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The Triumph and Tragedy of Poland's Solidarity Movement

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Poland's Solidarity trade union was one of the most impressive workers' movements in postwar Europe. It rocked the foundations of an autocratic regime, but it took a wrong turn as the Eastern Bloc started to crumble.

Forty years ago this week, Poland's independent trade union movement, Solidarność, burst onto the scene after a wildcat strike wave. The movement posed a direct challenge to the Polish Communist regime, which temporarily granted Solidarność freedom to organize, but later drove it underground after imposing martial law in December 1981.

The spectacle of a powerful workers' movement challenging a self-proclaimed workers' state had a huge impact throughout the Eastern Bloc; in many ways, it was the beginning of the end for Soviet-style Communism.

Poland's Solidarność ("Solidarity") movement emerged in August 1980 as a left-wing workers' movement against the putatively left-wing workers' state governing the country. It was a time of militant strikes, mass participation, and nascent workers' control of enterprises, with workers and intellectuals jointly challenging bureaucratic state socialism and posing demands for greater democracy, but not for the restoration of capitalism.

Today, what remains of Solidarity is a trade union closely associated with the right-wing Law and Justice party government of [Jarosław Kaczyński](#). This has led many, even in Poland, to reject the movement and discard its legacy. That is unfortunate. The Solidarity uprising was one of the great left-democratic social movements to have occurred since World War II. The contemporary left can still learn a great deal from its experiences and from its evolution.

Wildcat Movement

The movement began as a wildcat strike at the powerful Lenin Shipyards in Gdańsk, a plant with over twenty thousand workers and a tradition of labor protests for workers' rights. Strikes were illegal in state-socialist society, and unions largely worked in cahoots with management. However, a small circle of opposition labor and intellectual activists convinced key production units to lay down their tools, in the middle of a summer of unrest sparked by the imposition of higher food prices.

This crisis came in the wider context of a general social malaise, due to universal shortages and the apparent lack of ideas for any progressive developments. The initial demands of the strikers called for the rehiring of activists who had been fired for their political militancy, and the erection of a monument to the workers killed by the state's repressive forces during the last strike to have taken place there in 1970.

But as other workers, first from Gdańsk and then from around the country, started flocking to the

shipyards to declare their solidarity and seek support for their own fledgling actions, an Interfactory Strike Committee took shape. By late August, the strikers had drawn up a list of twenty-one demands, with the call for “independent self-governing trade unions” — Demand No. 1 — the only one upon which they refused to compromise.

Unable to suppress the expanding mobilization, the government made an about-turn. It recognized Solidarity in the famous Gdańsk Accord of August 31, 1980 — and then spent most of the next year trying to beat it back.

A Workers’ Democracy

Solidarity had some specific demands, such as an end to all Saturday work (many workers still faced a compulsory six-day workweek). Mainly, however, the movement wanted to facilitate widespread democratic mobilization, allowing workers in all institutions to formulate their own demands. It was indeed a workers’ movement, but because the state owned virtually all productive and cultural institutions in the country, Solidarity brought together blue- and white-collar employees, manual laborers, and intellectuals. All wanted to take charge of their institutions.

Solidarity called meetings in enterprises throughout the country, and it seemed that everyone wanted to speak. I remember one such meeting being held in a government building in Bydgoszcz in March 1981, occupied by farmers who were seeking registration of their own union. One of the organizers apologized to me for the “anarchic” nature of the proceedings, but I told him I had never seen such democracy in action. Poland during the Solidarity period often seemed like a real council democracy, with the aura of Paris 1968, Barcelona 1936, or even Petrograd 1917.

Of course, Solidarity was decidedly different from left-wing movements in the West. Solidarity’s “enemy,” after all, was the communist party-state, which insisted that this was nothing but a right-wing counterrevolution. Solidarity saw the Catholic Church as a great ally. Capitalist governments rushed to support it.

Yet here was a movement that was fighting for workers’ autonomy, with authentic grassroots participation. It wanted employees who had been democratically elected to run the workplaces, and not party bureaucrats. While Solidarity might have venerated the Church, the Church itself was quite wary of Solidarity’s radicalism.

Western governments followed Cold War logic in supporting the movement. However, the *Wall Street Journal*, wary that a Poland with empowered workers might not rush to pay back its global debts, editorialized that Communist Party rule might be better for Western business.

As for capitalism, Solidarity treated its return as something unimaginable and implausible. It seemed to want nothing but a democratic workers’ state. No wonder many Western Trotskyists cheered Solidarity on as the harbinger of the anti-Stalinist workers’ revolution for which they had been waiting.

No wonder, too, that when the ruling party repressed the movement, Western socialists and trade unionists gave Solidarity vast support — far more than their governments, who pretended to support the Polish workers, but always feared the radical and democratic nature of their organization.

The Self-Limiting Movement

Yet Solidarity did not push for a revolution. Workers wanted a realization of the system’s promises to the working class. Its huge debt crisis had led not only to shortages of basic goods but also to huge cutbacks in social welfare provision. The movement’s powerful intellectual advisers, such as [Jacek](#)

[Kuron](#), [Karol Modzelewski](#), and [Adam Michnik](#), had been anti-Stalinist left radicals in the 1960s, but now sought only an accord that would institutionalize Solidarity's existence, and push the system closer to political democracy.

The problem, though, was that the very idea of an independent trade union clashed with the reality of the state-socialist system, with a state-owned economy organized by central planners to fit national goals, and a political system based on single-party rule. Like other state-socialist countries, Poland had trade unions operating throughout the economy. However, those unions cooperated with management and the political authorities, and existed chiefly to administer social welfare policies.

As a result, when Solidarity branches in specific firms made demands on their managers, most of these issues could only be solved politically at a higher level — meaning that they were not resolved at all. The ensuing stalemate both angered and galvanized workers, which frightened the party and alarmed the state authorities, who then began preparing a repressive counterattack. There seemed to be an inbuilt vicious circle almost from the very beginning of the movement.

The final denouement began in September 1981, when Solidarity's First National Congress called for a "self-managing republic" in which workers would elect the management of enterprises, and issued an appeal to workers throughout state-socialist Eastern Europe "to join the fight for a free union movement." From that point on, the state essentially ceased negotiations with Solidarity.

Crackdown

The result was not chaos, as Solidarity exercised considerable discipline over its members, but rather a political and economic impasse, aimed at preparing the ground for a crackdown. And then it came, on December 13, 1981, when General [Wojciech Jaruzelski](#), now the party leader as well as head of the military, declared martial law.

The state raided and closed Solidarity offices all over the country, suspended all trade union activity, and interned thousands of Solidarity activists. To thwart any new strike activity, all telephone service was shut down, newspapers closed, and intercity travel banned, along with the sale of gasoline or of blank paper for mimeograph machines.

Because it was not a revolutionary movement, and not even *explicitly* a political one — it never demanded an end to Communist Party rule, as it understood that it could not reverse Poland's membership in the Soviet bloc — Solidarity was in no position to challenge the crackdown. In fact, its supreme commitment to democracy obstructed the formulation of a response. It did not have any underground structure, and it did not try to accumulate arms.

A week before the declaration of martial law, the leader of Solidarity's powerful Warsaw branch even told hundreds of delegates that if the authorities took repressive action against the union, he would . . . reconvene the body, so the collective could decide how to respond! (Needless to say, dozens of its members were among the first to be thrown in jail.) With their leadership arrested and no possibility of coordinating any response, Solidarity members organized scattered strikes only, which petered out within a week.

Filling the Vacuum

Once martial law was introduced, Solidarity had to become political. No longer recognized as a trade union, smashed as a democratic social movement by state police, its revival hinged on a political transformation, whether through a deal or a revolutionary uprising.

Some did call for the latter, but it would have been foreign to everything the movement stood for.

