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The Summer Strikes in Poland, 1980

Various Authors

November, 1980

On the first of July 1980 the Polish government tried to manipulate meat prices and to alter the food supply system in the industrial areas of the country. As a result, workers were faced with price rises of up to 60%, uncertain meat supplies and a fall in their living standards. Indeed for the last four years, since the last attempt to raise food prices, the workers' conditions had been slowly deteriorating due to constant price increases, demands for higher productivity and increasing difficulties in food supply.

Already, in December 1970, and again in June 1976, the Polish working class had endured severe governmental measures as regards the price of essential foodstuffs. On both occasions the corks had responded promptly, and forcefully. During December 1970 and January 1971 strikes broke out all over the country. At first the government reacted by undertaking a campaign of street assassinations, but the only result was to force the workers into carrying the struggle into the factory floor. Finally, after the countries leaders had been compelled to negotiate with the autonomous struggle organizations, the work-

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Echanges et Mouvement, Number 23, November, 1980

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ers achieved wage rises and forced the government to withdraw the price increases. In 1976, however, because the strike only lasted for one day, the separate protests in Ursus, Radom (Warsaw district) had no time to spread to the rest of the country, or to give rise to a nationally based movement. The government, which had learnt from the 1970 events, immediately withdrew all price rises; and, by thus satisfying the workers immediate aims, put an end to the possibility of further demands. As well in 1976 as in 1971, once the strike was over and the workers organizations disbanded, the ruling class enlarged upon a methodical campaign of repression: sackings, imprisonment, even murder! The workers had also learnt from the events of 1970. After 1976 "Defence Committees" were established, at first drawing their membership from intellectuals, but gradually spreading amongst the workers, especially amongst those marked down as "militants" during the strikes and following repression. (these committees were recently turned into the underground "Free Unions" and began to publish a paper "Robotnik") The committees were somewhat embryonic, but they had some members in the country and, despite severe harassment, have continued to exist, proving by their survival the tenacity, of the rank and file struggles and their development in the workers favour. Maintenance of the fight is an indication that the working class has developed a clear consciousness of its role as the exploited people in a "communist" society. Despite the complete control maintained by the state over the workers, they perceived that it did not differ fundamentally from the branch of Western capitalism except in its inability to provide them with anything approaching the living standards the West European workers. Poland's industrial development increasingly pushed its workers into the position of a modern, industrial proletariat, while, at the same time, denying them access to the consumer goods they turned out in such vast quantities. The workers could no longer accept that it was

impossible for them to receive any share in the produce of their labour.

In the past the Polish Workers Party has been able to keep its stranglehold upon the country, but not only because it was supported by Russian tanks, but also it could not assert the role in building the “New Poland”, the tenth ranked industrial power in the world. During the period of primitive accumulation such a claim could preserve a balance of reality and also gain political support, especially if the poverty of prewar Poland, and the devastation of the war years, were contrasted with the relative prosperity and stability enjoyed under the party. By 1956, when the Poznan riots brought workers councils into being, it had become apparent that, for at least some, this was no longer fully acceptable as an explanation for their condition. In 1970, as the country was attempting, by the use of Western capital, to turn itself into a modern, high technology nation, the myth of the P.W.P.’s paramount role appeared even less acceptable. After 1976 it carried no conviction whatsoever! One has only to read the interviews that were given by Polish workers — of any persuasion — during the present strikes, to realize that the party offers no hope for anybody. All of them see it as merely a repressive agent of Russian imperialism. The strikes witnessed defections to the side of the new organizations by rank and file members of the official unions, the factory militia, and even by some members of the army.

Such a situation is extremely dangerous in a society founded upon the exploitation of work. It did not result out of propaganda, but because the workers saw that the totalitarian bureaucracy, developed during the transition from a peasant into an industrial society, were irrelevant to modern industry producing consumer goods by means of new techniques and methods of work organization. The party monolith did not permit the introduction of new, flexible structures which would have produced a rise in output, the extraction of optimum surplus value, and the growth of a consumer society. The creation of

