

RAD Background Report/192  
(Poland)  
7 July 1981

### POLISH WORKERS COMMEMORATE THEIR PAST STRUGGLES

By J. B. de Weydenthal

**Summary:** Poland's workers have recently commemorated two separate but closely related anniversaries of their protests against official policies. One was the 25th anniversary of the workers' upheavals in Poznan in 1956; the other was the 5th anniversary of a protest in 1976. These anniversaries symbolize distinct historical stages in the long movement for the self-assertion of workers as a separate social and political force. They were also seen by many observers as vivid reminders of the need to maintain a disciplined and cohesive labor movement in Poland's current situation.

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Two separate but closely related anniversaries were recently commemorated in Poland. One was the 25th anniversary of a major workers' rebellion in the city of Poznan; the other was the 5th anniversary of a workers' riot in Radom. These events were separated by differences of time, they occurred in different places, and they originated from different causes. Yet, to the degree that they involved the same social group, the workers, one should and must regard them as crucial phenomena in fashioning the development of the workers' role in Poland's political and public life. Indeed, if nothing else, they symbolize historical stages in a long movement for the self-assertion of workers as a distinct political force, increasingly determined to influence both the direction and the methods of policy-making over issues that affect their interests.

There is considerable evidence, of course, that industrial conflicts in factories had occurred even before the Poznan rebellion. Widespread demonstrations of workers' dissatisfaction with official policies had taken place as early as the late 1940s. Politically, however, those protests were specific in that they exemplified the infighting between the labor organizations that had existed even before the emergence of the socialist state and

the new regime. The Poznan revolt was important for socialist politics because it was the first major instance in Poland in which workers seemingly integrated into socialist society had protested against the policies and operations of an established communist government.

### The Poznan Revolt

The workers' revolt in Poznan took the form of large-scale street demonstrations on 28 and 29 June 1956. It arose from the failure of the political authorities to take action on the various economic grievances of workers in a large machinery plant against local management decisions. To dramatize the situation, the workers decided to march to the main town square. In the course of the march many workers from other factories joined in as a sign of solidarity. The purpose of the demonstration was not to revolt against the authorities, however, but rather to bring home to the public the poor working conditions in the factory and to appeal to officialdom for some improvement. Commenting subsequently on the character of the demonstration, a perceptive eyewitness observed that it had been "reminiscent of the January 1905 Petersburg march /on the Czar's palace/ rather than the activities of workers in the second half of the 20th century." (1)

It was only after the workers had waited for some hours for any sign of interest from the authorities and none had materialized that the crowd moved toward the local security police building. It was there that the first shots, from the police building, were fired. Rapidly, the peaceful demonstration turned into a riot. Several official buildings were attacked, a number of shops were rampaged through, and broadcasting installations were destroyed. The authorities sent regular army troops to pacify the protesters. This process of "pacification" extended through two days of unrestrained violence: some seventy-five people were reported to have been killed, several hundreds were wounded, and uncounted numbers of others were subject to beatings and physical abuse. (2) Summing up the position of the authorities, Prime Minister Jozef Cyrankiewicz, who was also a Politburo member, told the citizens of Poznan and the nation as a whole in a radio speech on 29 June 1956 that

any provocator or madman who dares to raise his arm against the people's power should know well that the /people's/ power will cut off this arm. . . .

Indeed, for the workers of Poznan the immediate repercussions of the revolt were drastic. None of their grievances was satisfied. Large-scale punitive measures were implemented by the authorities

- (1) Ewa Wacowska, "Poznan 1956," in Poznan 1956-Grudzien 1970 (Paris: Instytut Literacki, 1971), p. 172. Wacowska's work is the best available account on the 1956 Poznan events.
- (2) See Jaroslaw Maciejewski, "The Facts and the Question Marks," Polityka, 6 June 1981.



in all factories throughout the city. Several hundred worker activists were arrested -- some of them were kept in jail for several months only to be eventually released without sentences but also without any rehabilitation -- and many more were dismissed from their jobs. (3)

And yet, in spite of these acts of repression, the Poznan revolt ended with a measure of unexpected but significant success. Viewed in retrospect, it is clear that the events provided a turning point in Poland's politics. Shattering the image of the party's and government's seemingly indisputable authority, the Poznan revolt was the catalyst for a large movement toward social and political change throughout the country.

