

Poland on the Edge: Revolution or reform?

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This article is being written just as the pressure of a Soviet invasion of Poland is being eased and under the assumption that such an attack is not about to occur. Amid an atmosphere of continuing political crisis, growing worker militancy, continuing economic problems, and constant reshuffling of the Polish government personnel, Solidarity, the recently formed “independent” labor organization, looks like it is about to become a permanent part of Polish society.

Solidarity, with Catholic nationalist Lech Walesa at its head, has become a pawn in the strategy of the Polish communist party and the Soviet Union to tame an exceedingly combative working class. (This obviously contradicts our statement in last issue’s Fifth Estate, Oct. 20, 1980, “Poland: Triumphs & Defeats,” p. 1, in which it was stated that, “It is dubious whether Walesa’s charade (the union) will last the year,” but it looks as if in this case, we were just dead wrong.)

Unions — Instruments of Supervision & Discipline

The exact details of the current situation and what organizational forms the Polish workers have established to manage their seemingly relentless series of strikes and job actions which continue to plague the already ailing Polish economy are hidden behind the wall of state censorship. Still, the extent of the workers’ power and the threat they pose to Warsaw’s state capitalist rule can easily be inferred from the forces aligned against them.

Developments in Poland during the last decade have convinced the ruling state apparatus that direct confrontation with its working class was becoming both more frequent and more fraught with danger to its power. Each confrontation posed the question of the ability of the party to rule, rather than presenting an issue which could be submerged beneath organs of mediation¹ such as occurs in the Western sector of capital. The official, state-controlled unions in all Eastern Bloc countries are recognized for what they are — instruments of supervision and discipline. When each worker uprising circumvented them as simply another obstacle in their struggle, it became clear that another mode of rule would have to be permitted even if it meant giving up the state’s prerogative of absolute rule.

Lech Walesa turned out to be the perfect man for the job, but the Solidarity union still contains an independent character that isn’t in the script. Workers in far flung cities of Poland have continued their strikes despite pleas from Walesa and threats from the Soviets, the Polish Army, and the guard dog regimes of East Germany and Czechoslovakia.

The line-up of forces at this point, then, is Walesa and the Solidarity leadership, the Polish CP bureaucracy and the Soviet Union pitted against the independent struggle of the Polish workers.

¹ We described that process thusly in the April 1977, Fifth Estate in a review of the Black & Red publication Poland: 1970–71; Capitalism and Class Struggle by ICO.:

“In the Eastern branch of capitalism, unions exist, but play a supervisory role, assuring that ‘their’ particular work force meets its State production norm. In a developed capitalism such as the U.S., the unions play a much more important function — that of buffer between the workers and the real sources of power in society.

“In a concrete situation such as the wildcat at Dodge Truck (Warren, Mich.) in June 1974, workers spent their efforts confronting local union officials, plant managers, the Warren city police and a county judge (See Wildcat, Black & Red). It’s questionable whether the head of Chrysler had more than even passing knowledge of the events being played out, and certainly President Nixon had no idea of what was happening in the Detroit suburb. Things were kept local and confined by a complex of mediating organs.

“In Poland (in 1970–71) the reverse occurred. The dispute over wage hikes immediately escalated to a question of which class was going to rule in that country. The torching of the Communist Party headquarters in Szczecin and Gdansk was accurately seen as an attack on the political apparatus in charge of the exploitation of the working class.”

Walesa, who goes about always wearing a picture of the Black Madonna of Czestochowa on his lapel, has made his feeling crystal clear to those who have the power to crush him and his union: "We don't want to bring down this government or any other government," and "I would be a dangerous man if I were not a Catholic." (Interview in Newsweek, Dec. 8, 1980.)

Walesa in Polish Army Helicopters

Walesa is whisked from a work stoppage to a hunger protest to a general strike meeting in Polish Army helicopters, demanding an end to militant actions. He assures the Polish communists, "We are not against the party at all;" — this in a country where the Paris-Match newspaper found that the party would receive barely 3% of the vote if an election were held.

The willingness of the Polish bureaucracy and their Russian masters to accept the existence of a docile Solidarity is clearly seen from the most recent purges of the ruling Polish communist party politburo. Party leader, Stanislaw Kania, consolidated his power at the beginning of December by ousting four members of the old guard faction of the party who had been resisting cooperation with the new union. Upon his arrival back from "consultation" with the Kremlin leaders, Kania stated, "We wish to cooperate with Solidarity sincerely and on an all-around basis. We appreciate and respect its independence and self-government. We will strive to overcome inhibitions and resistance toward cooperating with Solidarity in our own ranks." Such an idea, even a short time ago, would have been unthinkable in any Eastern Bloc country and could have come only with at least the tacit approval of Moscow.

