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Establishment of the Independent Self-Governing Trade Union “Solidarność”



In the late 1970s, the mood in Polish society was becoming increasingly rebellious, much owing to the Polish Pope John Paul II’s first-ever visit to his native country. The holy masses with the Pope drew hundreds of thousands of people. The crowds listened to papal sermons with enthusiasm. The Pope spoke openly about freedom and the need for Poland’s renewal. His words contributed not only to stronger religious sentiments but also awoke patriotic attitudes.

The opposition operated in a more and more organised fashion and from 1976 it conducted intensive information and publishing activities for society. Despite the repression of opposition activists (arrests, surveillance, searches, interrogations and convictions), their work brought results. People understood increasingly well the need to seek democracy. Clandestine Free Trade Unions started to appear, the first one set up by Kazimierz Świtoń in Upper Silesia in 1978, and in successive months similar unions in other provinces.



The rebellious mood also intensified in response to the ever more difficult economic situation. Despite a reshuffle in the Central Committee of the PUPW in the Spring of 1980, the key posts remained filled by the same people. The nation found it increasingly hard to live in a country where access to basic foodstuffs and industrial goods was limited. That deepened the workers’ unwillingness to perform pointless, often unplanned, useless work.

Using the already established scenario, the authorities decided to prop up the collapsing economy with price rises. On 1 July 1980, new prices were applied to key foodstuffs without a warning. The first strikes staged by workers broke out on that very day. Further plants across Poland joined in a common protest. As the authorities failed to respond, the strike action was spreading fast.

On 14 August, Gdańsk Shipyard went on strike, its workers very consciously demanding not so much better pay conditions but rather political decisions. They called for the return of Anna Walentynowicz and Lech Wałęsa who had been dismissed for trade union activities as well as the erection of a monument to commemorate the victims of the December 1970 protests. An Inter-Enterprise Strike Committee headed by Lech Wałęsa was set up in the shipyard, which was to support strikes staged also in other plants.

On 18 August, boards were made (now listed by UNESCO as world heritage items) with twenty-one hand

written demands by the shipyard workers, including legal free trade unions, the right to go on strike, freedom of speech, pay rises and better working and living conditions for the workers. The same day, the city of Szczecin joined the strike, with its own Inter-Enterprise Strike Committee headed by Marian Jurczyk. From then on, the ISCs in Szczecin and Gdańsk decided to speak in unison in the spirit of solidarity as well as to support each other in their demands.

The authorities sent a governmental committee to negotiate with the protesters. At the same time, they ordered the arrest of key activists of the democratic opposition since the opposition milieu supported the workers on strike and were getting ready to offer them actual help.

On 23 August, a general strike broke out cross coastal Poland and suppressing it by force as in 1970 and 1976 was out of the question. In the meantime, opposition intellectuals set up a commission of experts at Gdańsk Shipyard to support the ISC. Initially unwilling to talk with the ISC, the authorities now were forced to negotiate with representatives of the workers supported by intellectuals and church activists. Much pressure was exerted on the government by other plants and factories on strike across Poland as they supported the twenty-one Gdańsk demands.

Eventually, the ‘Gdańsk Agreement’ was signed: on 30 August, Mieczysław Jagielski’s governmental commission signed the pact in Szczecin, where the ISC was represented by Marian Jurczyk and then on 31 August in Gdańsk, where the workers on strike were represented by Lech Wałęsa. The authorities recognised almost all the demands made by the protesters. Under the agreement, independent self-governing trade unions were to be set up.

In early September, Edward Gierek was removed as party chief and replaced with Stanisław Kania. The strikes were blamed on Gierek and his camp. The August events became the reason for reshuffles in the party leadership. On 17 September 1980, the all-Poland Independent Self-Governing Trade Union ‘Solidarity’ was established. The union was officially registered by a Warsaw court on 10 November 1980. The word ‘solidarity’ recurred again and again during the strike in the context of unity of the strikers against the authorities.

In the months to come, ‘Solidarity’ was transformed from a trade union to a mass social movement, with around ten million members in its heyday. On the wave of the workers’ success, also other organisations appeared like the Independent Students’ Union. More and more liberties and freedoms were demanded. The authorities were losing their grip on society. This period in Polish history is often called a Solidarity Festival. Despite the introduction of food ration cards and the very difficult economic situation, the Poles started to believe that the communist system was beginning to crumble.

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References: