

Various Authors

Two articles on Poland

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1. Gdansk: an eye-witness account

Howard Besser and Terry Downs

This article is an attempt to discuss what we saw in several days at the Lenin Shipyards in Gdansk.

Regular newspapers can provide the 'factual' account of what happened, but certain important elements are just not discussed in them. Therefore we don't want to go through a day by day history of the strike, but rather we want to write about what we, coming from a libertarian perspective, discovered from general observations and discussions with the workers.

According to workers' accounts, the main (13 August) strike in the Lenin Shipyards started quite spontaneously. Price rises had touched off numerous strikes in other areas of the country, several of which had been settled quickly, including previous strikes at the Lenin Shipyards. As one worker put it, "I got up to work one morning and discovered that the trams and buses were not working. (I later found out that this was due to a strike). When I arrived at the shipyards, people were standing around in small groups, talking about the latest price rises. As time went on, the groups got larger and larger. Finally we all went to the head of the shipyard and delegated one man to talk to the boss. The boss asked him who he was to be talking with. He replied, 'I represent the free workers' union'. When the boss said he could do nothing, we decided to occupy the factory, and began formulating our list of demands".

In making the list of demands, the strikers were painfully aware of their history, one of their first demands being a memorial to those killed in the riots following the strikes of 1970–71. They did not want 1980 to be a repeat of 1970, when the government told the rest of Poland that the Gdansk workers were 'hooligans, anarchists and atheists'. They avoided any actions of violence or sabotage that might give the state ammunition against them. The entire strike was incredibly peaceful, and the only aggressive actions the strikers used were simply withholding their labour and occupying factories.

As over 80 per cent of Poland is Catholic, another early demand was for freedom of religion. "In the beginning we didn't know who would support us", one worker told us. "We wanted the people of Poland to know that we were as moral as they were, that we cared about our country and believed in God as much as they". Whether it was for moral or political reasons, the people of Poland certainly did not regard the Gdansk strikers as hooligans, but rather as heroes. In the Gdansk region, virtually everyone, even Party members, supported the strike wholeheartedly. And support for the strike seemed to be very strong throughout the rest of Poland as well. As much as we have a personal disdain for religion

(particularly Catholicism) we believe that this religious feeling did play a major unifying role in the strikes. From our point of view, the sight of thousands of strikers saying mass together every day was not particularly appealing, but it obviously was a major force, keeping the strikers together and maintaining the support of the general populace.

Among other demands voiced by the strikers were those for freedom of speech and freedom of the press. The fact that the strikers were demanding not only changes in working conditions, but social and political changes that affect the rest of the population was very important. As a Warsaw journalist and Party member put it, "This is the first strike in Poland, maybe in any Socialist country, where the workers are demanding large-scale freedoms for others, not just themselves".

But by far the most important demand voiced by the strikers was for 'free unions'. Virtually every striker we talked to told us that though they might be willing to compromise on a number of other demands, the demand for free unions was absolutely the most important, and- uncompromisable. When the government negotiator proposed free elections within the existing Party-controlled unions he was nearly booed out of the shipyards. The workers were adamant — they would accept nothing less than free unions. But as to what exactly a 'free union' would be — well, there were varying opinions. Many workers said that it remained to be seen. Some thought that what the western countries had were 'free unions', while others felt they wanted something totally new. Most were united in the view that they would work out exactly what a free union would be when the time came. And they know they have the power to strike if something goes wrong.

We have a lot of faith in how they will organise these unions. The way they have already organised themselves (at least in theory) into the strike committee is (we feel) very close to an ideal model upon which to build 'free unions'. The strike committee (set up spontaneously and relying on no previous organisation) was composed of representatives from over 400 enterprises on strike in the greater Gdansk region. Many of these enterprises rotated their delegates every few days. And the delegates were supposed to be in constant contact with the workers. Attempts were made to keep as many people as possible informed as to what was going on in the strike committee. Radio broadcasts were not possible as the radio stations were under government control for most of the strike. But the workers did rig up a loudspeaker system which brought the strike committee deliberations to a good deal of the 16,000 workers occupying the Lenin Shipyards. At the same time, this system served to unify the strikers with the rest of the people, because there was no other way to find out what was happening except to go to the shipyards and listen to the loudspeaker. Thousands came every day (and many at night) both to show their support and to obtain information. Strike bulletins were printed every few days. When these were thrown over the fence

of the occupied shipyard, the people waiting outside grabbed madly for them. And when someone got one, they would read it aloud to those around them. Later, they would be posted in numerous places along the fence and people could be seen copying down all the major points to take back to their factories and towns. Though the government had cut off all telephone, telegraph, mail and radio communication with the Gdansk region, people spontaneously found new non-hierarchical ways of communication.

