
The Victory and Tragedy of the Polish Working-Class

Notes and Commentary on the Polish Events.

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The following has been written as a result of a number of discussions and interviews with those who have either been directly related to the Polish events or made a special study of that country. The notes do not pretend to any special knowledge and are little more than an external commentary on the issues raised by the working-class activity in Poland. The views are entirely my own although shared or further developed by a number of others on the Critique board.

There can be no question of the enormous importance of the working-class victory in Poland. It has to be seen in the context of the inspiration it has provided to other struggles in the world both East and West. In Britain miners leaders referred to the Polish workers success when confronting the British Government, while the discontent in Estonia and workers' strike there obviously has been influenced by events in Poland. Again it is clear from reports that Soviet workers have been made aware of the Polish workers' struggles, and support them. In terms of Poland there can be no question of the significance of the challenge to the regime and most particularly to Russian domination.

Nonetheless, the situation in Poland is paradoxical in that although there has been a working-class protest movement it has been led by elements who are not in favour of working-class control over the society. In the best case KOR intellectuals have spoken of parliamentary democracy and the introduction of the market, while the worship of the Pope and veneration of Pilsudski, in the worst case, can only inspire pity for those whom Stalinism has deprived of any knowledge of history. It is crystal clear that Marxists exert no influence in Poland, although social democracy does appear as the ideology of many. The model of KOR intellectuals is Sweden. The aim is the mixed economy with a genuinely elected Parliament, to be achieved by a gradual process. It is truly an irony of history that those playing a crucial role in KOR like Kuron and Modzelewski should have begun their political careers as Trotskyists with their famous Trotskyist pamphlet on the political economy of Poland.

The irony is that probably only those who derived from Marxism could understand the importance of working-class struggle, while their position within the intelligentsia led them to adopt the views of that social group.

Thus the historical unity of the intelligentsia and working-class has been established on the terms of the intelligentsia. When such an anti-Marxist as Kolakowski can be the chief philosopher of KOR it is clear not only that Marxism is absent in those circles but that its demands are effectively those of modern Christian- or Social-Democracy. Efficient management, abolition of political controls, end to corruption, hierarchical mobility are the demands of the intelligentsia, usually expressed in terms of the market.

Historically, the Polish regime in its present form, established effectively in 1956, was always based on the Soviet realisation that its invasion of Poland would mean a war. The tank confrontation outside Warsaw in 1956 epitomises the basis of the Polish regime. Ultimately dependent on Soviet troops for the existence of the system, the regime has by the counter threat of force been allowed a political space in which concessions could be made to social groups. The petit-bourgeoisie obtained considerable concessions in de-collectivisation and so private farming, with a consequent control over its products; the artisans and small to medium size factory owners — up to 100 workers are known to exist within an enterprise, nominally illegal though it may be, constitute a second part of this petite-bourgeoisie; currency and other traders are a third part.

The importance of private property in this connection is that it actually provided an independence from state control which allowed still further independence for that control. It naturally feeds into the strength of the church, through the backwardness of the peasants. At the same time the strength of the peasantry slowed the relative rate of industrialisation, making Poland, paradoxically, more rural than the USSR. At the same time, their independence allowed the peasants to supply their worker brothers with food when on strike. The regime could not raise prices to the workers but also could not cut prices either by the direct exploitation of the Soviet kind or by making the farms more efficient. It is, of course, a popular view in Poland that small farms produce more efficiently than large farms, but the truth of the statement in Poland (in relation to state farms) cannot obscure the fact that the efficient Western farm is not small. The government proposals to increase the size of the farms as well as supplies to the farmers can only strengthen the importance of private property, without resolving the problem of size, since there is no optimum small size for a farm.