Nor was there any group with enough legitimacy to pursue it. Solidarity activists who escaped arrest and began acting underground thus returned to the traditional framework of dissident-era activism: samizdat publications, accompanied by nonviolent civic protest, calling for the restoration of the movement.

But if Solidarity could not be incorporated within the state-socialist system, a simple restoration of the trade union would only revive all the old clashes, this time more fiercely. Clearly, a new vision was needed. Unfortunately, that need was largely satisfied by the fresh ideology emerging in the early 1980s: neoliberalism.

When workers first created Solidarity, social democracy in the West was just barely hanging on, unable to figure a way out of the intractable economic crisis of the 1970s. By 1983, when martial law was formally lifted, neoliberalism was ascendant. The assaults on trade unions by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan were in full swing, while François Mitterrand's French socialist experiment was in tatters. Even Sweden was turning away from egalitarianism. Solidarity's intellectual elite, now almost all out of jail, began to follow these trends.

I remember being in Warsaw in 1984, attending seminars of prominent pro-Solidarity economists and intellectuals, who were all singing the praises of "property rights." The underground publishing house Nowa devoted scarce resources to produce a samizdat copy of Friedrich Hayek's *Road to Serfdom*. In 1981, my copies of books on self-managing socialism had been in strong demand among union intellectuals; now, however, everyone just wanted me to tell them how capitalism "really" worked.

Demise of the Regime

What explains this turn? Four factors seem key: the weakness of the proletarian dimension of Solidarity after martial law, now that it no longer operated as a trade union; acceptance of the emerging consensus about the alleged failure of the entire left project; a desire to curry favor with Western decision-makers; and a changing philosophical assessment, resulting from the crushing of Solidarity in 1981.

Previously, Solidarity's leadership had seen widespread civic participation as the ground on which democracy can be built. But that had now been tried and failed. Many were swayed to the belief that private property offered the strongest foundation for the guarantee of civic autonomy they saw as the basis for democracy.

Solidarity's turn to neoliberalism was thus not just a matter of "betrayal." Such an interpretation puts too much emphasis on subjective leadership and not enough on the global economic and ideological context of the time. Nevertheless, the turn meant that when Solidarity did reemerge, it would be a very different kind of organization, overseeing a very different kind of politics.

The stalemate of martial law began to crack with the elevation of Mikhail Gorbachev to head of the Soviet Communist Party in 1985. While Gorbachev himself had a broadly social-democratic disposition, apparent in his connection with Czech supporters of the 1968 Prague Spring, his willingness to allow Eastern European countries to go their own way stemmed also from Soviet economic needs. Put simply, the Soviet Union was tired of supplying to its satellites, in exchange for mid-quality goods and political support, the precious oil and gas it could have been selling to the West for hard currency.

In 1986, the Polish government freed all political prisoners. Solidarity's leadership pushed for open negotiations, which the government rejected until another Gdańsk ship workers' strike in 1988

showed the risks of further delay. Round-table negotiations commenced formally in February 1989.

Those talks concluded in April with the restoration of Solidarity and an agreement to hold partially free elections in June. Solidarity swept those elections so thoroughly that the Communist Party allowed a Solidarity-led government to be sworn in by September. The Berlin Wall fell two months later.

Building Polish Capitalism

Solidarity the political movement had come to power. Its leadership went into government offices and the media, some into the new world of private business. Solidarity's workers, however, who had made the transformation possible, experienced the new era of post-communism quite differently. They had got their trade union back, but it was no longer the same.

The last communist government had introduced a sharp austerity program in 1988, but the new Solidarity government only expanded it. So-called shock therapy triggered massive inflation and the slow bankruptcy of state-owned firms. However, because a Solidarity government now vouched for this program, most of the union leadership went along with it.

They wanted to "be like the West," and quickly, which to them meant supporting the rapid construction of capitalism — without recognizing that the only way industrial workers in the West had won a decent life was by *fighting* capitalism, rather than embracing it. A [survey](#) in 1994 showed that most enterprise union leaders in Poland believed a key part of their role as unionists was to convince their members to accept painful market reforms.

