

RADIO FREE EUROPE *Research*

RAD Background Report/112
(Poland)
23 April 1981

POLISH GOVERNMENT CALLS FOR TEMPORARY END TO STRIKES

By J. B. de Weydenthal

Summary: The Polish government asked for but failed to obtain a parliamentary suspension of the workers' right to strike. Instead, the Sejm passed a resolution calling for a suspension of strikes and the threat of strikes for two months. The Sejm action followed a strong critical response from the country's independent labor organization, Solidarity, to the government's demands. This demand was motivated by basically economic considerations, but it could have implied a serious limitation on the labor movement's activities. Accepting the rationale behind the economic concerns, Solidarity insisted on the necessity of introducing lasting changes in the operations of the existing institutional and political systems.

+ + +

In a formal address to a special session of the Sejm held on April 10, Polish Prime Minister Wojciech Jaruzelski asked the Sejm to suspend the workers' right to strike for a period of two months. The prime minister also made clear in his speech that the Sejm's failure to adopt the new legislation would result in the government's resignation.

In presenting his request, Jaruzelski reminded the deputies that when accepting the post of prime minister on February 12 he had pledged "to resign at any moment, particularly if the government fails to fulfill public expectations [of its performance]." (1) He went on to say that in view of the recent proliferation of social protests and strikes his government would be unable to operate unless the Sejm suspended strikes.

Jaruzelski's request presented the Sejm with an immediate legislative problem. There has been no legislative regulation of the right to strike itself; the issue has been settled merely through various agreements between the workers and the authorities

(1) For details, see J. B. de Weydenthal, "Polish CC Plenum Names New Prime Minister and Adopts a Tough Line," RAD Background Report/53 (Poland), Radio Free Europe Research, 25 February 1981.

and will be formally institutionalized only after the Sejm passes the law on trade unions. This law was drafted in December 1980 but has never been presented for parliamentary debate. To avoid the legal problems, Jaruzelski asked the legislature to suspend the right to strike on the basis of the existing draft and supported his plea by quoting from a recently concluded agreement between the government and Solidarity, in which the two parties pledged to adhere to the principles behind the draft. He justified his request by arguing that "the suspension of the right to strike would bring about a drop in social tension . . . it could be the beginning of the necessary stability." (2)

This request to suspend the right to strike was the single measure of decisive political importance outlined in Jaruzelski's speech. There was no indication of the government's readiness to undertake any other immediate action. Indeed, the speech included little more than a long recitation of the economic and social dangers facing the country and was replete with both warnings against any activities that would interfere with the operations of government agencies and appeals for public cooperation with the authorities.

Jaruzelski provided a list of the difficulties -- particularly in the area of the economy -- plaguing the country. It included an admission of a "breakdown in the system of internal trade," the decline of both agricultural and industrial production, a fall in productivity, and mounting problems in Poland's foreign trade. All these problems are well-known and have long been experienced by the population. There was no indication in the speech, however, of specific measures the government would adopt to improve the situation. Instead, Jaruzelski repeatedly promised forthcoming government action and expressed his determination to push for new decisions.

Jaruzelski appeared particularly insistent in pledging support for the work of various administrative agencies dealing with public order. He said that the government would undertake the "necessary steps" to ensure the operations of public authorities "at all administrative levels," management bodies in industry, and other institutions. Jaruzelski warned that any interference with the operations of transport and energy installations as well as in the armament industry would result in special protective measures, including those that could be undertaken by the military forces.

The prime minister decried the proliferation of unofficial publications in the country, seeing in them the "undermining of legal order and a contribution to disorder in public life." He stopped short, however, of saying that the government would suppress those publications. Instead, he appealed to the Sejm "for understanding of their disruptive character" and implied that the government could "expect a social protest against that basically antidemocratic behavior." It was not clear whether the prime minister eventually envisaged the possibility of asking the Sejm to enact legislation against unofficial publications.

-
- (2) Radio Warsaw, 10 April 1981. Interestingly, in a subsequently published version of Jaruzelski's speech, the prime minister's demand to "suspend the right to strike," was replaced with a milder expression of "suspension of strikes." See Trybuna Ludu, 11 April 1981.

The main emphasis of Jaruzelski's speech, however, was on the need to develop close cooperation between the authorities and the population so they could, through a concerted effort, pull the country out of its current difficulties. In pleading for social support and in promising the government's determination to achieve harmonious relations with various groups, Jaruzelski appeared strangely ambiguous in his declarations. This was particularly obvious when he spoke about the relations between the authorities and the peasant movement. Jaruzelski expressed his full support for the existing forms of rural representation, such as the agricultural circles or self-governing bodies. Yet, while mentioning that the government had entered into talks with "the representatives of the organizing committee of the union for private farmers," he also said that "we [the government] are looking for a solution that could serve the development of the countryside and the enhancement of agricultural production, but that would also be consistent with the interests of the socialist state."

More explicit was his plea for better relations between the government and the labor movement. Jaruzelski admitted that those relations had not always been smooth, saying that "we know that there is still distrust of the authorities [among the workers]." He went on to note, however, that "the authorities also have reason to be distrustful. We must, therefore, eliminate this barrier [of distrust]; we must avoid antagonistic issues." Instead, he called for a "platform of mutual and broad understanding, for forms of relations that would avoid confrontation."

At the same time, Jaruzelski frankly admitted that the state would not be able to fulfill promises that had been given to the workers on the occasion of various earlier agreements. Saying that "serious economic difficulties and the deteriorating situation in the country make it impossible to fulfill the economic obligations undertaken by the government [in the agreements in August and September 1980]," the prime minister formally proposed reopening negotiations with the unions on possible changes to the agreements. To this end, Jaruzelski envisaged the formation of a mixed government-Solidarity commission which would take up the matter of the government's obligations and provide a forum for renegotiating the agreements.

When viewed against the background of recent events in Poland, Jaruzelski's speech hardly broke new ground. Indeed, if anyone expected Prime Minister Wojciech Jaruzelski to introduce new policies and announce new decisions at the current Sejm session, it is clear that those expectations failed to materialize. The government's policy appears to be marked by cautious continuity rather than affected by any attempt at innovation. Its position still seems characterized by a desire to prevent any further deterioration rather than to trace ways of dealing with the country's social and economic problems.

Although the government remains affected by immobility, this does not, however, mean that its performance is a failure. After all, it is necessary to remember that decision-making in the current Polish situation is increasingly complex and many factors, both domestic and foreign, have to be considered by government officials and the representatives of the population in preparing policies that would be acceptable to all. It is possible that Jaruzelski's apparent ambiguity in approaching crucial aspects of the country's public life reflects the very complexity of the pressures to which he had been subjected.

The Sejm Resolution

As expected, the Polish Sejm passed a resolution in which it declared "the suspension of strikes and the threat of strikes for the duration of two months" as one of "the indispensable conditions in the task of overcoming the deep crisis in the country. (3) It was not immediately clear, however, whether the action of the Sejm constituted a suspension of the Polish workers' right to strike or was merely an urgent appeal to the workers to refrain from striking.

The Sejm's declaration was included in a nine-point resolution dealing with the country's economic and political problems. It was approved by Poland's highest parliamentary body following a long debate which took up the entire session on April 10 and concentrated on the government's performance in the current situation. The debate centered on Jaruzelski's statement, but there were some indications that it was also affected by an immediate reaction from the labor unions to the prime minister's demand. This reaction was clearly critical, and Solidarity expressed openly its concern over the prime minister's action.

The National Coordinating Commission [of Solidarity] declares that there is a real possibility of avoiding strikes by eliminating their causes through a general observance of the agreements [between the unions and the authorities]. The suspension of the right to strike will be interpreted by society as an announcement of measures that can generate these strikes; perhaps this will cause an increase in social tension. In a situation where agreements were signed and whose realization is possible for both sides, adopting such measures is unfounded and incomprehensible. . . . No resolution of the Sejm will be able to prevent a strike if the security of our union is threatened or if a glaring violation of the law takes place. (4)

Here it is important to note that Solidarity's communiqué did not contain an outright rejection of any moratorium on strikes; it merely affirmed the labor organization's opposition to the suspension of the right to strike. It could, therefore, indicate the union leadership's willingness to compromise with the government. There is some reason to assume that the Sejm's declaration reflected an acceptance of such a compromise.