To a considerable extent the market sector catered for the Polish elite and indeed formed part of it. In a sense the degeneration of the Polish October involved the incorporation of sections of this entrepreneurial sector, with the consequent corruption of other sections of the elite. At the same time the old ruling class was, as described in the eloquent film, *Ashes and Diamonds* partly incorporated. It is not unusual in present day Poland to find such people living under conditions of relative luxury. The main problem with such a social structure is not that it is non-Stalinist but that the factionalisation of the ruling group and its historical instability make it

incapable of resolving issues or imposing its will. Clearly, such a group would prefer a market and they have indeed declared that they will introduce a thoroughgoing market system with unemployment and the usual incentive system that goes with it. Apologists may split hairs as to whether it is or is not capitalism. If it is not capitalism it is close to it.

It would of course be entirely wrong to accuse Kuron and KOR of being on the same side. They are not — for they represent rather the classical intelligentsia of Eastern Europe: caught between the elite and the working-class. They require a quiet life with relative independence from the state, only possible with a market. The alternative form of independence: with democratic socialism is clearly impossible in one Poland and they certainly would not see Poland as being the sacrificial lamb for world socialism. Unlike the USSR where the intelligentsia wants to enter the elite and allies with sections of it, the Polish elite is more distant. In the USSR loyalty is meaningless as a test to enter the elite, whereas in a Poland where the majority openly proclaim their opposition to the system loyalty is important. Thus the Polish elite must contain a higher proportion of cynics, the corrupt and the stupid. The Soviet elite, in contrast, has increasingly been based on efficiency, careerism and management skills.

Thus the antagonism of the intelligentsia for an imposed elite has special dimensions in Poland as compared with the USSR. It is nationalist or at least anti Russian domination and against an imposed inefficient irritating, political elite, using a police state. In the USSR there is no external party, while the Russian party is clearly part of Russia. Thus the potential for a unity with the working-class existed in Poland even if it took thirty years to establish itself. The unity is indeed similar to that established by nationalist movements in colonial situations.

The reason for the absence of a working-class ideology or Marxism has fundamentally to do with the destruction of Marxism and Marxists by the Stalinist system but also to do with the failure of the left to produce a viable analysis of Poland. To a worker there appears only the success of the West, the failure of the economic system in Poland and the domination of Russia. Coming from a peasant background he easily absorbs Polish nationalism and the ideology of the market. Thus the forces of private property internally and externally combine with Stalinism to produce a confusion of ideas. Jumbled up with nationalism, dying anti-semitism, belief in a market, there is also demands for workers' control, rationing, egalitarianism all given by his situation as a worker. The confusion of the movement is very much explained by the confusion of the worker in his situation. The Western left cannot escape its share of the blame for not having produced a viable analysis of Poland other than simplistic and ludicrous descriptions of workers' states or capitalism of a kind unrecognisable to anyone in these countries. The fusion of ideas and personnel between intelligentsia and worker has thus taken the form of the worker providing the momentum for the interests of the intelligentsia.

There is the question why the revolts have tended to occur in Poland

X and nowhere else. There are a number of concrete causes: Firstly, the social democratic and trade unionist tradition, has continued in certain areas, reinforced by the sporadic general strikes. Secondly, in areas like Gdansk where there is a new working class the link with the countryside, its tradition of independence, the church, and the supply of food has been important. Thirdly, ever since the compromise of the Polish October the atomisation which is such a thoroughgoing feature of the USSR has been more limited, in terms of access to information, travel, discussion at an informal level and even limited forms at an organisational level, in so far as the church existed independently. An explanation of the actions in Poland has to be in relation to the other countries surrounding it and most particularly with respect to the USSR. Hitherto there has been little discussion of the question. Clearly, the answer cannot be simply one of continuity of tradition since it is shared by other countries. Rather the size of the country and the Soviet retreat in October 1956 have been factors X such that the regime has been relatively safe from Soviet invasion, while not having the same internal means of control used in the USSR. Where there was an imposed police state, relatively limited in its extent, explosions appear inevitable. Indeed there is a view in Poland that they are functional to the system. Certainly in terms of the history of Poland this latter view has been borne out.