Other new relationships were also built. There was no money exchanged within the shipyard. Farmers brought their produce to the strikers instead of selling it to the state stores. In fact, despite government claims of food shortages in the Gdansk region, we found food more plentiful there than in other regions of Poland. The food lines that were commonplace in Warsaw were non-existent in the Gdansk area.

However strong the revolutionary fervour of the Polish people, one important practical consideration was in the back of their heads — the knowledge that if their demands went beyond a certain limit, they would find the Russian tanks on their doorstep. And being surrounded by Soviet bloc countries, they would be totally cut off from the rest of the world. The intense hatred for the Soviet Union amongst the Poles is almost unimaginable, and the very last thing they want is to be directly (physically) dominated by the USSR. They did seem very confident that their demands did not go too far as to cause Soviet intervention. All the strike committee members we talked to were careful to point out to us that their movement was not ‘political’. ‘We only want control over the things that affect our day-to-day lives. Politics is the business of the Party’, they told us. They knew that if the Party didn’t maintain some kind of control (possibly predominantly in foreign relations) the Russians would move in to assert control. Most people’s vision of the immediate future seemed to be that the free unions might control most of the Polish economy while the Party would be recognised to have some kind of nominal power. Though everyone seemed to hate the Party almost as much as the Russians, most seemed to feel that it would be another decade before they could do away with the party itself.

And just as the people hate and fear the Russians, they seem to look hopefully towards the West, particularly the USA, for support. There are two basic reasons for this: firstly, Poles listening to Eastern Europe Radio know that they’re hearing lies about their own country. When they listen to Radio Free Europe, Voice of America or the BBC, they know that the criticisms they hear of the Russian or Polish leaders are well-founded, so, by extension, many begin to believe the positive things they hear about western countries. Secondly, they know that they are not strong enough to withstand a Soviet intervention, so they look towards the western powers to help make the Soviets weak enough not to invade them.

Although the situation at the shipyards looked very good to us, we did see some things that we are quite critical of. Because the spirit of the Poles was so unified against the Party, many people were having difficulties seeing other causes of oppression. For instance, the historical devotion to the Catholic Church and the Pope made the people unaware of how, in a personal way, the Church oppresses them in their daily lives. At one point, we did see the people begin to question at least some of the devotion. One morning the Party newspaper printed a call from the head of the Polish Catholic Church for the strikers to return to work. The strikers were unanimous in their opposition to the statement and actually began questioning his religious authority. The opposition was so strong, in fact, that the priest officiating at the shipyards found it necessary to announce to the strikers that evening that the church official had been quoted out of context, and that the church really did support the strikers. At that point, the strikers stopped questioning the role of the church.

We also saw the creation of a personality cult around the leader — Lech Walesha. He was considered a hero — people clustered around him for his autograph and listened attentively to all he said. They were so united in the struggle that they could not even comprehend that their fellow worker turned leader could potentially cause a problem for them as much as the Party had done.

Though in theory the structure of the strike committee was very democratic, in day to day practice much of this broke down for varying reasons. Some factories were almost a day's trip away, so most of these found it practical not to rotate their delegates. The fact that the workers had forced the government to talk to them as a collective group of over 400 delegates (and broadcast live over their loudspeaker) in the shipyards was a major breakthrough. However, a decision was made to change to a negotiating group of several people on each side. And speaking for the workers were experts in economics who were 'sympathetic' to the strikes. Because of the development of a kind of hierarchy it sometimes took several days for information to filter down to the workers in the shipyard and in the instance concerning the free unions, we knew about the decision three days before it was officially announced to everyone else.

Though there were several vociferous women in the strike committee, the support roles — making sandwiches, cleaning up, and typing — were mainly filled by women.

We feel the strike was a very important experience in self-management for the Polish workers. At this point we don't want to attempt an analysis of what is happening in Poland as the people are rapidly changing their opinions and goals. There is much that we in the West can learn from the experiences that the Poles are going through. We are planning to write a more detailed analysis of the Polish situation several months hence.

2. The betrayal begins (Editorial)

Just like everywhere else, the heady Polish summer moves slowly towards autumn; the nights draw in; the brilliant sun of the world's media begin to sink and the hot news of last month cools down on inside pages.

Hot as it was, it did not quite set the world alight. The great, expected climax was not reached and the Russian tanks did not roll.

A few heads did, though, near the top. What can only be described as cosmetic changes, the sort that any party can make without altering its own strength in any way, were publicised as culling out men who had lost touch with the working class roots of the Communist Party, had mishandled their responsibilities, fallen down on the job.