(3) Radio Warsaw, 10 April 1981.

(4) AP, 10 April 1981.

This assumption seems to be confirmed by the inclusion of this strike provision in the broad, nine-point resolution on "the economic and sociopolitical situation in the country." The resolution is a fairly balanced document, in which the Sejm formally approved the government's performance but also defended the interests of various social groups.

More specifically, the resolution expressed the Sejm's "full confidence in Prime Minister Wojciech Jaruzelski and his government and accepted the government's program of action for the immediate future." (5) At the same time, it extended the Sejm's "recognition and support for the agreement between the government and Solidarity" and called for its fulfillment . . . by both its signatories and society."

In other points, the resolution appealed for the full respect of the law by "both the authorities and all social organizations," and it called for the maintenance of operational efficiency in those areas of industrial activity that "have specific importance for the defensive capabilities of the country as well as its international obligations."

The resolution also said that "both the bodies charged with directing the media and the journalists" should provide "honest and responsible information and avoid anything that could provoke conflicts and tension."

Furthermore, the Sejm appealed to the authorities to undertake "more decisive steps" to improve the economic conditions of the population, and it "obligated the government to present a report during the current month April on the state of the economy as well as a program for economic stabilization." It also called upon the government to "present its views on the principles behind and the implementation of economic reforms."

Turning to current social problems, the resolution described "issues related to the agricultural situation and those concerned with the self-organization of individual farmers" as particularly important for the country. Defining the "labor movement in our country as the spokesman for and the defender of the interests and the rights of the working masses," the Sejm appealed to that movement to refrain "temporarily from making new demands, especially those related to wages," and affirmed that "only the well-organized, hard, and collective work of the entire nation . . . could provide a way out of the current economic difficulties."

At the same time, while affirming its "full approval for the earlier agreements between the workers and the authorities," the Sejm appealed to

the government for a rapid fulfillment of its promises to propose legislation that would contribute to the creation of institutional guarantees for the expansion, in accordance with the constitutional

(5) Radio Warsaw, 10 April 1981.

requirements, of participation by the working people in the management of the state /affairs/ and the economy as well as of autonomous /public/ activities in various areas of our life.

In this context, the Sejm expressed its support for "all forces of reason and civil responsibility, for all those who try to prevent tension and who contribute to the development of /social/ accord, and particularly for the role played in those activities by the Catholic Church." This final expression of recognition for the efforts of different groups to maintain peace in the country was combined with a special appeal to the entire nation "to unite in a common action to bring the country out of the deep crisis and to ensure calm and order as well as national and civil security."

It is, of course, too early to speculate about the Sejm resolution's possible impact upon the evolution of Poland's politics. It is obvious, however, that many of the strains in relations between the authorities and society are of such long duration and intensity that no single legislative act could mitigate them for long; but this does not seem to be the most important point here. Rather, the central aspect of the resolution seems to be a confirmation of a broadly based public desire to stabilize public life in a manner that would not only recognize the prerogatives of the government as the main administrative body but would also affirm the right of separate and autonomous social organizations to carry on their own activities and defend their own interests. It is not without interest that the resolution was adopted by a legislative body whose members had been elected before the emergence of the current movement of social and political change and whose collective political orientation might be suspected to have corresponded more to the earlier era in the country's politics than its present realities. If nothing else, this fact alone illustrates the extent of the political evolution that has taken place in Poland in recent months.

Solidarity's Response

Following the Sejm action, Lech Walesa, Chairman of Solidarity's National Coordinating Commission, publicly called upon the authorities to take prompt and practical steps to introduce lasting changes in Poland's public life. Walesa, the country's most important labor leader, made this appeal in a nationwide television interview on April 13. The purpose of the interview was to elicit Solidarity's reaction to a recently adopted Sejm resolution that called for a two-month suspension of strikes and strike threats.