X If we turn to the question of the possibility of a Soviet invasion it has to be said that it would only occur if certain conditions were present. There are three possibilities. The first would be one in which the process of working-class unrest reached the point that it ignored its "advisers" and proceeded to the point of taking power in its own name. The second would be if the process of working-class protest reached a stalemate where neither side could govern. The Soviet union has called this anarchy. The third could occur if the party democratised to the same point as in Czechoslovakia and adopted a permissive attitude to criticisms of the USSR. In fact none of || these conditions have so far obtained.

X The working-class threatened to act on its own but it has been brought under control, while the party hierarchy and the secret police are intact. Indeed the solutions proposed by the government and those suggested by the advisers to Solidarity are not very distant. They both agree on a market. Logically, this process of bargaining must lead to an incorporation of the union into some form of responsibility for the government programme — even if they refuse to enter the government. Once the constraints on the government are accepted, choices are few so that the imposed austerity will inevitably rebound on the union itself. Reformist Stalinism in one country is a utopia. The result therefore could go one of two ways. Either they will not introduce the market and incorporate the union by showing the parlous economic state in which the country stands and getting its agreement on compromise austerity measures combined with a certain political relaxation, or they will introduce the market with all its consequences which they have been quite open about. They have spoken of the

introduction of unemployment, enterprises based on profit, prices based on supply and demand etc. This could only mean that the working-class would have to work harder and be less secure in their employment. A section of the workers might be better off but the majority would not. The only question there would be whether the attempt to split the workers along skilled-unskilled, employed-unemployed, and strategic and non-strategic industrial lines would work. It is highly unlikely to do so, so that it is more than likely that the workers would veto, irrespective of their advisers, the market, insisting on security of employment, rationing and the present system of low productivity.

If the market does go through with the blessing of the union, its incorporation into the system would be complete. It would, in effect, have connived at the splitting of the working-class and the re-introduction of market discipline over the workers. It is impossible to imagine that the market could be introduced without massive Western aid, in order to cushion its immediate anti-egalitarian tendencies. That is the question being discussed in Paris and Washington at this moment. If it is provided the union would logically have to become a series of industrial unions. Solidarity would in effect become somewhat similar to the British TUC, accepting the system but defending workers' interests to a limited degree. This is unlikely for reasons given below, so that it is more likely that the regime will introduce a series of pragmatic measures to defuse the situation. Then within a few years the incorporation of Solidarity will lead either to the working-class ignoring its leadership or it will split with the beginnings of a left leadership. Once again there will be an explosion and in the absence of such a clear sighted working class leadership it will once again be contained.

The only question is whether the strategy of gradualism can be sustained. One important element is the attempt to directly incorporate workers through a system of workers' participation. This aspect has already been tried in Poland in 1956 and was reduced, as shown in the last issue of *Critique*, to a meaningless form. Participation without power would either mean a strengthening of the present system where the worker cannot be disciplined and hence has some control over his work process, or it would incorporate elements of the working-class in the introduction of the market. In either case, the workers will have gained very little. It cannot be stressed too strongly that the introduction of the market is not a technicality but a system of disciplining the working class using economic domination (or to employ a less polite word: economic force). No sweetener other than direct aid is likely to work under these circumstances. It may be objected that after all the system of censorship, police control, travel system etc. are less than in the rest of Eastern Europe, through such a gradualist strategy. This is dubious for the establishment of these gains came through a series of insurrections of which the most important, 1956, involved as we have mentioned, a military battle halted in its very early stages. The argument above goes to prove that there is no solution to the

situation of Poland alone. Even the gains in terms of free unions are likely to be reduced over time. Thus the instability of Poland is permanent. The conditions we have given for a Soviet invasion are unlikely to occur, so that the USSR will tolerate the situation for the next few years.