a new managerial class, and a shift towards “liberalization” (in the sense of more autonomy for managers, a wider range of exploiting conditions and means of control) would have resulted in the transformation of the ruling class — a possibility the present holders of power refuse to consider by blocking every attempt to reform the system. Seen objectively, the underground committees founded since 1976 have to be linked with the growth of reformist tendencies, whose *raison d’être* is to solve the present crisis within the system. Every crisis in capitalism provokes struggle which must spread everywhere to destroy the system. If it fails it only creates institutions and industrial relations which serve to solve the problems of the system and then help reinforce it. The repression directed against such bodies during their formation often obscures this fact but it must be never forgotten that the same problems exist, in varying degrees, in all the countries practising the eastern branch of capitalism, especially in the USSR where imperialism strives to maintain the status quo and to preserve it in the satellite states. However, the class struggle, which is as important in the small day to day conflicts as it is in the large strikes, and the crisis of world capitalism (which is most marked in Poland, the state closest to the western economy) makes this task increasingly difficult with every passing day.

On the first of July 1980, Kania, Gireks successor, stated: “The Party does not control anything!”

This explains why the Party leaders, despite their realization of the probable consequences, raised meat prices in an attempt to solve the economic crisis they faced and thereby provoked the workers, once again, into a conflict of immediate relevance to their daily lives. Following the announcement of price rises, a series of uncoordinated strikes broke out all over Poland. This movement reached its climax in the second fortnight of August but only finished completely in late September.

In contrast with previous occasions there were no mass demonstrations, attacks on public buildings, or incidents of ri-

B. For long periods of time the workers will have dispossessed the legal authorities of their power. Generally the workers will be surprised, since it is not their will that their struggle should give birth to new forms of integration or to revolutionary forms which overtake the structures which seek to control them. This depends upon internal forces which at state level correspond to the situation of capital, and the class struggle in a global context.

C. Halting the dynamics of the movement alters its serial characteristics and raises practical questions. What happens then is that the workers real interests are pushed aside by union recognition supplants the struggle for more wages. The struggle for power between the old and the new forms of industrial control masks the real conflict between the rank and file and both sets of institutions.

D. In the eastern branch of capitalism the role of the party is to determine the division of the surplus value. The official unions has to impose that upon the workers and control them. The question that must be asked is: how will independent unions, bargaining the price of the whole work force as in the west, exists in a planned economy under party authority? (this explains why the discussions about the preeminence of the party are not merely academic). But even this is too simplistic. For the real structure of capitalism and the level at which surplus value division is decided are neither the top strata in the East nor the firm or factory floor in the west. This is a topic which needs to be further developed.

This issue is only on Poland. This article is only the start of a long discussion. We are working on a pamphlet concerning these struggles and invite everyone to send in any original material and to take part in the discussions about the preceding points.

“free unions”) meant replacing “the workers interest” by “the union interest”.

This evolution will be stopped by the direct repression which will attack both rank and file and the organizations built upon it. This suppression, on behalf of the top strata of world capitalism, can only come from the USSR; e.g. on the 21st of August the Wall Street Journal wrote:

“Looking at Poland’s credit situation, another banker took the worst possible case and hypothesized that even in the Gdansk turmoil escalated sharply and the Soviet Union did step in, the credit status would actually go up “because the USSR is in a stronger economic position than Poland”.

The western financial interests, such as the large West German loan of July 1980, are now strong enough in Poland to support a direct Russian move against the movement thereby safeguarding their investment, but as yet the situation is by no means clear cut. With the USA tied up in Iran, and its own economy in a shaky position, Russia may decide that direct intervention is too big a gamble to take. The Western branch of capitalism, on the other hand, cannot recuperate the struggle (although they will try) because of its ambiguous class nature. The struggle of the Polish workers may prove to be a halt in the sticks into cold war.

The Polish Summer of 1980 raises other discussion points which may only be briefly summarized here:

A. The workers movement is not motivated, as the bourgeois revolution was, by idealism. It arises from the necessities of life. It arises and develops in the factory not out on the street. Its weapons are strike and occupation. Once the struggle has commenced it may change its demands constantly. The workers may say that they are good Catholics without contradicting the fact that they work in their own interests as they have no political claims, but their fight produces a situation where the fall of the government is inevitable despite its irrelevance to the struggle itself.

otous looting, which the party could easily have suppressed- Strikes limited to factories but able to paralyze whole areas were more difficult to subdue, firstly because the workers were organized and, perhaps less importantly, because the bloody suppression of a peaceful strike cannot be justified as a legitimate exercise in upholding the rule of law. From the beginning, therefore, the workers made no attempt to force the revocation of any government decree, instead they aimed at winning guarantees for the future rather than any momentary, and quickly destroyed, advantages. Similarly the autonomous struggle organizations sought to establish themselves on a more permanent basis, e.g. as committees with delegates elected, and controlled, by the rank and file.