Particularly important was the emergence of workers' councils, conceived as elective organs of self-government separate from other organizations at factory level. Almost simultaneously, there were mounting pressures to change the function of trade unions in Poland from that of transmitting party orders to the workers to representing the workers' interests with the party and the government. Similar demands for greater autonomy were made within the party-controlled youth movement. The political situation in the country and the conditions of social life became topics of criticism among the intellectuals and their opinions were openly displayed in numerous books and articles.

There is also little doubt that the impact of the Poznan events on the country at large was felt in the leadership of the party itself. This was fully manifested during a plenary meeting of the party's Central Committee in July 1956, barely three weeks after the workers' protest had been suppressed. The protest was described by the top leader of the party, CC First Secretary Edward Ochab, as "a warning signal of a serious deterioration in the relations between the party and the working class . . . /related to/ the functioning of the party itself as well as the frequently faulty understanding of its leading role." Ochab then called for a "decisive reorientation in the conceptualization and in the practical implementation of the leading role of the party." (4) Three months later, in October 1956, an entirely new party leadership was elected, the old methods of rule were strongly condemned, and promises were made for a thorough overhaul of the system. These changes were then defined, by both the new leaders and numerous observers, as paving the road to something that was then known as "the Polish way to socialism."

It is true, of course, that the initial hopes about the "Polish October" were shortly to disappear. (5) The workers' council were to be quickly integrated into a centralized organization of

(3) See excerpts from the memoirs of some of the participants in the Poznan events as published in Polityka, 30 May 1981.

(4) Nowe Drogi, July-August 1956, pp. 138-166.

(5) For a comprehensive analysis of Poland's politics in the late 1950s, see J. B. de Weydenthal, The Communists of Poland, (Stanford, California: Hoover Institution Press, 1978), pp. 72-98.

factory representation, the labor unions were rapidly disciplined, and other forms of social activism were gradually suppressed. The party's centralized machine once again re-emerged as the only institutionalized body empowered to make decisions on all aspects of the country's public life.

### The Commemoration

Yet it is also true that the Poznan events have remained in the public mind as symbolizing a major breakthrough, however temporary it might have been, in social aspirations toward a greater voice in politics as well as an indication of the vulnerability of the system to determined public protest. There is also little doubt that this symbolic meaning of the Poznan rebellion has never been lost on the authorities themselves. How could one otherwise explain the silence, apparently imposed from above, on all political aspects of the revolt. How could one explain the fact that not a single book has ever been published in Poland on the background to, and the development of, the protests. How could one explain the persistent failure to commemorate that tragedy over many years, both in Poznan itself and in other parts of the country.

Indeed the most significant feature of the current commemorations was that it broke this silence. (6) A special monument, financed by voluntary contributions from many groups and individuals, was erected in the center of Poznan, on a spot used for past demonstrations. On June 28 there was a religious service conducted by the local archbishop; some 150,000 of Poznan's inhabitants took part in the commemoration, including large numbers of workers' delegates from around the country, representatives of various social organizations, members of the government, and the local party authorities. (7) During the ceremony a special letter from Pope John Paul II, containing the papal blessing for the occasion, was read in public.

To bring alive the memory of the 1956 events several public conferences will be organized during the coming weeks to discuss the meaning of the revolt, two special commemorative books on the matter have just been published, and a play has been specially written. Called "The Accused: June 1956," it opened with a gala performance at the end of June in Poznan and will then be staged in all major cities throughout the country. The play is a dramatized documentary about the workers' protest and the official reaction to it. (8)

All these activities have been primarily directed at the historical resurrection and political rehabilitation of the once officially forgotten events. Yet they also carry an equally important message for the present in the form of a powerful reminder that public developments of the magnitude of the Poznan rebellion should never be removed from the collective consciousness of the nation.

