.

Melt Lenin!

This was not the only demand which related directly to the bitter memories of 1970. Another one called for the erection of a monument in memory of the workers killed by the state during the 1970 revolt. One worker suggested that the massive statue of Lenin, which dominates the yards, should be melted down to make the memorial much to the amusement of his fellow workers.

Faced with all of this, management cynically tried to divide the workers by offering different settlements to different groups, a move the workers contemptuously dismissed as an example of “capitalist tactics.” On August 16 the state retreated offering to accept the workers economic demands, plus the reinstatements and the erection of a memorial. Many strikers were now prepared to return to work. However, due to an appeal by Lech Walesa, this did not happen.

The reason for this was simple. During the occupation strikers elsewhere in Poland had repeatedly called for a continuation of the shipyard strike in solidarity with the ones elsewhere. This was essential for victory. When Walesa reminded his fellow shipyard workers of this they replied with a commitment to stay out. The strikes now took on semi-insurrectionary proportions.

Dual Power

The heightened level of struggle was facilitated by the formation of the Inter-Factory Strike Committee (MKS) in the Lenin Shipyards. It constituted a basis for dual power in Poland. It was composed of elected delegates, initially numbering about 200, who were subject to immediate re-call by the workers. Once again the workers’ councils, the characteristic organs of workers’ power ever since the Commune of Paris in 1871, have stepped onto the world stage.

One of the first actions of the MKS was to vote by acclamation to become a new all-Poland Trades Union Congress. However, its main pre-occupation was to formulate the growing list of demands being put forward by the workers. Among these now appeared a call for an end to special privileges for party members and the police and the closure of special shops existing exclusively for Poland’s privileged elite.

Demanding recognition of its social power the MKS insisted that the Prime Minister, Edward Babiuch, come to them for direct talks. Implicit in this request was the knowledge that had he agreed it would have been a public admission that the state controlled unions were not the genuine representative of the workers. Simultaneously, it would establish the legitimacy of the workers’ main demand, namely, trade unions free of the state’s control. So Babiuch stayed away.

Then on August 18 Gierek appeared on national television. He made numerous conciliatory gestures but these were mixed with statements like, “We will not tolerate strikes.” On the next day Anna Walentonowicz was quoted as saying, “He acts as if he were talking to children.” This seemed to sum up how pathetically ineffective his speech would prove to be.

It was followed by even greater polarization. Krackows’s steel works were idled. Bus drivers along with the workers at two shipyard’s, all in Szczecin, were on strike.

Accusations flew. The state made more charges about how the MKS didn’t represent the workers. On the other side the workers were widely quoted as having accused the state of behaving like a capitalist in its attempts to sow division in the strike movement.

Outside of Poland the events drew international attention. The capitalist press gloried in seeing such a profound challenge to a pro-Soviet state and heaped hypocritical admiration on the workers for their courage and wisdom. But its support had limits. After all, workers here might follow their example.

Within Poland the state was now opting for more repression. Fifteen members of the KOR. (Social Self-’ Defense Committee) were arrested. KOR was actively supporting the; struggle for free trade unions, a cause which it had long championed. Composed of reformist intellectuals

it had been a primary source of information for the Western press since the first strikes in July. Obviously, the state felt there was an urgent need to try to silence it.

Repression came down elsewhere too. Some 600 workers were arrested in Southern Poland' in a crude attempt to forestall strike activity there. Compared to the Northern Coast the South was very quiet.

The reactionary Polish Roman Catholic Church went public on the strikers for the first time on August 22. Cardinal Wyszynski put on a display of traditional conservatism by pleading for "wisdom and prudence" while also emphasizing that prolonged work stoppages "were not for the good of society."

Gierek on the Run

Premier Gierek was reportedly still in shock after the workers refusal to heed his patriotic appeal for the nation to resume work. What he was terming ".. anarchistic and anti-socialist groups that attempt to make political use of the work stoppages," were making his hold on power, less certain with each new day.

Gierek spoke to the nation again on August 24. This time he had to announce the removal from office of his close confidant, Prime Minister Babiuch, along with almost half of the other Politbureau members. Among their replacement is were noted adversaries of his demoted in the purges last winter. (See NAA 4, pg. 10)

Displaying his weakness he offered more concessions to the workers. Union elections would henceforth be democratized with secret ballot votes and no restrictions on the candidates. This was a major retreat but Gierek still wasn't agreeing to free trade unions. He didn't give way on censorship and the release of political prisoners either.

The still unimpressed strikers movement continued to grow in spite of him. The growth of MKS reflected this as the number of delegates from striking factories in many parts of Poland had by now swelled to almost 800.

