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WESTERN COMMUNIST REACTIONS TO POLISH DRAMA

By Kevin Devlin

Summary: Many West European communist parties have reacted vigorously to the military takeover in Poland. The lead was taken by the Italian CP, which bluntly condemned this development, demanded the release of the people arrested, and called for a resumption of the process of democratization. A similar stand was taken by the communist-dominated labor federation, acting jointly with Catholic and Social-Democratic federations. The takeover was also condemned or deplored by other parties, including the Spanish, British, Belgian, Dutch, Swedish, and Greek ("Interior") CPs. In France the PCF found itself in a position of obvious embarrassment. While the takeover was condemned by the Socialist Party, and deplored by the premier, whose cabinet contained four communist ministers, Secretary-General Georges Marchais said his party would refrain from any move that might hinder the search for a peaceful outcome; on that pretext the Communists boycotted a protest demonstration backed by the Socialists and all major labor organizations except the communist CGT.

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West European communist reactions to the military takeover in Poland were led by the Italian CP -- appropriately, since it had not only warned vigorously against any (Soviet) military intervention from outside but had also repeatedly emphasized its principled support for the cause of "pluralistic" renewal in Poland. Within hours of General Jaruzelski's announcement of the state of emergency and the simultaneous arrest of Solidarity leaders, the party's Executive Board (Direzione) met on Sunday morning in emergency session. Expressing extreme concern about these grave developments, the leadership's subsequent statement declared:

One must condemn the blow **that** has thus been dealt to attempts to solve Poland's crisis politically, with the responsible participation of all components of society through a process of effective democratization. (1)

The PCI, it went on, had always recognized the need for a "profound renewal" in Poland, based upon cooperation between a "renewed" communist party, labor union organizations autonomously and responsibly representing the workers, and the Church. It had also stressed the need for this renewal to be based upon "an open discussion leading to a national understanding capable of solving the acute problems of society and the state, of guaranteeing the Polish people's right to freedom and national independence, of isolating extremist elements in each camp without resorting to force, and rejecting any possibility of pressure and intervention from outside." The PCI demanded that civil and labor union liberties in Poland be restored and guaranteed, and reaffirmed the principle, on which its own autonomous strategy was based, that "democracy and socialism must be considered indissolubly linked."

In addition, the Italian Communists tabled a parliamentary question, signed by Secretary-General Enrico Berlinguer and "foreign minister" Gian Carlo Pajetta, among others, deploring the Polish developments and stressing particularly the "inadmissible character" of any foreign intervention. Communists also supported and participated in the mass protest demonstrations held in Milan, Rome, and other Italian centers.

The communist-dominated CGIL labor federation joined the two other national federations, the Christian Democratic CISL and the Social-Democratic UIL, in issuing a joint statement expressing "concern and firm condemnation of the act of force on the part of the Polish government." In particular, Italian labor union officials considered unacceptable the occupation of Solidarity's offices, the arrest of the Solidarity leaders, the proclamation of a state of emergency, the assumption of exceptional powers by a military committee, and the suspension of the right to strike.

The party newspaper (2) reported, without commentary, one reaction to this reaction: the observation by the Czechoslovak

(1) L'Unità, 14 December 1981, and Le Monde, 15 December 1981.

(2) Ibid., 15 December 1981.

party daily Rude Pravo that the PCI leadership "has not understood the meaning of the decision taken by the Polish authorities, and has underestimated the scope of the counterrevolutionary menace" in Poland.

A later editorial in the PCI daily (3) said that the military takeover was "proof of the failure of a whole ruling class of Polish society, organized by the Polish CP," and that it left completely unsolved the fundamental political problem -- "the creation of a new relationship of trust between the mass of workers and the government of the country, the construction of an effective popular consensus." The statement added that it was an illusion to think that a need for democracy and political freedom could be suffocated; and it was an illusion to think that one could solve the problems of a great country without allowing these needs to be expressed in "adequate political structures."

Spanish and Others

The Spanish party (PCE), which had also repeatedly emphasized its support of the cause of democratization in Poland, was similarly prompt and vigorous in its reaction. It issued a statement expressing its "profound and radical disagreement in the face of the Polish military coup," which it said was "in open contradiction to the essentials of socialism." It said that a solution of the Polish crisis was possible only through "a national reconciliation involving all the real forces of the country, maintaining and guaranteeing labor union liberties, as the only way in which to achieve the extraordinary efforts needed to overcome this grave crisis." (4)

In a separate statement issued on December 13, PCE Deputy Secretary-General Nicolas Sartorius said:

We have always supported the renewal of party leadership and the democratization of society in Poland. . . . This is the first time in a socialist country that the army has carried out a sort of coup d'état. It is not in this manner that one can solve political problems like those of Polish society. . . .

The arrest of labor union leaders and the measures taken against civil liberties are unacceptable and to be condemned, the more so since they lead only to a hardening of positions. There can be no solution of the Polish problem except within the framework of negotiations. (5)

Another Spanish CP leader, Marcelino Camacho, Secretary-General of the Workers' Commissions, linked the Polish and Spanish experiences in his commentary:

(3) Ibid.

(4) Ibid., and El País (Madrid), 15 December 1981.

(5) Le Monde, 15 December 1981.

We know very well what a military intervention directed against the rights of the workers means. To defend the existence of Solidarity in Poland is to defend the existence of pluralism and labor union democracy in this country. (6)

The Dutch CP (CPN) issued a statement rejecting "completely and flatly" the military takeover in Poland. Its communiqué states that "this decision emphasizes the bankruptcy of the Polish CP, which has thus blocked the impulse for renewal expressed by the people and by the labor union movement." (7) A spokesman said that the CPN would support any action or demonstration directed against present developments in Poland.

