

THE WORKERS STRUGGLE IN

FOSATU Workers News here takes a look at the rise of Poland's independent trade union — Solidarity.

IN December 1981 Martial Law was declared in Poland. Tanks and troops moved into the cities and towns. Solidarity, the free trade union, was banned and its leaders arrested. The workers movement was beaten down by armed force.

Throughout the world workers watched with horror as their Polish brothers and sisters fell beneath the armed might of the Polish state. Many could not believe what was actually happening. How could it be, they wondered, that a democratic worker organisation was being smashed by a state that claimed to believe in socialism and democracy? If socialism is in the interests of workers why did a so-called socialist government in Poland shoot down Polish workers?

These are not easy questions. To answer them we must first look at the 'socialist' history of Poland.

Unlike some other countries Poland never had a socialist revolution. That is, the workers in Poland never seized power from the capitalist class. Poland became socialist after the last world war. During the war Poland was occupied by the German Nazis until they were driven out by the Soviet army. The Soviet Union, which was governed by the Communist Party under Stalin, then put a new government into power in Poland. This government was controlled by the Polish United Workers Party (PUWP).

FASTEST GROWING INDUSTRY

The PUWP wanted to change Poland from being a backward agricultural country into a modern industrial state. But the Polish people did not trust this Party. They did not trust it because it was put in power by another country, the Soviet Union, and because it continued to have close links with the Soviet Union. The Polish people did not know whether the PUWP government represented them or whether it represented the Soviet Union. So the Party had to work very hard to build support among the people for itself and its ideas.

The PUWP had a lot of successes and brought some big improvements to Poland. By the early 1970's Poland had one of the world's fastest growing industrial sectors. It also had one of the highest meat consuming populations in Europe. This shows that by this time the Polish people had gained quite a high standard of living. Also, schools had been built throughout the country. People could read and write. Health facilities were made available to the poor. In general, the condition of the people improved a lot.

But gradually the improvements slowed down. Gradually the people in Poland — especially the urban workers — found it more and more difficult to satisfy their needs and raise their living standards. What cause this change?

FAILED TO MODERNIZE

There were two main causes. First the PUWP failed to modernize agriculture. This was not entirely its own fault. Small peasants refused to accept collectivization of the land in the late 1940's and early 1950's. Instead, each peasant wanted to own and work his/her own tiny plot of land. Because the PUWP government was not rooted in the people, the peasants did not trust it when it argued for collectivisation of the land. The result was that agricultural production in Poland was based on very small farms and was very inefficient. Because of this inefficiency in agriculture by the mid 1970's Poland was forced to import food at great cost to feed its growing urban population.

Secondly, the PUWP failed to give the workers real control over the running of the country. Although Workers Committees existed in the early years of PUWP rule, by 1950 they had lost all

real power. Economic planning fell into the hands of a huge bureaucracy of full-time officials. Many of these officials came from the ranks of the workers. But they soon secured special privileges for themselves. Some even grew very rich through corruption. In this way these officials lost touch with the needs of the working people.

It was these two problems — the shortage of locally produced food and the elitism and corruption of government officials — which produced the decline in living standards that caused workers to revolt in 1970. The PUWP government forcibly put down the revolt. But it was unsure how to respond to the causes of the revolt. That is, it was unsure how to meet the needs and demands of the people. Because it did not have strong support among the peasants it could not collectivize agriculture to increase efficiency without risking a peasant revolt. Because it did not have strong support among workers it could not ask them to accept a short term drop in their standard of living to promote industrial growth without risking a worker's revolt. Instead, the new PUWP leader, Edward Gierek, tried to raise the living standards of the workers by expanding and modernising industry.



Edward Gierek

But where would the PUWP get the money to buy the machinery they needed to modernize industry? And where would they get the money to subsidize food prices and rising wages so as to keep the workers content while industry was being modernised? Under Gierek the PUWP decided to borrow the money from the capitalist banks of the Western countries. Gierek hoped that as Poland's industry grew it would produce more wealth particularly by selling its goods to the capitalist countries, so that he could pay back the banks.

At first it seemed as if the policy might work. But in 1973 and 1974 a recession hit the capitalist world. None of the capitalist countries now wanted to buy Poland's industrial goods. At the same time inflation rose very fast in the capitalist countries. This meant that the machinery which Poland was importing for its industries from the capitalist countries was becoming more and more expensive.

In order to pay back its debt and to pay for the more expensive machinery the Polish government was forced to borrow even more money from capitalist banks. By 1981 Poland owed money to 501 banks and to 15 governments in the capitalist West. Repaying interest on these loans used up all the hard currency which Poland earned from its exports in that same year.