Seeking to avoid a head-on conflict with the workers, the party adopted the tactic of holding discussions in each factory, thereby seeking to destroy the workers unity, by discriminatory wages or food supplies, and also to prevent the strikes spreading further afield. This policy was made easier because of the new economic structure which granted certain industries, esp. those producing goods for export, a greater degree of independence than before. Confident of success they carefully avoided any open show of force against the workers, to whom it seemed clear that if wages could be discussed at factory level, than they should be allowed to have a say in the negotiations. In other words the government tactics opened up to the rank and file the possibility of controlling their own struggle and since they realized that problems constantly occur in the workplace they also grasped the advantages of dealing with them through an organization controlled by themselves through elected representatives answerable to the rank and file. Thus, far from dividing the workers, the government tactic produced a situation with more danger to itself by creating organizations which challenged the authority of the very structures it had developed to control the workers.

As early as July 1980 certain of the strikes showed signs of the forces that were to be unleashed within a month. In Lublin, for example, stoppages occurred in all the major manufacturing and service industries. The government vice-chairman, Jagielski, (the same one will appear later in Gdansk) managed to solve the dispute in a matter of days; but concessions, granted in the interests of a speedy resumption of production, led to other conflicts and demands in the discussions which followed the return to work. This situation was repeated all over Poland throughout the next two months and the government, fearing that matters were moving out of its control, reverted to a policy of repression. In reality they had no other choice, for their hands were tied by the need to raise prices, but their action provoked an explosion in Gdansk. From the Lenin shipyard a general strike spread across the city and then again across Poland with the claims of various groups of workers living united and thus for the first time articulating what had been a fact for a month. The underground committees federated into professional and geographical units and attempted to construct themselves as permanent "independent unions", which, within days, became the real power in ever growing areas in the country. Their strength forced the government to recognise them, de facto at first and later de jure, both as representatives of the workers demands and then as the core of a permanent organization.

The solution put forward by the party was to integrate the unions, into the political system but although the agreement of both parties to this brought an end to the strikes, it created a new set of problems. Since the balance of power rested in favour of the rank and file, as distinct from the free "unions", their objections could make such integration difficult, if not impossible. Equally the Polish economy could not continue to function on its previous basis, while, at the same time, the new organizations could not work too closely with the party — managers of capital, if they were to consolidate their position.

One of the most interesting points about this situation is the nature of the organizations which, developing from a spontaneous answer to a decision by the rulers, arrive at a point from which they can dictate their demands to a totalitarian party which is, abstemiously, ignoring them. The forms of organization are well known, less is clear about the ways in which they were built, how they operated, and what happened to them when work was resumed, for instance, the Inter Factories Committee controlled economic organization over a very wide area during the strike, but was in existence for only a very short time. What is clear is that the movement was able to mobilize its power so quickly because of the low degree of control exercised, at rank and file level, by the existing power structures, many of which sided with the workers. Such desertions are symptomatic of the depths of the social crisis in Poland.

The very strength of a movement which poses — as it does — a direct threat to the ruling class elicits two forms of repression. The first is direct: it comes from the top layer of the ruling class. The other is more oblique: people, with a role in the system to protect, offer their services to the new movement. For a short time these reinforcements do aid the struggle. Eventually however, they can only poison it by directing its attack away from their social functions. Examples of groups which have limited the workers struggle to their own conflict are: the Catholic church, "experts" of all kinds, middle management, and anyone else who stands to benefit from the formation of a new, flexible managerial class. Moreover since the function makes the man, the officials of the new unions (no matter how sincere they may be) are forced to carry out functions which do not depend on their personal beliefs, but merely upon the objective role of the unions within a capitalist society. The serious limitations of direct democracy are illustrated in Gdansk where the transformation of the strike committee into the Inter Factory Committee (by the election of a presidium and the creation of