

Who are the Workers in Polish Solidarity and what do they want?

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Polish workers have made headlines in America since August 1980. Their meteoric success in organizing Solidarity provided catchy copy for the morning papers and dramatic footage for the evening news. Waies's mustache became so familiar that if he would only agree to sell deodorant he'd easily make a million dollars.

But in spite of this sensational coverage, or perhaps because of it, the workers of Solidamosc remain a mystery to most Americans. Who are they? How did they organize Solidarity? What they accomplished in so short a time is astonishing, and it is incredible that they are still organizing under martial law.

Who Are They?

The great majority of Solidarity activists are today between the ages of 25 and 35. They were born into a new industrial state rising out of the chaos and devastation of World War II. Their families, uprooted by the war, settled near new manufacturing complexes such as the Gdansk shipyards on the Baltic Seaboard.

From their early childhoods, the future activists of Solidarity knew that someday they would take their places as workers in these factories. Thus, as a generation, they were just as important to the success of the new socialist state as were the recently constructed industrial plants.

Growing Up In A Workers' State

Officially, Poland has been a workers' state for 35 years, run by and for workers. But, even before the rise of Solidarity, Polish workers themselves repeatedly challenged the Polish reality through strikes and street demonstrations. If the ideals of socialism promised a better life for all, why wasn't there enough to eat? Why, in this workers' state, were the workers unable to control their own lives?

When major strikes broke out on the Baltic Seaboard in 1970, the government responded at first with repression. Several hundred workers were killed and many more injured, but still the strikes continued. A new government leader, Edward Gierek, traveled to striking factories in person to announce a change in government policy. He promised an end to repression, consultations with workers over their problems, and an improved standard of living.

Gierek hoped to win workers' loyalty by offering them the fruits of a flourishing consumer society. This required the retooling of the Polish economy at a cost of billions of western dollars. Gierek's message to workers was clear: if western dollars. Gierek's message to workers was clear: if they would leave the politics to the officials and turn their attention back to productive work on the job, they would soon be rewarded with the color TV sets and blue jeans that new Polish factories would produce.

But in spite of Sunday afternoon soccer in full color, the reality of working people's daily lives improved very little. Most of the benefits of the new economic policies went to support the scandalously expensive life-styles of the high government officials whom many called "the red bourgeoisie."

Price rises were inevitable, and when they came in 1976, the autoworkers in Radom and Ursus struck in protest. After their revolts were broken, a group of artists and intellectuals formed the Committee to Defend Workers (KOR; later named the Committee for Social Self-Defense)

to marshal financial and legal support for workers jailed for strike activity. They published and distributed literature which documented the repression underlying the “red bourgeoisie’s” consumer society. Their signatures on publications exposed the amorality of this society’s what’s-in-it-for-me attitude. In spite of their personal courage, however, KOR remained an isolated voice on the margins of popular opinion. Even as late as the spring of 1980, their call for free trade unions met with indifference from the majority of Polish people who had long ago despaired of meaningful change.

The cynicism gave way to an exhilarating sense of growing unity and strength when a wave of strikes swept the country in July 1980. The sporadic work stoppages were catalyzed into a general strike several weeks later, when an Inter-factory Strike Committee formed at the Gdansk shipyards. Strikers there had formulated a list of twenty-one demands that were adopted as their own by thousands of striking factories throughout the country.

Solidarity Takes Hold

Strikers had taken full advantage of their economic leverage as producers by staying in their factories and refusing to be provoked into street violence. Their cry was, “Don’t burn Party headquarters, form strike committees!”

The victorious tactic of a general strike of factory occupations anchored the movement in radical, consensus-based democracy. Strike activists were given positions of leadership by acclamation, but with the clear understanding that their authority sprang from the shop floor and could be revoked at any moment. When Walesa, for instance, declared the shipyard strike over because the government had acceded to local demands, he was hooted down by an assembly that included representatives from other plants. “No,” they shouted. “The shipyards stay on strike until all demands of the strike movement are met.” Walesa had to reverse the decision.

All strike negotiations were conducted in public assemblies and broadcast over loudspeaker systems. Representatives from outlying districts taped the proceedings on cassettes, to be re-played at striking factories back home.