So we can see how the Polish government was being squeezed tighter and tighter because of its dependance on capitalist banks and governments. It had to do something to save money. So it attacked the Polish workers. It did this by cutting

back food subsidies especially the subsidy on meat prices. These subsidies had enabled workers to buy cheap food even though the cost of producing or importing the food was high. The reason that the cuts in the subsidies was actually an attack on the workers was because it meant that the price of food rose so high that workers could no longer afford to eat properly. Faced with an attack of this kind the workers fought back. In 1979 workers rioted in Poland and in the middle of the next year, 1980, they formed the independent trade union, Solidarity.

ATTACK ON WORKERS

What exactly was Solidarity? It was a trade union organisation which the workers themselves set up to help them defend themselves against the attack made by the PUWP government on their living standards. But some people have asked why it was necessary to form Solidarity when there already were trade unions in Poland? The answer is that most workers did not trust these existing unions to defend them because these unions were under the State's control. These workers wanted a union which was independent of the State and which was under workers' control.

But because Solidarity was formed to defend workers against the government's attack it was more than just a trade union. It was also a political organisation which mobilized workers against some parts of government policy. In particular, it attacked the government's mismanagement of the economy. It also attacked the authoritarian way in which government decisions were taken. And it attacked the privileges and corruption of the government officials. Solidarity argued that Poland was meant to be a socialist society and as such should have done away with gross economic and political inequalities. So Solidarity called for 'socialist renewal' in Poland. That is it called for the creation of a more democratic and efficiently managed socialist system in Poland.

Because of its programme of 'socialist renewal' workers rushed to join Solidarity. Soon it had almost 10 million members and was fast becoming the most important force of resistance against the PUWP governments.



Solidarity C

But some people have argued that Solidarity was not a progressive organisation. They have argued that Solidarity was in fact leading the workers astray. These people point to the role which the Catholic Church has played in the organisation. They say that Solidarity was just a tool of the Catholic Church.

It is true that Solidarity often used religious symbols in its campaigns of protest. It is also true that church officials were influential among

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many of the Solidarity leaders. But we must remember that before Solidarity was formed it was the Catholic Church that had opposed the authoritarian power of the PUWP government. It was the church which had spoken out against economic mismanagement, corruption and privilege in government. So millions of Poles, including workers, had looked to the church to protect them. As a result, when Solidarity was formed many workers wanted to see Solidarity and the church join forces against the government. But it seems that the church was not so keen on this. The church seemed to fear that Solidarity would replace it as the champion of the people. When Solidarity was eventually crushed in 1981 the Catholic Church did little to defend it.

It is then true that there was a conservative side to many of Solidarity's members, including some of the leaders. Perhaps these workers put too much faith in the church? They mistakenly relied on the church to join with them in their struggle for 'socialist renewal' in Poland.

DEMAND FOR OWNERSHIP

But the conservative side of Solidarity was not its only side. At the same time as some workers were looking for an alliance with the church others were developing a progressive set of demands for Solidarity to fight for. These demands were based on the public ownership of the means of production in Poland. They included:

- * the equalisation of wages,
- * major improvements for the lowest paid,
- * the extension of food services and social services,
- * the retention of full employment,
- * the abolition of official privileges,
- * the democratic accountability of business managers and economic planners.

In other words, Solidarity was demanding a radical socialist democracy in Poland.

So Solidarity had both a conservative and progressive side. But it is important to remember that even the church-supporters in Solidarity supported these demands. This suggests that these workers were not reactionary, as has been claimed, but that they were confused. The progressive members of Solidarity hoped to educate the others through



Protest in 1981

struggle.

So we can see that, despite its name, Solidarity was not a disciplined and united organisation. Rather, it was seriously divided and broken into factions. As a trade union it was also weakened by the fact that its shop floor organisation was poor. Also, it did not organise workers on industrial lines. Instead, it organised on a regional basis. This reflects the fact that in many ways Solidarity was more of a political organisation than a trade union.



Solidarity's headquarters in Warsaw

There was also a serious division within Solidarity over the strategies and tactics to be used in the struggle. One faction wanted to concentrate on economic reforms rather than take up political issues. This faction hoped that eventually Solidarity would win acceptance from the PUWP government. They hoped eventually to form an alliance with both the Catholic Church and the PUWP which would give them influence in running the country. This was the moderate faction.

The other faction was the radical faction. They rejected the moderate approach. They wanted Solidarity to seize power on behalf of the workers movement and to govern Poland. They rejected the idea of an alliance with the PUWP and the church. They wanted to take up political issues immediately.

The central leadership of Solidarity was broadly speaking controlled by the moderate faction. Lech Walesa, Solidarity's leader, was part of this group. The leadership was afraid of the political demands being made by the radical fraction. They called on the members to be cautious and tried to hold back the forward movement of the workers. Sometimes

they used undemocratic methods to achieve this. The radicals attacked them for this. The radicals called Walesa 'a dictatorial vain fool'. They attacked him for entering into discussions with the government and church without consulting the rank-and-file. In the election for leader of Solidarity, Walesa only managed to get 55 per cent of the vote. This shows how strong the radical faction was within Solidarity. This also shows how badly divided the organisation was.

But despite these divisions Solidarity won some important reforms. This was because it had the support of the mass of the people. It won freedom for the press and freedom of travel. It won the extension of religious freedom. It won the removal from office of large numbers of corrupt state and party officials.

Solidarity's influence even extended into the ranks of the PUWP itself. As the Polish workers through Solidarity took up the struggle for radical socialist democracy in Poland, so large sections of the governing Party responded. These Party

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members began demanding the democratisation of the PUWP. A million Party members joined Solidarity and raised the cry 'odnova' which means 'renewal'. Under pressure from the rank-and-file in the Party the established leaders began to fall. First Gierak was driven from office to be replaced by Kania. Kania acknowledged the need for reform but he did little to implement reform. The important question here is 'why not'? If Kania saw the need for reform why did he not use his official position as leader of the governing Party to implement the reform?

PRESSURE FROM BUREAUCRATS

The answer lies in the fact that Kania was not only under pressure from Solidarity and the rank-and-file in his own Party. He was also under pressure from the senior bureaucrats and technocrats in his government to resist reforms. These people feared that the reforms would mean they would lose their positions of privilege and power in Poland. These people had no support among the Polish people. But they did have the support of the Soviet Union which was strongly opposed to the democratisation of the Party and government in Poland. Kania thought that the Soviet Union might well use its military strength to smash the reform movement as it had done earlier in Hungary and Czechoslovakia. When the Soviet army began massive military manoeuvres right on Poland's borders it seemed as though they were about to invade Poland.

Kania's failure to act decisively led to his removal from office and replacement by Jaruzelski. Like Kania, Jaruzelski also claimed to support reform in Poland. But unlike Kania, Jaruzelski was a general in the army — and the army had very close ties with the Soviet Union.

DECLARES MARTIAL LAW

As the demands from the people reached new heights Jaruzelski acted. He claimed that the deterioration of the economy was so serious that strong government was now necessary. He claimed that Solidarity's increasingly political demands were making it impossible for the PUWP to rule. So in December 1981 he declared Martial Law in Poland.

Under Jaruzelski the Polish Army moved into the streets and took over the government of the country. In doing this the Army was supported by the technocrats in the PUWP and by the Soviet Union. But the Army was opposed by Solidarity and the democrats in the PUWP. Thus in order to succeed the Polish Army had to crush Solidarity. This it



Lech Walesa (front) at the last legal meeting of Solidarity

did by banning the organisation, by arresting thousands of its leaders and members, by smashing its meetings and demonstrations.

But unlike the Army, Solidarity is rooted in the working people of Poland. Though Solidarity can no longer function legally it continues to survive in the hearts of the working people. It continues to organise from underground and in exile. Since Martial Law was declared strikes, go-slows and mass cynicism have continued in Poland, depressing the economy even further. Faced with this working class resistance Jaruzelski has been forced to release many Solidarity leaders, including Lech Walesa. And recently Jaruzelski was forced to lift Martial Law.

But the democrats have by now been purged from the PUWP. The Party which now governs Poland again is run by the old established bureaucrats and technocrats. It is authoritarian and undemocratic. It has maintained the ban on Solidarity, continues to imprison Solidarity activists and to ban opposition meetings and demonstrations. In this the Party has the clear support of the Soviet Union and other Communist powers. (East Germany's leader, Honecker, recently paid a good-will visit to Poland).

But the Party also has some support from the Catholic Church which, though critical, is opposed to Solidarity's return. And the Party also has the support of the capitalist banks who want strong government in Poland in the hope that this will enable them to get their money back.

But for the workers of Poland there are only higher prices for food and other essentials and increased hardship. With no organisation to fight openly for them the workers have suffered a terrible blow. Their dream for a land of democracy and greater wealth has ended in tragedy. It has ended in authoritarian rule and increasing poverty. But their resistance continues. It continues because Poland's workers are the same as workers throughout the rest of the world. They dream the same dream. They dream of freedom, of democracy, full employment and rising living standards. And, like the workers in other parts of the world, the Polish workers have shown that they are prepared to struggle and suffer to make their dream become a reality. The struggle of the Polish workers stands as an inspiration to other workers in their struggle. And despite the terrible defeat they have suffered, we know that the Polish workers will not give up their struggle.