In Greece, while police were providing protection for the offices of the pro-Soviet Communist Party (KKE), the Eurocommunist "Interior" Greek CP issued a statement condemning the military takeover in Poland, and expressing the party's "deep anxiety about this development, and our endless solidarity with the working class and the Communists of Poland, who are struggling for democratic socialism." (8) It also called for the liberation of all those arrested and for the full restoration of democratic and union liberties. "In these crucial and responsible moments for détente and peace in Europe, the democratic development of Poland takes on decisive importance," it said.

Another strong reaction came from the British CP, through an editorial in the party daily. (9) Noting that from the first the CPGB had given full support to the cause of democratic and socialist renewal in Poland, welcoming the establishment of Solidarity and recent attempts to reach some form of national accord, it said: "This remains our position today. It is for the Polish people to solve the problems they face. But this implies a lengthy political process. It cannot be solved by military means." Poland's problems were largely rooted "in the accumulated mistakes of past years, in the corruption involved and in the deficiencies in the functioning of socialist democracy." Recalling that a resolution adopted at the British CP's recent congress had stated that these problems could be overcome only through "political partnership between the party, Solidarity, and other institutions," the editorial added: "Difficult as the situation is today, this still remains the only basis for winning the popular consensus needed to involve the mass of the Polish people in solving the acute problems they are facing."

The Belgian CP leadership, meeting after President Louis Van Geyt had issued a preliminary statement deploring the military takeover, issued a communiqué saying:

The military regime and the harsh measures it has taken are for the Belgian CP incompatible with socialism in a developed country. The PCB Politburo insists on the urgent need to resume the

(6) Ibid.

(7) L'Unità, 15 December 1981.

(8) AP (from Athens), 13 December 1981.

(9) Morning Star, 14 December 1981.

dialogue between the regime and Solidarity, and to remove whatever, on both sides, is and has been an obstacle to this dialogue. This obviously implies the release of labor union officials and other persons arrested, as well as a speedy return to civilian rule. (10)

The PCB daily had already carried an editorial that concluded:

Forceful solutions have never settled fundamental problems. The limitation of liberties, presented as temporary, risks increasing tension even more. Is the hope for change now to be wiped out? The democratic process has been brutally interrupted. The army has taken on a heavy responsibility in Poland. (11)

The independent Swedish Communist Party (VPK) issued a statement condemning any attempt to solve Poland's problems by "police and military methods." Warning against any form of outside intervention in the crisis, Chairman Lars Werner said: "The Polish crisis is a political crisis. Political solutions to it must, therefore, be found." (12)

Embarrassed French

Of the major West European communist parties, the one most clearly embarrassed by the Polish developments was the French. That embarrassment was heightened by the fact that its much stronger ruling partner, President Mitterrand's Socialist Party, reacted vigorously to the news, with Premier Pierre Mauroy warning of the "grave repercussions" that would result if the movement for renewal in Poland were blocked. The premier said later that Minister of State for Transportation Charles Fiterman, one of four communist ministers, had told him "how much he was in agreement with the declaration. Mauroy added that his statement on Poland "expresses the attitude of the whole government." (13)

But in the preceding days the PCF's newspaper had repeatedly criticized Solidarity for alleged antisocialist extremism, and also criticized Western food shipments to Poland. The party's isolation was shown when it declined to join the Socialists and all other parties in supporting a massive "national demonstration" held on December 14 in Paris. That demonstration had been organized by five major union federations; the missing one was the biggest -- the communist CGT.

This embarrassment was reflected in a statement by Secretary-General Marchais and an editorial by Yves Moreau in the party daily. Marchais said: "We will refrain from any initiative that could hamper the necessary search for a peaceful outcome to the crisis, one which, on the basis of an understanding between national forces, would permit the pursuit of the reforms needed

(10) Le Drapeau Rouge (Brussels), 15 December 1981.

(11) Ibid., 14 December 1981.

(12) Le Monde, 15 December 1981.

(13) Ibid., 16 December 1981.

finally to overcome the mistakes of the past and to develop confrontation or external intervention, which we do not want to see." (14) Moreau's editorial said that it was "above all the excesses of Solidarity" that had ruined the hope raised in Poland, through having "disorganized the economy, and created a state of penury, disorder, and permanent strikes." (15) He accused Solidarity of having "refused the national understanding repeatedly proposed by the Polish Communists, rejected all dialogue, /and issued/ calls for armed struggle and subversion," adding that General Wojciech Jaruzelski "was undoubtedly not wrong to say that the measures adopted on the night from Saturday to Sunday were last chance ones." He added that it was no help to the Poles to issue calls for "irresponsible demonstrations."

One result of this uncomfortable stand was to deepen existing divisions within French communism. Two separate statements criticizing the party's position were issued by groups of prominent "dissidents." One of these denounced the attempt to crush by a military coup the "revolutionary" growth of "an independent and pluralistic labor union movement," adding that this could not be called an internal matter, since the measures taken were "those that the Soviet leaders have been demanding for months, thus continuously intervening in Polish affairs." (16)

Another statement issued by the anti-Marchais movement Rencontres Communistes (Communist Encounters), headed by former Politburo member Henri Fishbin, said:

The PCF must, without delay, condemn the measures adopted in Poland. It must demand the liberation of those imprisoned, the re-establishment of public and labor union liberties, as a condition for a positive outcome to the crisis. It must use its influence to prevent outside intervention being an obstacle to the resumption of the democratic process. It must take its place in the movement of protest now developing in France: its moral and political authority depends on this. (17)

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(14) L'Humanité, 14 December 1981.

(15) Ibid.

(16) Le Monde, 15 December 1981.

(17) Ibid.