The workers then won a small but significant victory. Telephone and Telex lines into Gdansk which had been cut earlier in the strike were restored without conditions. These lines enabled 'the Gdansk MKS to better coordinate their activities with strike committees in Szczecin and Elbag. It is noteworthy that the MKS had made the demand for their re-connection a pre-requisite for direct negotiations. with the same government which had earlier refused to recognize it. Once again Cardinal Wyszynski spoke out for restraint. This time he stated, "The better we work, the more justified are our rights and then we can formulate our demands." A statement credited to a 22 year-old worker shortly afterwards provided a fitting reply. He reportedly said, "The government had to call on the Cardinal to try to calm things down, but the Cardinal won't get us, back to work."

Still more strikes began. These included stoppages in Silesia — Gierek's political power base. At this point there were now 300,000 workers striking.

The MKS then issued an appeal for temporary restraint to allow food to be gathered but the strikes did not let up. Walesa was advising the workers, "It's not good to have Poland terrorized. The people must have food." He also made statements to the effect that the workers could now give the government some time to act but if they didn't respond quickly the strikes should spread. The strikers, incidentally, by now had been promised wages for their time-off on strike.

With August drawing to a close 20,000 Silesian copper miners struck and their counterparts in the coal mines were becoming restless. The state cracked. On August 30, agreed to free trade unions and the right to strike as long as the Party's leading role in society and Poland's membership in the Warsaw Pact were respected. Knowing these two stipulations were needed to keep the USSR's tanks from pouring in the workers accepted.

There were other important provisions. The most dangerous was the stipulation that the free trade unions stay out of "politics". In another, amnesty was promised to those arrested during the strikes. Among the many economic gains were 3 years of maternity leave for women and a reduction of the retirement age.

Consciousness Lacking

Upon their 'return to work the Gdansk workers sang 'God save — Poland', an act which showed the more backward aspects of the revolt. These being nationalism (albeit from people who live in an oppressed country) and religion. Obviously, the workers' political consciousness till lags well behind the implications of their actions.

Many thought the battle was over. That was until after a mining accident on September 1 in the Silesian coal fields killed, 8 workers. In response Southern Poland erupted. Within hours 32 new strikes, including 19 in various mines employing 200,000 miners, broke out.

The demands won at Gdansk were put forward along with ones for the correction of unsafe working conditions and an end to compulsory work on Saturdays and round-the-clock shifts. Gierek's resignation was also demanded. All the demands, except the call for Gierek's head, were quickly met and work resumed.

Scattered strikes persisted indicating how little trust the workers had in the government's word. Likewise at Gdansk; the feeling had been widespread that since the government couldn't be trusted the free trade unions were essential to instituting the agreements generally. Subsequently, workers all over Poland started enthusiastically seeking membership in them.

But the government was still on the defensive as the price controls announced in early September showed. Aid packages coming from the USSR and the other "fraternal" states indicated that defensiveness prevailed even outside Poland.

Kania

This fraternal aid was padded further by new loans from the International Banks all at the very time that comrade Gierek became suddenly ill. Sick with the symptoms of mass strikes and a sordid scandal involving his speech-writer Gierek saw Stanislaw Kania become Premier. Called a "moderate" the new man is the former head of the secret police.

Again, the party's purges evoked indifference from the workers. By contrast the Kremlin was more enthusiastic. Brezhnev heartily congratulated Kania and accordingly cattle up with yet another aid package.

Kania responded in kind. While pledging to honour the strike settlements he emphasized his desire to strengthen relations to the USSR. He again reminded his people that the new free trade unions were to keep clear of "politics".

Soon after there were new reports of strikes involving workers angered at management harassment of those showing interest in the new unions. Elsewhere, Jack Kuron of KOR and other “anti-socialist elements” were increasingly being attacked in the official media.

Overwhelming Crisis

From the perspective of the bureaucrats such a process of trying to erode the workers’ gains is the only option available. The country’s economic crisis is awesome. The debt to Western Banks is \$20 billion while the workers’ gains will cost another \$3 billion. To this can be added the cost of the strikes and debts to the USSR. Poland is bankrupt.

The political crisis is just as severe. For the rulers in Warsaw and Moscow the dangerous implications rival the Czech Prague Spring. The formation of unions not controlled by the state, the right to strike, eased censorship, the concessions to the church and the Polish state’s weakness all add up to a potential centre for subversion within the Soviet domain. Even more foreboding are the ideological implications of a workers’ revolt against a “workers’ state”.

Objectively, what’s ahead in the next little while is an open question. Continued tension is inevitable but the response of the workers to state attacks is uncertain. But, given the danger to the East, it’s likely they will act with discretion.