How could they convince workers to accept the capitalist turn, despite growing economic privation? National Solidarity took a sharp turn to the cultural right. This was partly due to the increasing presence in the union leadership of cultural conservatives, now that the left-liberals who had previously held sway had moved into government positions.

However, it also enabled union leaders to deflect rank-and-file opposition by blaming workers' problems not on capitalism as such, but rather on capitalism being run by the wrong type of people. The newly rising elites weren't "true Poles" and weren't Christian enough, according to the new Solidarity narrative.

Class Dismissed

The irony, then, is that at the very time class thinking was needed, it was no longer available, having been [compromised](#) by both state socialism and a false Cold War understanding of capitalism. The old Solidarity left, now firmly liberal, believed that it needed to build capitalism *before* incorporating workers, while the Right pushed to unite workers on a Catholic-nationalist platform.

And this, in short, is how things have played out since. With their support for the market and fear of workers, the left-liberals lost all influence within Solidarity. The Polish left thus essentially disappeared, until a new generation began to rethink and revive a left-wing movement in the 2000s.

As for the Right, its hegemony within Solidarity was tenuous so long as it offered workers only religious and nationalist bromides, but not any economic alternative to neoliberalism. That only changed in the past decade, when Jarosław Kaczyński's right-wing Law and Justice party (PiS, in Polish initials) began pushing for some real economic redistribution. It was on the basis of such a program that PiS won strong labor support in its 2015 electoral victory.

In part PiS has delivered, with stronger labor contract enforcement, higher minimum wages, and

generous cash payments to parents. Its policies have helped the poorest workers more than unionized ones, and it has been hostile to public-sector unionists (who are mostly members of other trade unions). Moreover, PiS does not work *with* unions. In typical authoritarian style, it introduces policies [paternalistically](#), so that workers look to the state for hope, and not to their own organizations.

Still, all this has been enough to win the support of Solidarity. Today, the union is almost entirely allied with PiS, and thus with all the illiberal, anti-democratic, anti-immigrant, homophobic, protofascist policies and practices that the party has been promoting.

Out of the Ashes

This evolution has led many on the Left to question how the Solidarity of 1980 should be assessed today. But great social movements always contain within them the seeds of a variety of alternatives. The beginnings don't determine the future. And in Solidarity's case, much of its evolution was determined by the nature of state socialism.

In the end, Solidarity deserves to be celebrated as a powerful left-wing opposition to state socialism that carried within itself the seeds of a viable democratic socialist alternative. It fought for genuine workers' participation and democratic self-government in a state-owned economy. It was a truly universalist movement, incorporating highly and lesser-skilled workers, blue- and white-collar employees, workers, and intellectuals, shunning racism and exclusion.

Of course, much of Solidarity's "leftness" stemmed from its emergence within the framework of state socialism. Workers and intellectuals were all employees of the same state; everyone belonged to trade unions already. Any opposition movement had to accept the basic parameters of a state-owned economy and formally embrace internationalism and anti-racism: following any other course would have allowed the state to suppress Solidarity at the very outset.

To say that Solidarity was a democratic left alternative to state socialism thus does not mean that all of its leadership and members saw it that way. Nevertheless, from August 1980 to December 1981, Solidarity invented in Poland the kind of grassroots, democratic, noncapitalist, participatory social experiment that the Left has always tried to bring about. This is what should be remembered, commemorated, and highlighted today.

The Communist Party crushed that movement and imposed martial law, which pushed Solidarity away from socialism, propelling some of its activists toward neoliberalism and others toward Catholic nationalism. The Solidarity of 1980 is not responsible for that.

Forty years later, it should be remembered as a bright light in the struggle for a democratic socialism. Its participatory ethos and union-dominated enterprises gave us a glimpse at how a modern society could flourish democratically. Its experiences and evolution will remain well worth studying for a long time to come.

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