Solidarity’s structure reflected the general strike that propelled it into existence. News of the strike in Gdansk spread through factory networks, which were based on the new trust that developed between people who had broken through the old web of fear and apathy. As these networks grew in strength, they gathered plant departments and individual factories into regional centers based at major industrial plants.

After the Accords were signed, these regional strike centers became the new union framework, a loose federation of regional chapters. The national leadership was the National Consulting Commission. Composed of two representatives from each region and several permanent members, its task was to exchange information and to relay suggestions for coordinated action between regions. It met only as the need arose and had no power to mime its decisions.

The regional structure of Solidarity contrasted sharply with the craft structure of the official trade unions. Solidarity welcomed all people employed in a given region as members of that region’s chapter. Popular enthusiasm was so great that in the two months between the Accords and official registration, Solidarity organized ten million members; that is, over 80% of the workforce and more than one quarter of the total population.

Thus, even before it had the legal right to organize, Solidarity had established itself as an organization of the entire class of working people. Technicians, government employees: scientists, and journalists joined Solidarity. They joined to support the cause of industrial workers, and also to protect workers in general, by creating greater economic clout for their own interests. Independent farmers and students formed separate unions in association with Solidarity.

Solidarity In Action

“They want us to pull our load, like workhorses. But we want to hold the reins as well, so that they won’t take any more wrong turns.”

In a country that has known formal political democracy for only four years in its entire history, Solidarity spearheaded a radical experiment in democracy with no parallel in the world. Once the lid of secrecy and censorship had been lifted, it became a national obsession to prevent manipulation or arbitrary decisions. No matter how long discussions in search of consensus dragged on, they were universally acknowledged as preferable to top-down directives.

The challenge of creating and maintaining a self-managed, organization of ten million people out of nothing produced an explosion of creative talent. The most articulate, politically canny spokesmen for Solidarity stepped directly from their jobs as electricians and lathe operators into positions of responsibility in the union. Art and writing blossomed; over 600 Solidarity publications sprang to life in the first year of its existence. Every factory, every town, insisted on its own paper and took great pride in its production.

The five-day work week was one of Solidarity’s earliest and hardest-fought victories. Yet by late summer 1981 “free Saturdays” seemed a luxury Polish society could ill afford. The nation’s economy teetered on the edge of collapse. Massive hunger marches inflamed social frustration to the flashpoint of violence. Although the government offered no proposals of its own, it launched a hysterical campaign to blame the volatile climate on the strikes spurred by Solidarity.

How To Break The Deadlock

To break this social and economic deadlock, Solidarity called for tactics which would provide social services to relieve the discomfort caused by shortages, develop new kinds of strike action that would not disrupt necessary production, and set in motion workers’ self-management of their workplaces and control over goods produced.

First, Solidarity organized self-help institutions to aid the elderly, the sick, and working families in meeting daily needs under increasingly difficult conditions. The Solidarity program adopted at its September 1981 Convention contains a detailed plan for emergency operations for the coming winter.

Secondly, Solidarity proposed a variation on the traditional strike, calling it the “direct action strike.” Workers would continue to go to work, but would find ways to deny the results of production to the state-employer. For example, printers struck to protest censorship and the government’s refusal to grant Solidarity access to the media. During the strike, however, they continued to print children’s books, local papers and strike bulletins — everything in fact, except the official Party paper.

Thirdly, Solidarity demanded the right of workers to fire their bosses. General managers and their staffs were to remain in charge of routine administration. But they would be hired or recalled by vote of rank and file representatives to a workers' council, rather than by political appointment through the Party apparatus. Hundreds of workplaces instituted efforts to force corrupt or inefficient managers to resign, and to force government ministries to approve appointments suggested by workers' councils.

Lastly, Solidarity began organizing production itself. The National Commission issued an appeal to the Solidarity membership for volunteer work on their hard-won free Saturdays. Local self-management councils would take charge of the plants during Saturday work, organizing the process of production and insuring that goods produced were delivered to areas of greatest need.

This approach promised practical results. Workers at the Ursus tractor plant, for instance, agreed that machinery produced on Saturdays would be designated for direct transfer to independent farmers rather than to the state wholesaler. Miners in Silesia agreed to send coal to farming regions in return for assurances of food supplies for mining regions that had few farms.