This is particularly true since Poland would face the Soviet tanks alone. No help would come from the West. The West’s priorities are obviously stability in the region and the protection of Western capital’s interests. This will apply even more if Poland’s workers embark upon a clearly revolutionary course. One must recognize that at present, the West’s allies in Poland are the right-wing nationalist tendencies and the Catholic Church.

By contrast, the genuine allies of the Polish workers are their class counterparts internationally. Like all workers they are oppressed by the East-West struggle for global expansion. Similarly, as workers in the West are suffering the effects of a system racked by crisis, workers in the East are the victims of the related crisis in their societies. The workers in both camps also share a mutual interest in casting off their respective-oppressors duly aided by a spirit of internationalism.

With Poland in a temporary state of relative class peace certain priorities can be seen within this context. Foremost among these is the active defense of the gains of the Polish workers. The longer these last, the more they will be built upon, and the greater will be the prospects for similar struggles developing elsewhere in Eastern Europe. The fact that millions of workers in the Soviet block have been given an impressive example of militant class struggle to learn from encourages this view. And no one recognizes this more than the leaders of the Soviet Communist Party.

Another urgent priority is for us as workers in the West to intensify the struggle here. In doing so we will dispel whatever remaining illusions the Polish workers have about how good life is in the West while exemplifying the similarities of our struggles.

Active solidarity with the Polish workers is an integral part of the ongoing struggle against authoritarian socialism. But to do this effectively it is essential for us to develop a deep theoretical understanding of the social system they are confronting. In effect we have to synthesize a libertarian understanding of Eastern Europe with consistent revolutionary practice. This historic struggle of the Polish demands nothing less.

Meet the New Boss

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On September 21st mass was broadcast over Poland's state radio for the first time in over three decades. This, major event took place because the striking Polish workers had included a demand for such broadcasts among those they formulated during their struggle against the state. In light of this it is of great importance to assess the role of the Catholic Church in Poland in relation to the opposition movement and the workers in particular.

It is undeniable that the Church does "have a large following within all sections of the population including the workers. However there are reasons to suspect the estimates 'of the degree of its influence especially as it is gauged in the capitalist media in North America.

Judgments based upon church attendance, are a bit deceptive. This is because there are many avowed atheists and agnostics who see attending mass as safe gesture of opposition to the state. Likewise, the various symbols of Catholicism displayed, in the Gdansk shipyards during the occupation stand in contrast to workers denunciations of Cardinal Wyszynski for having appealed for a resumption of work at the height of the strikes. (See accompanying article) They indicated a marked perception that the Church hierarchy constitutes a part of the status quo.

These facts in turn beg the question stated above of the Church's relation to dissident formations. This matter, incidentally, has been a topic of considerable debate in underground publications with the focus being on whether the Church is the most effective organization of resistance.

At present the relationship is a fairly close one. Many of the activists are Catholics. A few are even priests with "leftist" sympathies. Consistent with this there has been a common concern between them over defending the rights of believers.

But at the same time this harmony has not always prevailed. The Church began to make its rivalry with the state explicit in the early 1960's. Earlier, it had considered dissident' activity of little concern. This is significant insofar as it indicates how the Church has been willing to perform about-faces in its stands since the early days of Stalinist rule.

Two eye-opening examples of this practice sufficiently reveal the Church's opportunism and, in the process, shed light on its actual role in Polish society. The first occurred in 1957 just after the great revolt of the previous year. Relatively free elections were being held as part of the changes typical of that period of "liberalization". During the election the Church took a position in favour of the candidates who supported the then party boss Wladyslaw Gomulka.

Almost twenty years later the Church came out in support of the huge food price increases announced by the government in late June of 1976. These increases sparked an explosive two day wave of strikes, demonstrations and riots which forced an end to the new prices. Repression followed. In response the same church which had endorsed this economic attack on the working class decided to speak up in the workers' defense by advocating an amnesty for those persecuted.

This provides a context for the present. Having benefited substantially from the mass strikes the Church can be expected to give support to efforts to preserve the present gains of the workers.

But there is little likelihood of any support for more demands unless new unrest can be used to further enhance its own power; an unlikely possibility given the dynamics of mass working class struggle. If instead, the next revolt runs counter to the Church's interests in any way it will gladly serve as a reactionary pillar of the present order.

In short, the Church will support whichever side in the class war that will benefit it the most at any given time. This one fact exposes the real role of the Catholic Church in Poland. Namely, as or of a power structure determined to extend its domination over Polish society as much as possible. In response, the role of the working class is to recognize the Church as an oppressive institution which, just like the Polish state, must be smashed.

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