

First-Hand Account from Poland:

In the Eye of the Storm

For the past several weeks the world has been waiting for the Soviets to drop the other shoe—the invasion of Poland. The escalating spiral of struggle between Polish workers and the government and party has brought numerous warnings of the dire consequences that confront the country. On December 4 the Polish United Workers Party Central Committee issued a statement to the people of Poland: "Countrymen, the fate of the nation and the country

hang in the balance. . . . Continuing unrest is leading our homeland to the brink of economic and moral destruction." Then, on Friday, December 5, the Soviet news agency Tass announced that an emergency secret summit meeting of the Warsaw Pact had just been concluded in Moscow. The official communique from this meeting declared a "reprieve" for the Poles. There would be no Soviet invasion to restore order—at least for the moment. Mean-

while, Lech Walesa and other leaders of the new Polish unions seemed to be working feverishly, along with the hierarchy of Poland's Catholic Church, in an effort to cool things out and prevent the outbreak of another wave of strikes. Their argument to the workers is that unless the Polish government and party, headed by new First Secretary Stanislaw Kania, is able to restore some semblance of stability, Polish workers risk losing all they have gained

in the wake of Soviet military intervention.

The following story, sent to the RW by a correspondent who arrived in Poland shortly before the last outbreak of strikes that was touched off by the raiding of the Warsaw offices of the independent union, Solidarity, and the arrest of its printer Jan Narozniaka, takes a look at the mood of the Polish

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workers in the wake of the victories they have won to date and in the face of the Soviet threats.

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Two uniformed security guards suddenly stepped in front of the procession of newsmen quickly making their way to the front gate of the large factory complex in Ursus just outside of Warsaw. The man in front of this string of camera-toting journalists suddenly started arguing in Polish with one of the guards. Standing just outside the guardhouse where this whole scene was unfolding, I looked up at a large red banner that hung on an outside wall of the gatehouse, proclaiming in bold white letters: UWOLNICE JANA NAROZNIAKA—STRAJK (FREE JAN NAROZNIAKA—STRIKE). One of the security guards went back into his office and others were called out to block the front gate from the outside intruders. The young worker who had led us this far turned around and asked through a translator if the journalists would stand aside for a minute. The guard was calling the director and things would be cleared up in a minute. The bright red and white button pinned on the upper left side of his sweater caught my eye. It said simply, "Solidarnosc" (Solidarity). I could sense the impatience of several of the journalists at the delay. The cameraman next to me, video equipment perched on his right shoulder, referring to the guard, asked, "Who does this Kojak dude think he is?" I laughed to myself. Here they were, NBC, CBS and other journalists from various imperialist countries of the West, standing outside a factory, itching to get inside and film the story of the striking workers! When all the time it was obvious that what they really wanted to do, and what the whole U.S. bloc media was doing with this strike, was to use it to slam the Soviets and their client regime in Poland. They couldn't give a damn about the condition of the Polish workers themselves, or what they are fighting for, except in so far as it has a bearing on the interests and plans of the U.S. imperialists.

Suddenly a large, cleancut man in a sportscoat appeared at the factory gates from inside the grounds. He was also wearing a red and white Solidarnosc button on his collar. With him were two workers in their grey work clothes, each wearing a red and white armband. While the man in the sportscoat, a strike committee leader, walked into the guard office and began arguing loudly with the chief of the security guards, the other two workers set up their own security position at the gates and began to check the identification cards of people going in and out of the plant grounds. When one well dressed fellow in a suit and tie, looking just like a manager, tried to leave without showing his I.D., they quickly held him back and demanded that he show it. An interpreter told us that they are making sure that no police agents are allowed to sneak in or out of the plant unnoticed. These security measures, he said, will be enforced for the remainder of the strike.

