

## **25 Years of Solidarity – From Workers Revolution to Capitalism**

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The circumstances and events surrounding the official commemoration celebrations of the Solidarity uprising 25 years ago speak for themselves. The drama and farce of the situation facing Poland today are reflected within them; a grotesque irony in which the ruling elites have appointed themselves as the successors of the August revolt of 1980.

The Establishment's propaganda campaign endeavours to associate the Solidarity uprising with the anti-communist motifs of the teachings of Pope John Paul II, with the West's victory in the Cold War, and even with Wiktor Juszczek's pseudo-revolution in Ukraine. A measure of the scale of manipulation effected through this occasion can be seen in the pronounced oversight committed by the officials of the Institute of National Memory (Instytut Pamięci Narodowej - IPN). The IPN added a disk with the contents of all the issues and supplements of the 'Solidarity Weekly' from 1981 to the special anniversary bulletin. Only the supplement to issue 29 containing the Solidarity program agreed at the first Congress of Delegates was omitted. This was the most important document of the Union!

The attitude of the Gdansk ship yard workers provides a good insight into the character of the trials and conflicts experienced by workers 25 years ago this August, leading to a great victory for Polish workers. The privatisation and parcelling off of entire industries into hundreds of companies has already led to the dismissal of thousands of shipyard workers. Today a board listing workers demands hangs from the gate of the shipyard, just as it did 25 years ago. This protest however, did not have support of Solidarity's National leadership.

When on August 26<sup>th</sup> officials and opposition leaders of the past, led by Lech Walesa, arrived in Gdansk to listen to Jean Michel Jarre in Concert, trade unionists from the neighbouring shipyards demonstrated against the anti-worker policies of the past and present Polish governments. Significantly, a sizable portion of Solidarity's former leaders organised an alternative commemoration of the 25-year anniversary.

Andrzej Gwiazda, Anna Walentynowicz and other leaders of the 1980 uprising spoke out in 1989 and continue to speak of the betrayal and anti-worker plots led by security service agents which they say turned Solidarity into a locomotive for capitalism. Their slogan is a bitter adaptation of the official commemoration logo. To the statement 'It Began in Gdansk' the heroes of the first Solidarity added 'And Ended in Magdalen' (a reference to the town near Warsaw where the governing elite and opposition sealed the restoration of capitalism in Poland). Karol Modzelewski, co-author with Jacek Kuron of the famous 'Open Letter to the Party' (1965) is also critical of the official commemoration, but from a completely different perspective. Modzelewski spent eight and half years of his life in Communist regime jails. Last month Lech Walesa announced at the commemoration seminar packed with former opposition leaders, that he had known as far back as 1980 that 'We will have to build capitalism' Modzelewski retorted 'He alone must have been thinking about

capitalism. I certainly wasn't. I wouldn't have spent a week nor a month, let alone 8.5 years in jail for capitalism!'

25-years after the coastal strikes, Poland is everything except the successor of workers protests. The ultraliberal policies implemented by all the democratic governments post 1989 have led to thousand-fold rises in Poles living below the 'social minimum' (defined as a living standard of £130 (192,4 EUR) per person and £297 (440,4 EUR) for a three person family per month) affecting 15% of the population in 1989 to 47% in 1996, and 59% in 2003. Today unemployment stands at 18% (in 2007 14 %). Almost 4 million people in a country totalling 38 million live below the 'minimum of existence'. On the other hand, the richest 5% of the population consumes over 50% of society's general consumption. In the international political arena, Poland is regarded as an uncritical advocate of the imperialistic aspirations of the USA in Iraq, and as Washington's Trojan horse in the EU.

How did a workers revolt give way to Poland participating in the international-law breaking invasion of Iraq? How did it happen, that a country which one had workers self-government is ruled today by Prime Minister Marek Belka, who in his stint as director of economic reconstruction in Iraq with the Coalition Provisional Authority violated both The Hague Regulations and Geneva Conventions? How did it come to this? That a powerful and democratic movement of self-determination bore poisoned fruit in the form of an alienated political stage where it is becoming harder and harder to distinguish the Left from the Right; a depoliticised population lending its' ears all too often to Politicians promising iron fisted solutions to clean up a variety of 'enemies' – communists, swindlers, criminals, homosexuals and more. The answers to these questions hold the key to understanding the predicament of Polish society circa 2005, and in particular, the conditions and perspectives of the Polish left.