MAWU wins major battles in Natal

A NUMBER of major long-standing battles have been won by the Metal and Allied Workers Union in Natal.

For over two years workers at WB Camerons in Jacobs have been pushing for the recognition of MAWU at their factory.

In June this year things came to a head when the shop stewards put forward a demand for an R18 across-the-board increase.

ANGERED

This was the same demand that MAWU had put forward at the metal industry's industrial council but the 'sell-out' unions on the council agreed on far less.

Predictably, the company said they would look at the wage demand but refused to negotiate with the shop stewards until it had signed a recognition agreement with MAWU.

Angered at this response, workers staged two one-day work stoppages.

Branch secretary, Geoff Schreiner said the union had tried to resolve the matter.

'But it appears that with the help of Barlows head office, the company was prepared to sit out the strike', he said.

GO-SLOW

The workers then changed tactics by going on a go-slow which reduced production by as much as 50 percent in the major departments.

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'At least this way workers were able to ensure that they got paid while involved in industrial action,' Brother Schreiner said.

The go-slow was called off when the company agreed to negotiate an agreement and thereafter to discuss wages.

'Within three weeks we had completed a recognition agreement which just goes to show the initial bad faith of the company,' Brother Schreiner said.

However, wage negotiations did not go as smoothly, because the company was prepared to only offer a maximum increase of R4,05 a week — a long way off the workers' demand of R18.

BALLOT

MAWU declared a dispute with the company which was referred to mediation and at the same time held a strike ballot.

Three hundred and two workers voted in favour of the strike and there were 21 spoilt papers — none voted against.

As part of the dispute, the union had charged that the company should have provided it with reasonable information on the company's financial standing.

Eventually WB Camerons agreed to provide reasonable information during wage negotiations and agreed to pay a R4,50 per week increase backdated to July 1, a R1,35 increase from September 1 and a further

R4,50 increase from January 1.

This effectively brings the minimum wages to R90 a week — the MAWU minimum wage demand.

The union has also won this demand at Prestige SA in Pietermaritzburg where an R8,10 per week increase hiked the minimum wages up to R90.

MCKINNON

Another major victory was won at Pietermaritzburg factory, Mckinnon Chain.

Brother Schreiner said that during the past four years that the union had been active at the factory, the company had failed to keep to any agreement it had made with MAWU.

'They agreed to give us access — this was withdrawn.

'The company agreed to meet with shop stewards — they have not done this for months.

ENOUGH

'They agreed to give us stop orders but this was also withdrawn. Finally they agreed to negotiate a recognition agreement — one and a half years later we were still waiting for this,' he said.

At the middle of this year, the workers decided they had had enough and said it was clear that the company had no intention of recognising the union so a

dispute was declared.

Brother Schreiner said the Industrial Council had been notified and officials from the council had flown down from Johannesburg to urge Mckinnon Chain to settle the dispute.

SETTLED

In settlement negotiations, the company agreed to submit a draft recognition agreement within two weeks and that it would take all possible steps to conclude recognition talks before the end of November.

However, the union has said that should the company again appear to be avoiding recognising MAWU it would proceed straight to the Industrial Court.

Meanwhile at Scottish Cables, where MAWU declared a dispute after the company refused to open wage talks at factory level, the company has agreed to push the Cable Manufacturers' Association to re-open negotiations with the union.

In turn, MAWU agreed not to push for factory level negotiations if talks were re-opened with the employers' association.

SIGNED

Following the example of the metal industry's main industrial council, the Cable Manufacturers earlier this year also signed a wage agreement with the 'sell out' unions in the face of fierce opposition from MAWU.

Another Nampak firm free from closed shop

WORKERS at Nampak in Pietermaritzburg have won the right to be represented by the Paper Wood and Allied Workers Union.

The Nampak factory is covered by the closed shop of the printing industry which forces workers to belong to TUCSA's SA Typographical Union.

But recently in a ballot held at the factory, workers voted in favour of resigning from the TUCSA union.

Now the factory has been given an exemption from the closed shop and workers are free to be members of the PWAU.

This is the fourth Nampak factory to be exempted from the closed shop since PWAU started organising at Nampak's packaging factories.

A PWAU organiser said the Nampak workers were 'thrilled at their well earned success'.