Shortly the Solidarity official in the sportscoat came out of the guard shack and motioned us to follow him. We quickly made it down a dark muddy road that runs along the plant perimeter. Large, bright green, unfinished tractors were parked on each side of the road. After about 200 yards, passing various sections of the plant, we stopped in front of the large red brick main section of the factory. Again, two workers were standing out in front with the red and white armbands, checking everyone who came in and out of the one door that leads into the large work hall. Behind them was a poster announcing *Strajk!* Stretching about 200 yards in front of us was a silent assembly line, half-built tractors standing dead still. As we moved down the line, cameras clicking, video film rolling, workers who had been sitting and standing around the line began to check out this troop of foreigners who had just entered the factory now under their control.

Five months had passed since the workers at the Ursus Tractor Works, one of the largest and most prestigious factories in the country, with a workforce 16,000 strong, had walked out

over the government's announcement of higher food prices. That strike had touched off the nationwide upheaval last summer that toppled Polish party boss Edward Gierek, unleashed a series of purges in the party hierarchy, and forced the new First Secretary of the party, Stanislaw Kania, and the other party and government leaders to accede to the workers' demands for independent unions and the right to strike.

Since the summer, workers in plants all over the country had waged a series of strikes to gain recognition of their unions and to force factory and government officials to live up to agreements. These strikes and the continuing militancy of the workers directed against the party and the government had created the most severe political crisis that crisis-wracked Poland has experienced in the post-war period.

Now the Ursus strike threatened to touch off a whole new explosion. It had begun a few days ago, after government security forces had raided the Warsaw office of Solidarity, confiscating typewriters and other office equipment and arresting a union printer, Jan Narozniaka, for duplicating supposedly stolen, secret government documents (see *RW* No. 82). Already the workers at the large Rosa Luxemburg electrical plant in the center of Warsaw and the steelworkers at Nova Waza plant on the outskirts of the capital had gone out. Under such slogans as "Free Jana Narozniaka," "Today Jana, Tomorrow Walesa," and "Stop Political Repression," the strike began to spread across the whole central region.

The scene around Warsaw now was quite different from what I had encountered when I arrived in the city only a week before. Then there had been no outward signs of the mass movement that had rocked the rulers of this Soviet satellite. Aside from a few scattered posters around town announcing a fundraising auction of art works for Solidarity and some other signs on shop windows calling on people to "organize in Solidarity" or "Solidarity Today, Success Tomorrow," there was not much evidence of the wild upheaval that had shaken the Soviets' Eastern European empire. The government did its best to immediately cover over any graffiti and rip down any posters or

leaflets that were dispersed. At the University of Warsaw, the site of violent student demonstrations in 1968, I saw one small part of the long bulletin boards at the front gate given over to notices from the newly formed independent student union which was linked to Solidarity. I saw groups of students gathered around trying to read the newest leaflets put out by both the union and the student organization. But here too, there was no outward surge of events that revealed the true strength and depth of the political current surging through Polish society. When I arrived there were no demonstrations, mass meetings, public agitation.

But the calm was superficial. It was like that "intense calm" Lenin spoke of, when under the surface everything is boiling. After the raid on the Solidarity offices, all hell broke loose once again. Suddenly leaflets and small silkscreened posters began to appear everywhere, pasted on walls at main city corners, outside factories and the university and in the subways. Everywhere people would stop, read and discuss the latest events. At Warsaw University the representatives of the NZS (Independent Student Union) that I'd been trying to find for a week were all over the place. Since the government and university officials had not yet granted the student union a room, they set up operations in the main lobby of the administration building, making posters on the floor, typing leaflets on small coffee tables, calling on students to support the workers by striking themselves. The main offices of Solidarity in Warsaw were seething with activity: workers were coming and going, taking the various communiques and leaflets to their respective factories and offices.

Even the government news agencies and radio and TV were forced to report about the strikes relatively accurately and to recount the demands of the strikers. One student told me after hearing a news broadcast that in his whole lifetime he'd never heard a news report that objective.

The reasons for this, and for the government's generally conciliatory tone, were not hard to see. Since summer, the new unions had grown like wildfire, accounting for over 10 million of the

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country's 14 million industrial workers. Shipyard workers in Gdansk told me that sailors in the Polish navy had begun to organize their own unions, which had spread rapidly until the government was forced to come down with a direct order forbidding such activity in the military. When I visited Czestochawa in the southern agricultural area, I was told that a similar order had been issued for workers in the armaments industry after independent unions began to spring up among these workers.