However, in order to communicate this answer, we need to demolish a few of the main myths surrounding Solidarity which are voiced continually not only by Right wing historians but equally by the mainstream media and heirs of the old regime.

### Workers Revolution

In the summer of 1980, a workers revolution began in Poland. Solidarity was an expression of workers struggle for political and economic emancipation. Despite its' lack of revolutionary phraseology, symbolism and organisation at the level of concrete activity, it can be described as a revolutionary process. It had a worker-oriented character not only due to the arithmetical preponderance – i.e. the sheer numbers - of workers active in the structures of Solidarity, but above all, because of the content of Solidarity's political project. Solidarity's goals were not economic recoveries or reform which can always be written back into the system, any more than it was a return to capitalism. Even the question of political freedoms typical of bourgeois democracy stood in the background.

Despite the strident questioning of the articles in the constitution referring to the entrenched leadership of the communist party, there was no demand for a multi-party system. Democracy was comprehended more according to the traditions of the revolutionary Left such as workers self-management and autonomy and collective

social control over central planning. Therefore, Solidarity was not a pro-capitalist force. It declared itself as behind socialism not only due to the fact that all its' documents acknowledge the inviolability of the socialisation of the economy and other socialist accomplishments of the PRL (The Peoples Republic of Poland) but above all, because it politicised the sphere which the ruling classes in a capitalist world strive at all cost to de-politicise. Polish workers wanted democratic self-determination in the workplace, precisely the domain where the Bourgeoisie wants to see the determination of pure economics.

Point six of the famous Gdansk Agreements states that 'Reform of the domestic economy should rest upon the principle of greater independence for the enterprises and a genuine inclusion of workers self-management within their administration'. Another demand accepted into the program of the Autonomous Republic during the first Solidarity Congress in August 1981 was that the domestic economy should rely on the public sector "which is managed by a collective represented by a workers council, operated by a director, who is appointed by way of competition through the council and responsible to it in the interests of society and his/her own collective'.

In spite of Solidarity's national leadership, which aspired to compromise with the government, Congress delegates decreed that the union 'in the struggle for workers self-management and a socialised enterprise will continue to proceed in accordance with the will of the collectives'. The uncompromising stance of the Congress revealed in its' sharpness, the dominant logic of the mass movement from 1980-81. Radical autonomous activist Zbigniew M. Kowalewski said of those years, 'In Solidarity, it was difficult to overcome with the will of the collectives in the large industrial workplaces. Whoever had that will behind them could boldly count on it and know that with it they could win, even against Walesa'.

### Martial Law and the Return to Capitalism

Martial law or 'The State of War' interrupted the carnival that had been evolving since August 1980. The workers movement became completely pacified or pushed underground. It was this movement, and not the leadership of Solidarity - which was being interned in relatively good conditions - which was the real victim in the Martial Law period. In these new conditions, Solidarity had to lose its' mass-movement character. Nevertheless, most of the trade union structures survived in secret, but the logic of the mass movement which had kept them animated, was shattered. Opposition leaders and activists became effectively cut off from their social base. Under these new conditions, their support came not from the factories and industrial plants, but the church.

In 1984, despite 80% of Polish workers declaring their support for self governance and autonomous control of their workplaces, this mood was not reflected in the politics of the opposition. Less than a year later, the Provisional National Commission along with Zbigniew Bujak and Bogdan Borusewicz carried out a serious internal attack on Solidarity's program, introducing to its program a range of pro-capitalist elements into it.

The evolution of the Right was bolstered by a free-flow of foreign aid and support from Western regimes, culminating at its highest point with the USA SEED Act

(Support for Eastern European Democracy) passed by US Congress in 1989. The Act saw over \$200m injected into the centres of the opposition to promote a neo-liberal economic agenda in the region. In Poland this capital was used to create a network of conservative think tanks, the most serious of which is the Polish American Freedom Foundation (PAFF). These think-tanks became the incubators of the cadre for the new governing elites.

What is interesting is that these pro-capitalist tendencies in Solidarity appeared within the communist party around the same time. When Michael Gorbachov's government launched Perestroika, the regime in Warsaw began to drift towards the introduction of market mechanisms. These were openly activated on a mass scale under the governments of Zbigniew Messner and Mieczyslaw F. Rakowski (last prime minister of PRL) Technocrats and regional party barons waited impatiently for the green light to privatise, knowing that this would enable them to claw back the running of factories themselves.

