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POLISH UNDERGROUND PRESS AND THE IMPENDING PEOPLE'S
COUNCIL ELECTIONS

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Summary: Since the announcement that elections to the People's Councils are to be held in June and the passage of a revised law regulating such elections, the underground press has been waging a vigorous campaign aimed at clarifying the rules for democratic elections and, above all, at working out ways and means of invalidating bogus elections that have most probably been decided in advance by the authorities.

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Pre-election Campaign

Elections to the People's Councils at all administrative levels are not on a par with Sejm elections; the councils, however, by the very fact that they are local, dealing more closely with ordinary citizens and the day-to-day problems of a given area (the main problem being housing). Thus, the proclamation that the deferred elections are to take place in June¹ has caused a great deal of activity on the part of the underground press, from the smallest leaflets circulated in factories to the major regular publications. The campaign can be roughly divided into two parts: explanations of the democratic electoral system as practiced in the West and in Poland between the wars, and various suggestions of how to thwart the communist party and stop being stooges in a fake electoral process.

Our primary concern here will not be with the explanatory or educational part of the campaign; although its role in raising the consciousness of the electorate must not be underestimated, the patient explaining of civil rights has in the past helped

create the right climate for the emergence of Solidarity. More pertinent to our concerns are the actions (and frequently forms of inaction) proposed in statements, articles, and letters that have appeared in the underground press since last December, when the new draft law was announced and corrections to it invited.

To Vote or Not To Vote

It must be noted, first of all, that voting is not obligatory in Poland and no sanctions seem to have been imposed on people who failed to vote in the past. "I did not vote, and I did get an apartment (it took 12 years)," a reader of *Z Dnia na Dzien*² writes persuasively. It has been suggested darkly, however, that the regime may well introduce the obligation to vote in order to further its aims.

There is also a consensus that there is no point in attempting to make the elections truly representative; the law is set up in such a way and the authorities are so deceitful that the results will come out the way they have planned, no matter what. To quote the above reader of *Z Dnia na Dzien* again:

The current team remains in power through oppression and terror. If it could count on majority support, it would not have to use tanks, truncheons, internment camps, and prisons. Elections are held for show only.

A writer using the pseudonym Maciej Debski writes in *Mysl Niezalezna*³:

If there should be people anywhere naive enough to think that the authorities would make the slightest effort to gain credibility, they must be disappointed now. The objectives the authorities are placing in the elections are the same as those in March 1980 or November 1952. Are we capable of showing them that things are entirely different?

So the question arises of how to show not only the authorities, who know that they cannot hope for mass support, but also the media at home and abroad that things are indeed "different."

How Not To Vote

The consensus, after only a few weeks of discussion, seems to be for an abstention or boycott of the electoral process. The major underground Solidarity organizations have already come out in their statements in favor of a boycott.

The Interim Coordinating Commission of Solidarity (TKK NSZZ "Solidarnosc") published a statement on January 23⁴ that included the following assessment of the situation and defined the stance of clandestine leaders of Solidarity:

The conditions for authentic elections are: the repeal of suppressive laws and the freeing of political prisoners, the existence of independent social organizations capable of free activity and free expression of opinion, a democratic electoral law providing all organizations and social groups with the right to put forward their candidates, and the right to monitor elections. In view of the failure to fulfill these conditions, elections in our country only serve to enslave the population. In keeping with the opinion of the majority of the independent Solidarity groups, our only response can be the refusal to take part in voting. Our very presence at the voting booth would authenticate the propaganda lie that the authorities have public support. Hence, the proposals to place empty envelopes in ballot boxes and to count the withheld voting cards afterward or to cross out all names on the voting lists, etc., are unacceptable.

We appeal to all union groups to undertake counteraction and to prepare means for controlling the boycott in their respective areas.

This proposal of a straightforward boycott was approved officially in the statements made by various regional and factory branches.

Among the alternative ways of showing that the elections were fixed, the main suggestion was to withhold voting slips and to place only empty envelopes in the ballot boxes. The main supporter of this idea was *Niepodleglosc*,⁵ which suggested that the withheld voting slips should then be handed over to "social electoral commissions" through the usual clandestine Solidarity channels:

The painstaking collection of the purloined voting slips would follow. Let it take a year, if needs be. The reds will have to proclaim the results within a few days anyway, and out of sheer habit the official vote will be set very high, at 90% or so . . . while we collect the cards and hand them over. The findings of the independent social commissions would be conveyed to some international organization concerned with human rights.

Another Warsaw publication, *W Okopach*,⁶ approved this idea, adding only that the "purloined" voting slips should be handed over to the episcopate. *Biuletyn Lodzki*⁷ objected that this would mean involving the Church in a purely political action,

presenting the regime with the opportunity to accuse it of antistate activities. This would destroy the already tenuous hopes of liberating political prisoners with the help of the Church.

The main objection to active sabotage of the elections through the withholding or spoiling of voting slips was a more practical one⁸:

Solidarity dues are being paid by 10-20% of employees in large industrial plants; it would be Solidarity activists who would collect the slips from paying members (increased collection activity would carry with it the danger of disclosure). Collecting 20% of the voting slips would be a great success, yet an ambiguous one. After all, the Communists might very well proclaim that this time in Warsaw and Gdansk they got 80% of the vote. In this way Solidarity would unwittingly confirm the fraudulent elections.