And already links have begun to be established between the industrial workers in the unions and the farmers and agricultural workers. I attended a meeting in Czestochawa where 200 farmers and representatives from 45 provinces met with representatives of Solidarity in order to establish a formal link. For the most part these were not agricultural workers from the state farms, but the small farmers, and even

a few small capitalist farmers, who together still make up almost 80% of the agricultural population. It was a vivid example of how the upsurge draws many different class forces into motion, and in the process exposes and reveals to the working class how these different class forces see things. One of the first debates clearly reflected the rather narrow petty-bourgeois interests of the farmers in attendance. It was over whether workers from the state farms should be included, since the demands of many of these small farmers centered around cheaper land, lower rents and higher prices for their products. Several of the Solidarity workers expressed their amazement at what they termed the "egotisticalness" of these farmers.

On the other hand several stories I heard at the meeting indicated how the power of the mass upheaval that had swept the country in past months had changed some of the relationships that had existed and in particular had affected the attitude of quiescence and acceptance that many of the rural population took towards officialdom. One example was of the group of farmers

who had long been irate at the policies of local party and government officials. After the strike wave began, they also moved, storming into one of these official committee meetings and calling the authorities to account, with one farmer holding up a noose to drive home the point.

This momentum unleashed by the actions of the workers, which is now sending vibrations into all spheres of society, is profoundly disturbing to the Polish leaders and their Soviet masters. At every step they have been forced to make concessions, they have worked mightily to restrict and get the workers to impose limits on their own struggle. After this last strike outbreak, Kania declared that distributing leaflets out in the streets is far beyond the limits of purely trade union activities and complained that the Warsaw Solidarity bureau was too political, ordering Walesa and the presidium of the union to keep their members in line with the government agreement signed in September. But the agreement of Kania and Walesa to keep politics out of the union and to prevent the unions from

becoming a counterforce to the party and classes forces that now rule the country has proven to be rather hollow in practice. This is not the result of the union leadership going back on its word. They definitely do not want to risk their newly acquired position of union leadership by pushing the government to come down hard or bring in the Russians, arguing that many important reforms have been won which should not be jeopardized. In fact, many of the workers I talked to complained of the union bureaucracy already becoming a haven for opportunists looking for a quick ride to the top. And they pointed out that at least some of the current leaders of the new unions are people who had just transferred over from leading positions in the old government unions.

The situation reminded me of Lenin's remarks on the concessions and reforms offered by the Czar during the 1905 revolution. "The... liberals, the opportunists," he said, "were ready to grasp with both hands this 'gift' of the fright-

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ened czar. Like all reformists, our reformists of 1905 could not understand that historic situations arise when reforms, and particularly promises of reforms, pursue only one aim: to allay the unrest of the people, force the revolutionary class to cease, or at least slacken, its struggle."

The profoundly political character of the workers' struggle that has broken loose, despite the fact that its stated aims remain principally economic, is a result of the tremendous surge of power that the actions of the working class have shown in their defiant acts of resistance to the state capitalist rulers, or the "red bourgeoisie" as they are commonly referred to by workers throughout the country.

Despite the efforts of the U.S. "red, white and blue" bourgeoisie to turn the upheaval in Poland to its own interest and characterize it as an "anti-communist" revolt, the workers I spoke with, and I was told that this was the general sentiment, understood that Poland is not a "workers' state." I asked many of them straight out if they thought that the capitalist system as it existed in the West was better, if that's what they were struggling for. Generally the answer was an emphatic negative. And though, to one degree or another, they saw their own ruling class as capitalist, they said they did not want a system of private capital and private ownership of the means of production. At the same time there was no clear understanding expressed as to just what the goals of this movement were or should be, or even how to view the significance of the strikes. Workers I spoke with in Warsaw and in the Baltic region talked more in terms of striking back at their rulers, of finding ways to exert some control over society. They saw the formation of the new unions as a big step in this direction, but as to where things go now, there didn't seem to be much more than the idea of getting the unions together and preventing successful government counterattacks.