The USSR is unlikely to invade in any but the above circumstances for three reasons. Firstly, it knows that a war is quite likely and even if it is over relatively soon, which is uncalculable, it will cause such unrest in the USSR, a country already conducting a war in Afghanistan, that the consequences could be far-reaching. At the same time the destruction of the economic capacity of Poland entailed by such battles and by the resistance of the working-class, would mean that the restoration of a viable economy might become impossible. This would not be helped by a Western blockade or refusal of credit.

Secondly, even if there were no resistance the invasion would not alter the disastrous economic situation internally or externally. In fact it could only make it worse. It is of course possible that the Russians would invade and introduce the market by force, extending private property in an attempt to obtain the consent of the national petit bourgeoisie. They have tried this method in Afghanistan, where they have de-nationalised and handed over to the private entrepreneur. This cannot be ruled out if we look at the extension of the private plot in the USSR at present and the obvious existence of a liberal wing of the elite which wants the market, as so many of the Soviet journalists make clear. The working-class would be unlikely to co-operate and it is very likely that such a market would ruin all liberalism for ever in Eastern Europe. The strategy is too risky, although possible.

Thirdly, the economic cost to the USSR would be considerable. Externally, it would find its credit rating drastically reduced, already affected as it is by its underwriting of the debts of its dependencies. Internally, the loans and the cost of the troops would be such as to stretch an already faltering economy to the limit.

Hence an invasion could only take place if the regime itself were threatened as it would be in the conditions outlined above. In that case any risk would be worthwhile.

The question that has to be asked is why the strategy of detente failed for Poland. Gierak imported Western technology in order to raise the standard of living and establish a stable industrial base for the country — to maintain that standard of living. Given the unrest in the country the strategy could only succeed with Western loans, which was of the essence of detente. Unfortunately it was based on the premise that the goods so produced could be exported to the West to repay the debt. Only the most incorrigible fetishized bourgeois economist could ever have believed this possible. It has to be noted that the growth rate in the USSR and in Poland was largely based on the extension of the surplus product in its absolute form i.e. through the increasing employment of flows of labour time of whatever kind. Its slowing down required that productivity be raised or the

relative surplus product be increased. This the system attempted to achieve through the import of Western technology but without the system of discipline that goes with that technology. The result was entirely predictable in that productivity was not raised as expected and the goods produced were as unsalable as all Soviet-type products. It was not the world recession, although that did not help, but the fact that Polish goods could not compete with similar German, Japanese, French or American goods, that created the problem.

The success of the system, if success it is, was in terms of the flexibility in the mobilisation of labour; once this was reduced through the drying up of the flows of labour and the necessity of employing industrial skill, the regime had the contradiction of the system brought into stark relief: its low productivity (i.e. its poor quality goods, their obsolescence and high cost). It is this, the nature of its product that has to be solved before any resolution is possible. This, however, is a question of social relations and certainly not the technical question that the Western economists and Eastern technocrats say it is. The working-class has either to be controlled or it must have an incentive by itself controlling the system. There is no viable third way. The Polish regime, as all of Eastern Europe, has no solution. As a result it resorted to a return to the extension of the absolute surplus product, or in other words increasing the norms, so increasing the intensity of labour, and reducing the cost of labour power through raising prices not to speak of attempts to extend the working day. Thus the strategy of detente failed for Poland as it had to do so unless the regime turned, as the West required from detente, to the market. Every attempt to turn to the market has been frustrated by workers demanding not higher prices but rationing. As long as work discipline continues to be in favour of the worker — in relation to the West — the regime is caught. Hence, the tragedy of the present situation is that the working class misled by its leaders may actually accept the solution so much desired by the regime, and the West. Nor should the USSR be regarded as opposed to the introduction of such a market. Thus a resolution with a market outcome would provide an end to the impasse completely acceptable to the Polish elite, the Soviet elite and the American ruling class.

From the point of view of that holy and blessed alliance nothing could be worse than the spontaneous action of the working class and thus caution has always been the watchword of West and East.