Walesa stopped short of either endorsing or rejecting the resolution. Instead, he reiterated his frequently made declaration that the workers' organization

wishes to have peace, in general, it wishes to have strong government, strong leadership in the party and elsewhere; but /this leadership will be/ strong only when it provides us with early solutions /to problems that are /not necessarily financial, when it comes forward to society. (6)

After remarking that "the strength of that government and the party will depend [on their ability] [to come to grips early with] the issues [whose resolution] we [the unions] demand and will demand [in the future]," Walesa pointedly observed that "once this happens, there will be no need for empty appeals because we will trust [the authorities]." He then went on to observe that

for the time being we are in a situation in which we do not trust [the authorities]. We do not believe that [what the authorities are doing] constitutes a renewal, we think that it is once more merely [an effort to start] the same [pattern of politics] as in the past.

Obviously careful not to reject the resolution itself but clearly implying that it amounted to little more than an "empty appeal," Walesa emphasized the urgent need for the government to overcome "the barrier of distrust" separating it from society and from the unions. Reminding his audience that this barrier was created through the authorities' failure to fulfill promises made to society during several earlier crises such as in 1956, 1970, and in 1976, Walesa cautioned that neutralizing the long ingrained distrust would require a long effort on behalf of the government.

"The government will have to come up with something," Walesa said,

with an initiative; it must come up with . . . a gesture [of its own] that is not forced [upon it] by us, that is not [a fulfillment of] a promise made to us earlier. Then we will believe that a renewal is taking place, a renewal that we would like to see. For the time being, however, there are only words.

Walesa strongly decried the authorities' apparent unwillingness or inability to implement its own measures that would make lasting changes in the operations of the institutional and political systems. "Why is it that we have to force the issue of censorship; why do we have to force the issue of a law on trade unions; why do we have to create trouble for the peasants about their unions," he asked rhetorically, in pointing to the unions' recent demands. "If there were no need to [force those issues upon the authorities] we would have trust in the renewal." Walesa then warned that "Solidarity still has many problems to be presented to the authorities," suggesting that the government "should come up with some initiatives to indicate that it is [ready] to offer something to society" by its own volition.

Walesa complained that almost everything that the unions gained had been obtained through confrontations and by "pressuring" the authorities and he suggested that the authorities still have a chance to improve relations with the labor movement by adopting a more cooperative attitude in the forthcoming negotiations with Solidarity on the ways to implement the agreement reached between the government and the workers' organization on March 30.

Walesa's interview could hardly be said to have introduced any new elements into the relationship between the workers' movement and the authorities. Indeed, Walesa's complaints had already been presented many times, both in negotiations with the authorities and in the press. Rather, the significance of the event was that the authorities apparently let the labor leader air his views on a special nationwide television broadcast. Until recently, appearances by the workers' representatives were either limited to short announcements of the unions' positions or were couched in the form of discussions with the officials.

It is probable, of course, that the interview with Walesa was arranged in hope that he would endorse the recent action of the Sejm. Had this happened, it undoubtedly would have greatly facilitated the government's efforts to introduce a measure of peace in the country through the suspension of strikes.

Such an argument could appear plausible, considering that Walesa has frequently been presented, in both the domestic and foreign media, as an outspoken proponent of moderate tendencies within Solidarity. (7) Indeed, numerous press reports have recently intimated that the unions' leadership suffered from internal dissension and splits between radical and moderate wings. Therefore, by providing Walesa with mass television exposure, at least some of the Polish officials might have assumed that it would help solidify the more moderate wing of the movement.

Whether this proved to be the case, however, remains a matter of speculation. The main question is to what extent differences over the choice of methods in dealing with the authorities, differences that have always been obvious within the unions' leadership, could be indicative of potential differences over goals. Here Walesa's interview provided no clues. Indeed, his calls upon the government to introduce on its own some measures of political change within the system could hardly be attributed to any specific moderate views within the workers' movement. Rather, it seems that they reflected the sentiments of a major part of the labor organization and large sectors of society, which appear increasingly frustrated by the widely perceived failure of the authorities to adopt clear positions on the most crucial issues of the country's public life. Following Walesa's appearance on television, it has become more obvious than ever than the ball is now in the government's court.

- end -

(7) See J. B. de Weydenthal, "Government and Unions Reach Agreement but Problems Remain," RAD BR/111 (Poland), RFER, 23 April 1981.