It struck me as very similar to the left economism and revolutionary syndicalism of the IWW that fostered the illusion that the working class could accomplish the goal of seizing state power from the bourgeoisie through radical unionism. The 10 million workers in the new unions now grouped around Solidarity would certainly have come close to the old IWW dream of "one big union."

At the same time Marxism-Leninism is held in low esteem among most of the workers since it is allegedly the official ideology of Poland's capitalist rulers and their Soviet imperialist masters. In fact, they have gutted the revolutionary content out of Marxism-Leninism and instead of it being a weapon in the hands of the proletariat, it is used as a club by the rulers to try to beat them into submission. Most of the workers I talked with said they seldom even looked

at a volume of Marx or Lenin after the perfunctory and very dogmatic study that is required in the schools. This was borne out by visits to a couple of bookstores in Warsaw, where the Marxist volumes were stuck away on high shelves accumulating dust. There did seem to be at least one exception to the workers' aversion to studying Marxism and taking it up as a weapon. In Gdansk I saw several quotes from Lenin on the walls of the strike headquarters, and someone told me that the workers did often go through volumes of Lenin looking for quotes that exposed the government.

Yet the thing that struck me time and again, everywhere I went, was that the working class was in motion and that there was a tremendous thirst for knowledge among the rank and file, a desire to have a broader understanding of their struggle, where it was going and its implications. One of the most interesting discussions I had with workers occurred in one industrial city where I showed a group of guys I was talking with several copies of the Polish translation of an article on the strike from the *Revolutionary Worker* that I happened to have with me. The article, which had been passed out among Polish-speaking people in the U.S., analyzed the strike in the context of the global contention between the two superpowers and viewed the strike from the point of view of the seeds of revolutionary struggle of the working class. The leaflet generated heated discussion and great excitement among the workers I was talking to. Not all agreed with everything it said, but everyone said it was the first thing they had seen which attempted to put the strike in a broader context. They asked for copies of the leaflet, saying that they were going to try to reproduce it. On another occasion several workers I was talking with, along with some students, expressed great interest in the copy of *Revolution* I had with me with the article on the unity of the International Communist Movement. Since it was the only copy I had, one of the guys took it and xeroxed the issue, saying they would get it translated.

The government, of course, has tried to paint the militant workers as "anti-socialist" and has made much of the close connection and ties that exist between much of the new unions' top leadership and the dissident intellectuals in the group known as the Committee for Social Self-Defense (KOR). KOR members have been called CIA operatives and agents for U.S. imperialism. From the conversations I had with their members in Warsaw, this is undoubtedly true—whether or not it is actually the case that the majority or even a high percentage of its membership are. While not attempting to deny that the U.S. is an imperialist country, they argued that it was the "lesser of two evils." "At least you have democracy," one of them told me. One of them even

tried to defend the ridiculous position that Iran, under the Shah and U.S. domination, couldn't have been worse than Poland is right now.

The KOR members were keenly aware of the government's efforts to attack the unions through them and, even more so, of efforts to isolate and discredit them among the masses. Several KOR members told me that the organization was not really that strong, or even that well known outside some key cities in the Baltic region and Warsaw itself. And they admitted that the government's charge that they were "anti-socialist" and agents for the West had managed to turn workers against them in some areas, like Silesia. I thought their remarks were more interesting for what they reflected of the attitudes of these workers than for KOR's efforts to cover over their own pro-U.S. imperialism line.