### The Absolute Sorrow of Restoration

If 1980-81 was a revolutionary period in Poland, in 1989 we saw its' total opposite. In Poland, the restorative character of the events of 1989 was felt more acutely than in Berlin or Prague because the changes in the system were not achieved through or accompanied by any mass social movement. When Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki became ill during his inaugural appearance in Parliament, it was an ironic symbol of the 'energy' of the old opposition. The grassroots revolutionary energies of Solidarity were finally suppressed by the opposition elites, with Lech Walesa at the helm, one year earlier. 1988 saw the last workers mass mobilisation in Poland capable of breaking through the universal apathy of 1986-1987. The country was swept by a wave of combative factory occupations and strikes organised by young workers. Officially, Solidarity's leadership was seen to be supporting the strikes, however on the ground, it was struggling to extinguish the whole movement because it threatened the mediation role of the church in the ongoing negotiations with the government.

If 1980 was a year of utopia then 1989 represented the end of all the utopias, illusions and dreams of the beginnings of the movement. The lack of enthusiasm experienced by most of the population translated into a rock-bottom turn-out at the first free elections (62% - 10 out of 27 million eligible voters did not take part). The mass meetings and demonstrations that had characterised 1980 were absent. The popular conviction that the future of the country was being decided behind the backs of its citizens dominated. A fatalistic anticipation of what the future might bring flooded the factories and industrial plants. The measure discouragement of this was the widespread belief (held by nearly half of all workers), that they had no influence over the direction of the changes then being implemented in Poland. Despite the vast majority of workers having a negative attitude towards privatisation, actual resistance to it was weak.

Restoration brought with it disintegration in political activities and the privatisation of aspiration. People who 10 years earlier has believed in social change now just wanted a career, quick returns, and personal happiness. Political nihilism, summarised in the slogan 'Whatever we do, they'll do what they want anyway', soon replaced the past

faith in democracy and its institutions. Above all, the previous motor of Solidarity – the working class – found itself on the sidelines, frustrated and deprived of any political representation. Without any organisation or any left-wing leadership, many of the movement's segments began to drift towards Catholic fundamentalism, twinning a rejection of capitalism with authoritarianism, anti-Semitism, and conspiracy theory-based interpretations of history. The legacy of this drift today are 2 million members of the Radio Maria family – transmitting the fundamentalist broadcasts of Tadeusz Rydzyk, the swelling ranks of The League of Polish Families' (Liga Polskich Rodzin - LPR), as well as the anti-Semitic cries within the crowds of desperate dockers protesting the anniversary of the August strikes.

In the 25-years that have lapsed since the Gdansk strikes of 1980, Polish society has walked a twisted and intricate path between the trial-run of realising the dreams of democratic self-determination to a state of political nihilism cohering with an erosion of the very concept of democracy. In one respect, this path resembles a circle. Just as a quarter of a century ago, in today's Poland the only group which takes the promises of democracy seriously is the group which has the least from it. It's possible to see from the successive social protests that it is workers who are stubbornly holding on to the ideas of a democratic society, as a community which can realise the principles of social justice as a reality and not just in the form of equality but also in terms of social control over strategic decision-making in the economic sphere. This position contrasts vividly with the ideas and agenda of the political class which seems intent on limiting an already anaemic democracy exemplified by the singular election mandates launched by the liberal-conservative Citizens Platform party and the introduction of tuition fees for higher education, to the awarding of lock-out rights for bosses planned by Belka's government.

The restoration of capitalism in Poland has created a social wasteland. The current 'alterglobalisation' phenomenon is more of a social scene (activist scene) than a social movement. Workers protests are truly dramatic and often end in riots (last July saw rioting in the streets of Warsaw during a Miners demonstration), but they lack co-ordination and a political tendency. Even when a wave of strikes and protests rises, as happened in 2002-2003, forcing changes in the budget policies of the 'leftwing' government of the SLD (The Democratic Left Alliance), they do not leave behind any lasting structures or representation.

In Poland today, Solidarity means almost nothing. In the eyes of ordinary citizens it is seen as compromised, corrupt and treacherous. It has become less and less of a point of reference for workers struggling to defend their liquidated workplaces. For them, more important It is the solidarity with a small 's' that means more to them.