Still, the concessions of the government have only emboldened workers across Poland from the Silesian coal fields to the Lodz and Bydgoszcz textile plants and back to Warsaw as wildcat strikes continue to occur with increasing demands for both political and economic concessions. There has also been mounting opposition within the universities, from the state controlled media and even within the communist dominated Polish parliament.

Fireman for Militant Activity

As the communist bureaucrats view the situation, the social upheavals that threaten to unravel the Polish police state need to be contained within a framework that does not challenge the ultimate authority, of the Party, but can also effectively deal with working class discontent in such a manner as to assure that it does not grow in scope. At the present, Walesa appears to have immense popularity with the workers and is viewed as a hero for his role in last Summer and Fall's successful confrontation with the government. But his authority and ability to quell strikes would be rapidly diminished if his only role appears to be that of fireman of militant activity.

At this point, the role of the Soviet Union and the other Warsaw Pact nations have become crucial. Their thinly veiled threats of intervention to suppress "anti-socialist elements" and the continuing allusions to Czechoslovakia in 1968 are stern warnings as to the limits all of the participants face. But the Russian troop movements and the military maneuvers at the Polish borders serve the function of strengthening Walesa's hand when he calls for moderation and an end to "unauthorized" strike actions. Addressing steel workers in Warsaw on November 28, Walesa said, "The army could be called in to run things. Let us not forget that tanks and rockets

could also be the reply. We will not be able to defend ourselves, whereas these gentlemen could destroy us.”

Yoked Even Firmer

Walesa is, of course, correct and his logic carried the day and the steel workers dropped their talk of a general strike. The Polish army or an invading Russian force does have the power to crush the unarmed workers' movement, but Walesa's warnings result in him emerging as the head of a tamed labor organization, which recognizes “the leading role of the Polish Workers Party” (CPI, and confines itself to economic issues, recognizing the permanent duality of capital and labor.

This then has all of the elements of a classic recuperation of the radical movement. Workers begin moving with a revolutionary potential only to find themselves yoked even firmer than when they had begun their struggle, now under a form of domination more fitting to the particular period. It's no wonder that organizations like the American AFL-CIO_ and the British and Australian Labor Parties have been sending aid to Walesa's central offices.

At this writing, 30 Soviet divisions stand ready at the Polish borders and Walesa is like the little Dutch boy at the dike trying to hold back worker uprisings on one side and an invasion on the other. Solidarity has declared a six-week moratorium on strike actions hoping to defuse the situation, but much of what it hopes to constrain is beyond its control and the strikes continue.

Solidarity competes with those still existing negations of unionism which arose during the beginning of the crisis last Summer: mass assemblies in the work places, worker defense guards, the MKS (the inter-Factory Strike Committee) and the hundreds of workplaces throughout Poland, many of which are ostensibly Solidarity locals, but which are organizationally not connected to the national headquarters and have a mind of their own. It is within these formations that the potential for an authentic revolution lies.

Kremlin Has Agreed to a Dangerous Gambit

The international news media continues using the cliché of the “whole world is watching” developments in Poland, but it is the working class of Eastern Europe who is most carefully observing the events which are unfolding there. The Polish government (and by implication, the Soviets) have agreed to a dangerous gambit by giving their grudging blessings to Solidarity, and they know it. What the Kremlin fears most intensely is a generalization of the “Polish infection” to its other satellite nations. Already, in October, factory workers in the East German city of Magdeburg struck and presented a watered down version of the Polish demands for “independent” unions.

Russia's ability to economically exploit its Eastern Bloc has been severely diminished by the economic crisis in Poland and necessitated most recently the Soviet Union granting \$1.1 billion in aid just to keep Poland afloat financially and to convince its Western creditors that the Warsaw government remains stable and maintains the backing of its powerful protector.

There is no reason to think that Poland's economic situation will do anything besides become more dismal in the months ahead and that worker response to increased deprivation will only increase in militancy. The future may only be turmoil, but, hopefully, for the workers of Eastern

Europe and the Soviet Union may present an opportunity to launch a mighty attack against the Eastern bastion of capital.

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