On top of all this, suddenly came stories of moral corruption, financial back-handers (as distinct from the perfectly moral and justifiable privileges like fine apartments, country houses, large cars, etc. etc. for party officials) which made the Warsaw hierarchy look just as human as any in the West. But they had to go — just as in the West.

Through the earlier reshuffle, Gierek himself sat tight, no doubt privately telling himself that he really should have carried out some at least of the promises with which he bought off the strikers in 1970, getting himself the top job. He brought people with 'moderate' reputations into positions where they could be seen to be listening sympathetically to the determined workers. After the workers had been striking for a fortnight, he granted them the right to strike — an amazing act of generosity in the circumstances since they had already taken that right by their own direct action!

He also granted them the right to form their own 'free' trade unions — the basic structure for which they had already created in their works strikes committees. And then, as if all this had made him remember something about the emancipation of the workers being the task of the workers themselves — he had a heart attack.

Or so we are told. Whether Gierek's coronary will prove to be as cosmetic as the changes at the top, we shall not know yet awhile, but the occasion was convenient to change still further the faces at the top — which is, after all, what the cosmetic art is all about.

Into Gierek's job steps a man who is hailed as a 'moderate' and has, until now, maintained a low profile. One reason for this is that he has been busy working his way up the party ladder, occupying the party posts which have given him close relationships with the police, the militia and the armed forces. Stanislaw Kania's 'unanimous' election to the top job by the central committee was reputedly greeted with enthusiasm by Moscow. Having experienced the wonderful stability that

can be maintained in a state by the greatest apparatchik of all time — Josef Stalin — Brezhnev and his boys must have heaved a sigh of relief when a similar climber crept into the saddle in Poland.

And what is the real party task facing Kania now? It was summed up in an anonymous quote from a ‘party journalist’ in Warsaw, the day Gierek collapsed. He said, “First of all, we resisted the grassroots movement for change. Then we accepted it. But now we have to take the third step and lead it, and fat is the real difficulty” (our emphasis).

That is what Kania’s job is now: to lead the workers back into the party’s own backyard. To contain their demands within bounds the party can manage. It is the oldest trick in the book — to yield in the heat of battle and then gradually to take it all back in the fullness of time.

It is said that Kania was opposed to the use of force against the strikers when a faction in the Politburo was arguing for it at the time (29 August) that Gierek was settling with the workers in Gdansk. At that point Kania was responsible for ‘security’ (secret police?) and he was backed up by General Jaruzelski, commander of the Polish armed forces, while Admiral Janczyszyn told the local party in Gdansk that he was not prepared to put his men in direct confrontation with the strikers.

In other words, as we suspected all along, the party had no confidence that the armed forces would back them in a fight against the people — just as, quite obviously, the Russians also felt that they could not rely upon the Polish army’s support should the Soviets invade. In fact, quite the opposite, they might well have had a fight with the Polish forces on their hands.

So it was a case of softly, softly, catchee monkey. On paper the party has graciously yielded to the undeniably just demands of the Gdansk strikers — subject of course to the necessity to recognise what they call the ‘raison d’Etat’ — the objects of the state. And it is interesting to notice how this phrase has replaced the better known ‘raison d’etre’ — a rather more objective object — the object of being.

Another state that we should not forget, of course, in all this, is that tiny state in the middle of Rome — the Vatican. It might be complete coincidence that this upheaval in Poland happened so soon after the Pope’s visit, but the fact is that the other great totalitarian power fighting for the soul of Poland is the Roman Catholic Church — with more than 1000 years of experience in wheeling and dealing to draw upon.

One of the more disturbing factors in the Polish struggle has been the role of Lech Walesa — the most publicised of the strikers’ leaders — who was calling for ‘caution’ at about the same time as the Polish Pope was saying the same thing in the course of leading masses of Italian Catholics in prayers for what he called “My Poland”.

Walesa has been recognised by the Communist Party as the workers' leader entrusted with the task of setting up the organisation for the new 'independent' unions. Having appointed Jacek Kuron (the dissident 'intellectual' who produced the influential underground paper Robotnik) as head of his advisory staff, Welesa went off to say mass with Cardinal Wyszynski, following a private audience.

'Stability' is in the interests of both the state and the church. Both authoritarian, for each power-hungry outfit stability means the suppression of the people to their separate dogma. Discipline and obedience are key words in both of these religions – Catholicism and Communism. If the Polish people have been fighting for freedom this summer, they are well warned to beware of both these organisations – even to look, if they will, to what is happening in Iran, where the situation is not dissimilar.

The Marxists may have forgotten their most essential text of all – but we do well constantly to remind the working class that – the task of emancipation is the task of the working class alone. And by Christ, as the Pope may say, are they alone:

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