It would be exhilarating to watch the antics of the American ruling class if the working class did in fact go beyond its leaders and the USSR invaded to restore elite control. There can be no doubt that outside of words it would do little except to attempt to blind the Western working class to the events — through a pretence of being on the same side. However, we have argued that this is unlikely and that the status quo with marginal change is the most likely outcome. There is nonetheless a general tendency towards the Finlandisation of Eastern Europe which cannot be ignored. The USSR actively supported the turn to Western aid and the increasing absorption of

Poland into the Western division of labour. The technical bankruptcy of Poland can only mean that the West will impose new conditions such that Poland will become still more dependent. If it does provide the necessary loans and conditions to permit the introduction of the market which will inevitably entail increasing absorption into the world division of labour, Poland will be gradually passing, as it already is, into the sphere of influence of the Western capitalist class. The USSR could accept this, as long as the military consequences did not follow. The introduction of a Parliamentary regime as in Finland could be acceptable. The West might then acquire another country, where cheap labour merited investment. This is clearly the trajectory but we have argued that the West is unlikely to be so far sighted at the moment to proceed along this path. The interests of Germany are certainly in this direction for a Finlandised Poland would ultimately mean a new deal for East Germany, and possibly a united but neutralised West Germany. This would not be in the interest of the United States, Britain or France for they would certainly not be able to compete with such an enormously powerful united Germany. Hence the present division of Europe is likely to remain. The gradualist solution is a utopia. That is not to say that such a scenario may not unfold but it would not be by the force of persuasion or reason. Under the threat of worse to come i.e. a possible workers' uprising under workers' ideology the Gordian knot would be cut. Poland would be found a radical solution.

Conclusion

Such a resolution remains only a distant goal, since the contradictions involved are too great to be easily overcome — although it is the predominant tendency for the USSR and Germany. On the other hand, if this solution is difficult, the other appears as distant. It is the realisation by the Polish workers that their struggle is not national i.e. not specifically Polish, nor religious but part of an international movement of the working-class in which their only real success could be in establishing workers' power for however short a time before it is crushed. For the fact is that the USSR would certainly have invaded if required: that was made quite clear in Pravda, but they certainly were most reluctant to do so — that was equally clear. If that is so then we have to consider what the consequences of an invasion would have been at present. It is dubious whether the USSR would have survived in its present form had an invasion required a protracted time for its success. Two wars on two fronts with a highly discontented working-class and intelligentsia and few international alliances intact, has broken most regimes before now. Thus, the policy of gradualisation plays into the hands of the Polish elite and given the decline of the USSR, even the Soviet elite.

This appears to be a pessimistic and perhaps adventurous conclusion given the results in Hungary and Czechoslovakia. But we would point out that there was no resistance in Czechoslovakia and 1980 is not 1956 or even 1968. The victory of the Polish workers will decay to an empty shell unless

pressed home and the decision to push forward will have to be made time and again. Of course, the time for such defensive action may not be the present but reports in the Western press do not suggest any strategy other than a gradual one and it is this that we take issue with. The Soviet elite can live with a market, even with Western style unions, and it can permit relaxation of censorship — even as we have suggested permitting a Finlandisation in reverse with different political parties — but it cannot tolerate criticisms of itself nor any suggestion of genuine working-class control over the society. Thus the strategy of gradualism will lead if successful to a Poland dependent on the West, with a capitalist system but without any incorporation into Nato or a press which refers to the USSR. The problem as pointed out above is that the contradictions involved in this policy are insoluble and hence we are led to the conclusion that gradualism is probably a utopia even in its own terms.

As this becomes more evident it is very likely that the Polish workers will spontaneously shift to the left and choose new advisers, or become demoralised by constant failure. It is this latter strategy that the Soviet elite is working on. Whether they are right will depend to a large extent on what happens inside the USSR and internationally.

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