Martial Law

The government never took an official stand on Solidarity's proposals for self-management, but unofficially it did everything to obstruct them by stalling negotiations and refusing administrative cooperation. Many Poles wondered if this do-nothing government was capable of any concerted effort whatsoever.

On December 13, 1981, General Jaruzelski cut short that speculation by declaring martial law. His answer to Solidarity's initiatives for a self-managed society: "We must shackle the hands of adventurers, the extremists of Solidarity, before they push the country into civil war...Our military actions do not threaten anyone, but are aimed at peace and international cooperation."

If martial law aimed to break the union by jailing its "leaders," it has utterly failed. Solidarity's origins in a nonviolent general strike, its decentralized structure, and its tradition of decision by consensus, were the best possible preparation for surviving a "state of war." Today underground information bulletins circulate from hand to hand, as they did in the weeks preceding the strike in Gdansk. Help has been organized for families of workers killed, jailed, or dismissed from their jobs. Factory crews make collective decisions on the forms resistance should take. For instance, loyalty oaths are signed by no one or by all, to prevent individuals from being singled out for harassment.

The threat of military terror could not prevent the rise of Solidarity; it will not be able to extinguish it. Words that rallied workers in August 1980 take on even greater meaning today: "They can shoot us but they cannot make us work. Our power lies in ourselves, when together we decide what we want and how to get it."

The twenty-one Demands in Gdansk That Started it All

The non-negotiable core of Gdansk's twenty-one points was the right to independent trade unions and the right to strike as a guarantee of their independence. Bitter past experience had convinced workers that only an organization controlled by the rank and file could force the government to keep its promises. They remembered how easily radical-sounding concessions —

such as workers' councils in 1956 and consultations in 1970 — could later be nullified in practice by political maneuvers beyond the control of workers.

The remaining points defined the immediate needs of working people, linked those needs to a broader social movement for civil liberties, and expressed the workers' intention to supervise the direction of economic reform.

Raises were not to be based on a percentage of income, but would be a fixed sum across the board so that workers at the lower end of the pay scale would be helped most. Demands for maternity leaves, day-care centers, reduced waiting time for housing, and a lowered retirement age aimed to relieve the pressures on working families. Privileges for police and party officials, such as special shops that sold goods not available to workers, were to be eliminated. Food supplies were to be allocated first of all for domestic consumption; only the remaining surplus was to go for export. The workers' grievances could not be kept separate from the interests of society at large. When strikers demanded the reinstatement of their fellow workers who had been fired for participating in protests in the past, they included intellectuals and students dismissed for similar activities, and non-strikers (such as KOR members) who were actively aiding the current strike movement.

Workers insisted that news of the Seaboard strike and the twenty-one points of the Gdansk Inter-factory Committee be published in the daily press. They sought assurances of continued access to the public media for both workers and other independent viewpoints, an end to censorship, and an end to harassment of unofficial publications.

Finally, the Gdansk demands announced the need for a thorough housecleaning in the economy and its administrative apparatus. They declared that corrupt officials should be removed and inefficient managers replaced. They pressed the government to make public the secret data workers needed to understand the operations of the economy. The strikers made it clear that they did not want to take over the state's economic authority or get bogged down with responsibility for the day-to-day administration of factories. But they claimed the right to oversee the government's actions in this sphere, and to control investment decisions and allocations policy, so that never again would a "red bourgeoisie" have free rein to misdirect the course of the national economy.

The movement represented by these twenty-one demands spoke for and was supported by virtually everyone in Polish society except for those directly beholden to the Party or the internal security apparatus. Faced with such massive power, the government reluctantly agreed to all of the demands.

When it signed the Accords at Gdansk on August 31, 1980, the government agreed in principle to allow independent, self-managed trade unions. But how would these unions look in reality? Should there be one big union, or many independent ones? If one, should it be organized by trade or by territory? Should it be directed by a strong central executive or be decentralized with emphasis on local autonomy? How would it relate to the official trade unions and Party-dominated factory councils? What would be its role beyond the workplace?

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1982

Commonwork Pamphlets, 1982
Commonwork Pamphlets
P.O. Box 2026
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