But if large numbers of workers were not taken in by KOR's open activity on behalf of U.S. imperialism, the same was not true of the extent to which the main agent of U.S. penetration of Poland, the Catholic Church, influenced the masses. Religion seems to be consciously given a very big role in the life and organization of the Polish working class, and the Church, together with its forces in the working class, like Lech Walesa, are playing this to the hilt to make inroads and to keep control of the powerful forces that have been unleashed through the actions of the workers. In all the Solidarity offices that I visited, including those of the local strike committees inside the factories, shipyards and mines, there were what now seems the three symbols of the union: the cross, the Polish national emblem and flag, and a picture of the Pope, all openly displayed. One worker I spoke with explained this influence of the Church on the basis of Polish nationalism, arguing that the Church represented the Polish people's opposition to Soviet domination. Another, himself a practicing Catholic, tried to argue that the Church had always stood up for the in-ticing Catholic, tried to argue that the Church had always stood up for the interests of the Poles. When I pointed out that during World War II the Catholic Church had, in fact, sided with the Nazis against the Poles, he tried to make a distinction between the Polish church and the Vatican. Now, of course, many Polish workers look on the current occupant of the Vatican as "their pope." But also significant was the opinion of a woman worker I spoke with in the Silesian coal mining region. She was also a practicing Catholic. She said that "We (the Poles) are a very religious people but we also realize that the Church has played politics in the past, maneuvering around for its own advantage in contrast to those of the people as a whole." And in fact it is more common today to see workers arguing heatedly with local parish priests, pointing their fingers in their faces when they feel that the Church is trying to interfere or put the brakes on the movement. In many ways, although

the Church has consolidated its strength through the months of this upheaval, it has also been somewhat exposed, and perhaps its foothold has already started to erode. Cardinal Wysinski was sharply criticized by many workers, Catholics as well as atheists, when he came out in the early days of the summer strikes urging moderation, even though he later claimed that the government had distorted his statements.

Of course, the other thing to remember about the strength of the Church, and through it the influence of the U.S., is what it stands in opposition to: revisionism. Since it is revisionism that is in power, it is hardly surprising that opposition would tend to coalesce around the Church, particularly in a country where much of the population still lives and works in peasant-like conditions and much of the industrial workforce, though large, is not more than one or two generations removed from the same peasant roots.

Given the tremendous animosity towards the Soviets, the one thing I did find surprising was the rather casual attitude that most of the workers I talked with seemed to have towards the possibility of a Soviet invasion. I often heard the sentiment expressed that the Soviets would not invade because it would be too costly, or that if they did it would mean civil war. When I asked one worker how they would wage this civil war, how they would organize for it and carry it out, he shrugged and asked me if I knew how to survive in the woods. When I said no, he said that many Poles did, that it was a skill passed down from their fathers who had had long experience in resisting oppressors. The implication was obvious, they would find a way to do it. Others would say, "So what if the Soviets invade, how are they going to force us back to work?"

While there is much to admire in this courageous determination to stand up to the Soviets, I felt that this attitude coincided with, and in a sense flowed from, the general lack of understanding of the drive towards war of the two superpower blocs and the importance of seeing the struggle in Poland in that context. The tendency to view the struggle narrowly as between the masses of Poles and the Soviets fostered illusions about the nature of such a confrontation.

When I did raise the question of World War 3 directly, I frequently got a laughing response, or a shrug and the answer that Polish soldiers would not fight. But at one plant in the Baltic region, I pulled out a Free the UN 2 button I had with me and explained to the workers I was talking with what it represented, how two revolutionaries had targeted the superpowers' war moves for the world with red paint. Everyone was tremendously interested and thought that this was just great, a very significant action. One of the workers wore the button around the next day, explaining to still more people what it meant.

The question of what the Polish army would do in the face of a Soviet or Warsaw Pact invasion is a critical one. One significant development that occurred while I was there, but did not come out in the press until a few days ago, was the report of a letter sent to the government and signed by 30 Polish generals and 200 staff officers, declaring that they would consider it an act of war if East German soldiers invaded Poland. Nothing was said of a Soviet invasion, but the implication seemed clear, since the East Germans would not come in unless sent by the Russians.

There is no question that there is a great hatred for the Soviet imperialists among the masses of the Polish people and the working class. But it certainly did not preclude the immediate recognition and appreciation of a dramatic act of proletarian internationalism that occurred during the summer strike, when workers in Gdansk received a postcard that had somehow managed to get through from workers at a factory in the Russian town of Minsk, offering solidarity and encouraging them to stand steadfast in their struggle. It was an indication that the Soviet imperialists may find opposition to their dreams of expanding their world empire through war a lot further east than the Polish border.

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