- (6) This point was stressed by Gazeta Krakowska, 14 May 1981; Sztandar Mlodych, 5-7 June 1981; Nowiny, 15-17 May 1981; and Tygodnik Solidarnosc, 19 June 1981.
- (7) Part of the ceremony was broadcast by Radio Warsaw, 28 June 1981.
- (8) For excerpts, see Przekroj, 31 May 1981; also Slowo Powszechne, 19 June 1981.



That message might be regarded by some as particularly poignant in the current situation, in which, following profound social changes prompted by the successful workers' protests of 1980, the public is especially sensitive to the memory of working-class conflicts in the past. It could also have an additional meaning as well considering the almost simultaneous fifth anniversary of the workers' riot in Radom.

### The Radom Anniversary

Occurring on 24 June 1976, the Radom riots were related to the nationwide workers' protest against the government decision to implement a previously unannounced increase in the prices of food and meat. They took the form of a spontaneous demonstration by workers on the city streets, a demonstration during which some public office buildings were severely damaged and many shops were looted. A similar demonstration also took place in a large tractor factory in Ursus, near Warsaw. No counterreaction by military units was organized that time in either place, although police intervened to break up the demonstration in Radom and the authorities subsequently arrested and prosecuted many hundreds of protesters.

In contrast to the Poznan rebellion of 1956, however, the workers' protest of 1976 ended with major success. The government, apparently concerned about the possibility that the workers' agitation could persist and mindful that an earlier proletarian protest in December 1970 had led to a drastic change in leadership, decided to reverse its decision on prices. On the evening of 25 June 1976, less than 24 hours after the original announcement of the increases, the food prices were rescinded.

Viewed in retrospect, the 1976 workers' protest against official economic policy was a turning point both in the process of government decision-making and in the evolution of the social movement of self-assertion. (9) The government's operations, especially in the area of economic policy-making, came to an almost complete standstill. Although economic conditions in the country continued to deteriorate, no comprehensive strategy of action to combat the difficulties was introduced. Instead, the running of economic policy became a succession of ad hoc moves, with frequent changes of course or contradictory implications. The main preoccupation of the leadership was with finding expedient ways to prevent a further decline, rather than introducing innovation. The net effect of that attitude, however, was growing public disillusionment with the government's performance, operational chaos, and a mounting feeling of uncertainty as to the future development of the country.

(9) For a discussion of post-1976 political and economic developments in Poland, see J. B. de Weydenthal, Poland: Communism Adrift, The Washington Papers, Vol. 7, No. 72 (Beverly Hills and London: Sage Publications, 1979), pp. 32-63.

The political and social repercussions of the protest were equally significant. More than anything else, the success of the workers in preventing the implementation of a government decision in 1976, particularly when coupled with a similar success in 1971, exposed the vulnerability of the political system to social pressures. This element alone greatly enhanced the resolve of both the workers and other social groups to demand access to participation in the process of politics. Needless to say, this development adversely influenced the effectiveness of the government and further undermined its authority.

More specifically, following a series of repressive measures against selected groups of workers from Radom and Ursus, where incidents of limited violence had taken place, there was widespread public criticism of the authorities' punitive action. This led to the establishment, in September 1976, of the Committee for the Defense of the Workers (KOR). Set up by a small group of prominent intellectuals, the committee's main task was to provide legal and financial help to the families of imprisoned workers and to campaign for their release. The emergence of KOR and the subsequent expansion of its activities to other areas of Poland's public life prompted the establishment of other dissident organizations and groups. Finally, in early 1978, the first units of the free trade union movement were established by workers in mining and shipping centers. Their aim was to serve as the nucleus of a future independent syndicalist movement that would be autonomous of the existing party-dominated institutions. The current Solidarity labor organization, which was set up as the result of workers' strikes in July-August 1980, has grown from the foundations provided by the free trade union movement.

#### The Past and the Future

This element of continuity in the workers' efforts toward self-organization must certainly have been on the minds of several thousand people who attended, on June 25, a solemn ceremony in memory of the Radom riots. Organized by a local chapter of Solidarity, the ceremony centered on the placing of a cornerstone for a monument that is to be erected to mark the 1976 events. A religious service was also held.

Addressing the crowds, the Radom Solidarity leader Andrzej Sobieraj, said that "we [Solidarity] will do our best so that the tragic events of Radom prove the last on the road of the cross of our nation." (10) He then went on to praise the past activities of KOR as the first organized group "to break the barrier of fear" in the country. Sobieraj also stressed the need for a full disclosure of official activities related to the 1976 events. Indeed, the Radom chapter of Solidarity and the government have been conducting protracted negotiations on local problems, in which the issue of official responsibility for the repression of workers who had taken

(10) UPI, 25 June 1981.



part in the riots has been one of the most important elements. There has been little if any progress so far on the matter. Following the most recent session, on June 24, a government spokesman was reported to have said that "as long as Solidarity fails to present documentary evidence of official responsibility for [the use of violence in the treatment of the protesters] no specific action can be undertaken [by the authorities]." (11)

Despite these signs of a continuing preoccupation with past events, the main accent behind the Radom ceremony was on the future of the workers' movement. This was fully demonstrated in Sobieraj's address, which, while dealing with the meaning of the Radom events and warning against possible problems for Solidarity's work in the current political environment, also carried a message of conviction that the workers' organizations would overcome potential obstacles. "We are sure that we will overcome all attempts at provocation that strive to push the nation off the road of authentic renewal," he said, adding that "our hopes for the victory of truth have strong foundations in the Solidarity unions." (12)

Sobieraj's assurances were echoed with equal emphasis by the main speaker at the ceremony, Lech Walesa, Chairman of Solidarity's National Coordinating Commission. Speaking about the relations between the unions and the authorities, Walesa told the people of Radom that "the period of confrontation is over." He was quick to add, however, that "let no one think that we have won; now the toughest period begins." (13) Walesa stopped short of explaining in detail what difficulties and problems the unions would have to face in the future; but he pointedly suggested that "attempts" might be made by "conservative forces" to break up the workers' organization and called upon his listeners "to be united and sensible."

Walesa was even more explicit when he spoke at the unveiling ceremony of a monument to the workers' rebellion in Poznan. He reminded his audience of thousands there that the best way to defend the interests of the workers was in "the solidarity of the world of labor, in the solidarity of honest people against dishonest people, against falseness and against people trying to keep our mouths shut." (14) Then, concentrating on the need to preserve the cohesion of the newly organized labor movement, Walesa declared:

We must not allow ourselves to be divided, we must not allow ourselves to be set against one another, we must not allow antisocialist and counterrevolutionary forces to be sought, because this is contemptible. . . . The world of labor is not counter-revolutionary, it is not anti-this or anti-that, but

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(11) Radio Warsaw, 24 June 1981.

(12) UPI, 25 June 1981.

(13) Ibid.

(14) Radio Warsaw, 28 June 1981.

is honest and true. This is why you [The critics of Solidarity (?) /] should finally stop insulting us, stop dividing us, because we will not allow ourselves to be insulted and divided any more. Whoever looks for antisocialist and counterrevolutionary forces, let him look for a name for those who called us precisely that at the time [Of the Poznan rebellion]. We will regard anyone who uses those epithets as someone who wants to divide us and set us against one another.

Walesa's remarks were presumably directed at all those Solidarity critics in both the domestic and foreign press who ascribe to some groups within the labor organization tendencies hostile to the existing system in Poland. Yet they also indicated a sense of determination to persevere in the defense of the workers' interests, a defense conducted in an organized and broadly based fashion. There is little doubt that the recently held commemoration of the past experiences of the workers' struggles for their rights will only reinforce that determination.

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We must not allow ourselves to be divided, we must not allow ourselves to be set against one another, we must not allow antisocialist and counterrevolutionary forces to be set against this as counter-revolutionary. The world of labor is not counter-revolutionary, it is not anti-labor or anti-peace, but

(11) Radio Warsaw, 24 June 1981

(12) UPI, 25 June 1981

(13) 1981

(14) Radio Warsaw, 25 June 1981