Furthermore, the fortnightly publication *Hutnicy 82* notes that people who are afraid to take part in a boycott would be equally afraid to remove voting slips and hand them over to clandestine Solidarity activists.

Boycott--Yes! Control--Yes!

There is, then, already a consensus that a boycott is more advisable and more feasible than any other means of invalidating a predetermined "election." In the role of watchdog of the democratic process, however, the weekly *CDN*⁹ commented:

A boycott is the best solution, for moral reasons in particular. . . . But basic doubts can be raised about the way in which the Interim Commission made the decision on this matter: almost like a decree. Zbyszek Bujak and his colleagues placed a *fait accompli* before the union, although discussions were just gaining force at that point and there was sufficient time to weigh up all the pros and cons. The executive structure responded swiftly and in a disciplined manner--in itself a most positive fact. Nevertheless, there was once again no thorough consultation of members within plants; this is a major problem that should be solved for the good of us all, including the Interim Committee.

Now that the boycott has been decided upon, the underground papers have published numerous suggestions as to its implementation, wishing to maintain some means of controlling the extent of the boycott and of monitoring its size. In the above-quoted article, *CDN* suggested "the tallying of absent voters, street marches, and other forms of demonstration on voting day, so that the elections must be held under bayonets or at least under truncheons."

*Solidarnosc Walczaca*¹⁰ issued its own "practical suggestions:

On election day, one must certainly leave home, not only to take part in independent demonstrations and promenading but also to avoid the intrusion of the so-called representatives of the electoral commissions into the homes of those who have not yet voted. . . . Remember that according to the constitution elections are secret and no one can officially make the accusation "You did not vote." Furthermore, there will surely be enough of us to render pointless any underhand reprisals against those who did not vote.

The tradition of "promenading" goes back to the heyday of Solidarity, when masses of people in many towns and cities would go for ostentatious walks at exactly 1930 hours, during the despised main newscast on Polish television.

The Warsaw weekly *Wola*¹¹ published a suggestion that "commissions of social control" be placed near voting centers at certain times of the day to count those entering to vote, then calculate the average number of persons, multiply by the number of voting hours, and arrive at real participation figures. Most underground leaflets are beginning to carry antivoting slogans, such as "If you don't go, you don't lie." There are also appeals for any new ideas on the matter. Above all, there are calls for an intensive publicity campaign using all available means: underground press, leaflets, posters, Radio Solidarity broadcasts, personal talks, and so forth. The campaign should ridicule the elections and appeal to patriotism and justice. *Nasz Glos*,¹² for example, states:

As long as democratic opposition is not allowed to express the demands and needs of society, there can be no talk of democracy, either in social life or in elections. Democracy in the classic sense of freely elected government, and not in the socialist sense; the difference between the two is like that between an ordinary chair and an electric chair.

*Wiadomosci Wojenne*¹³ commented:

Therefore, dear reader, before making a final decision, think it over once again. And don't be afraid. No one will bite your head off if you boycott these elections. They will not kick you out of work or out of school. They will not take away your old age pension. As a matter of fact, you risk nothing; and you will have the delicious feeling that you did not cave in and take part in this whole farce.

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- 1 See Polish Situation Report/4, *Radio Free Europe Research*, 25 February 1984, item 4.
- 2 (From Day to Day) 12 February 1984; a Wroclaw publication appearing more or less weekly since December 1981.
- 3 (Independent Thought) no. 1, 1984; an irregular political magazine that has been published in Warsaw since at least early 1982.
- 4 *Tygodnik Mazowsze* (Mazowsze Weekly), 2 February 1984; a major publication, widely accepted as the official voice of the underground leaders of Solidarity; it has appeared regularly since February 1982.
- 5 (Independence), September-October 1983; a political monthly published in Warsaw and Katowice (recently Warsaw and Cracow) since early 1982. In its January 1984 issue *Niepodleglosc* adds that it does not insist on its original approach and is ready to cooperate on any other "sensible" suggestion.
- 6 (In the Trenches) no. B69, February 1984; published in Warsaw fortnightly.
- 7 (Lodz Bulletin), 9 February 1984; a weekly publication appearing in Lodz since November 1982.
- 8 *Hunticy 82* (Foundry Workers '82), 22 January 1984, a fortnightly published in Huta Warszawa since early 1982.
- 9 (To Be Continued), 27 February 1984; a weekly that has been appearing in Warsaw under the sponsorship of the Interfactory Worker Solidarity Committee (MRKS) since early 1982.
- 10 (Fighting Solidarity), 15-22 January 1984; a weekly published in Wroclaw since mid-1982.
- 11 (The Will), 2 April 1984; the title is also a play on words, since it is the name of the Warsaw suburb, where the weekly is published.
- 12 (Our voice), 31 January 1984; a publication from Silesia.
- 13 (Wartime News), 18 February 1984; published in Lodz at least since early 1982.

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