

POLAND - Five Years After The Mass Strike

Five years ago the fact that the economic crisis of capitalism wasn't just a failure of this or that national economy to compete, or wasn't just a western phenomenon was made blindingly obvious by events in Eastern Europe, in Poland especially.

The bourgeoisie there, facing the same economic catastrophe as the west, but, by and large, without the depth of responses available to their western counterparts, parliament, democracy, unions etc., and with decades of dealing with their proletariat by means of clubs, police guns and concentration camps, launched an offensive against the existing meagre living standards of the Polish proletariat by instituting a huge increase in the price of already scarce basic foodstuffs. The response of the Polish workers was immediate and dramatic. Beginning in the shipyards at Gdynia workers downed tools, occupied their yards and factories and called on all other workers throughout the country to join them. The strike spread to Gdansk, to Warsaw and to the mines of Silesia until practically a nationwide general strike was in existence, paralysing the country and the capitalist economy.

The existing unions, mouthpieces for the government, were swept aside and mass assemblies built.

Negotiations were publically broadcast to the workers through loudspeakers and the strikers sought to spread the struggle to every section of the proletariat, knowing full well that isolation in one yard, one city or one industry would mean defeat. Their struggle against the ravages of a dying capitalist system shone out as a beacon to workers everywhere demonstrating that the working class can halt the slide to pauperisation, and can fight back against the attacks of capital. The bully boys of not merely the Polish bourgeoisie but also their masters in the Kremlin quaked in their boots at this awesome demonstration of proletarian might.

But bourgeois order survived in Poland. The government recinded the price rises when they realised they could not brutalise the entire workforce into submission and their collapsing economy was bailed out by western bankers eager to exploit Polish weakness by making profit out of their lending. And the workers themselves were unable to see the need that their generalisation of the struggle should not stop at the Polish border rather, if it was to be successful, it had to spread beyond to involve the proletariat of the rest of the East capitalist bloc where there were stirrings of



Empty Shelves in Poland Spark Class Response

support from workers already. However, the real reason for their failure lay elsewhere.

Trotsky, in his history of the revolution in Russia, in writing about the mass action of workers in February 1917 tried to come to terms with the fact that no sooner had the workers subverted the soldiers, shot up the police and stormed the government buildings than they proceeded to hand over the power they had taken to the bourgeois Duma and their provisional committee which all the while had been quaking with fear in a back room at what the Petrograd proletariat had been doing. Echoing Marx, Trotsky noted how the proletariat seemed to rise to the heights only, at the last moment, to abandon what they have achieved, allowing their class enemies to recoup the situation. And so it was in Poland also.

Having gone further, much further, than any section of the world proletariat since the great upheavals of the revolutionary period after WWI, the Polish workers, after an offensive against the bourgeois state where they ousted the police and took control of their factories, and indeed whole towns, and tried to spread their struggle as widely as they knew how, proceeded to hand their power over to such as Walesa and the bourgeois theorists Kuron et alia. The sole idea of these bourgeois apologists was to negotiate WITHIN the terms of the Polish capitalist state for the creation of a new union to take its 'rightful' place WITHIN the Polish State machine, just like its Western counterparts, in order to direct the state's policies in a different, but not that different, more specifically 'polish' direction. Aided by a catholic church which similarly sought a long denied place in the Polish capitalist sun they succeeded in directing the antagonism of the polish proletariat AWAY from the cause of their problem, capitalism itself, and into the quagmire of refashioning Polish capital into new and different methods of controlling the workers and thus of maintaining the existence of the Polish capitalist state. Like unions everywhere it sought influence in the determination of capitalist policy.

However, since the problems of Polish capitalism, like capitalism everywhere, are not unique, merely being specific problems that EVERY capitalist nation state faces in the worldwide economic downturn, it was obvious that the situation wasn't just going to go away. No matter how much money the bankers poured in, it would get worse precisely because the state, in order to survive a little while longer, was now even deeper in debt. At best there could be a temporary halt in the inexorable slide to bankruptcy. The bourgeoisie might manage to delay its attack on the living standards of its workers but sooner or later they would be forced to attack again. And so it has turned out.

The beginning of 1985 saw headlines in western papers telling us that the Polish Government intended massively increasing the cost of basic foodstuffs. Rather more cunning than in 1980 this initial announcement was followed by a backdown 'caused' (if it can be so termed) by the opposition to the announcement of the 'official' tame poodle unions the Polish bourgeoisie set up after the struggle of 1980. While in no way rejecting their intention to raise prices the government decided that increases would be staggered and so avoided indicating just how great they would be. As a government spokesman said:

"The concern for market equilibrium... does not make it possible to spread these price rises over more stages or to introduce them over a longer period than the first half of 1985"

(see accompanying newspaper clipping)

Warsaw to raise prices by June

WARSAW, Thursday. — The Polish Government said today that it would impose food price increases before the end of June in three stages but did not indicate how big they would be.

The Deputy Minister for Prices, Mr Antoni Gryniewicz, told PAP, the official news agency, that details would be made public this week and that the first round of increases would affect bread and sugar.

Commentaries in the official Press claimed that the authorities had not backed down over the unpopular increases, although the Government had agreed not to impose across-the-board increases in March in response to trade union pressure.

Zycie Warszawy, the country's biggest daily, said: "Some people wrongly read (the Government's decision) as a complete abandonment of price rises. There should be no illusions in this respect."

The banned Solidarity free trade union cancelled a call for a 15-minute general strike, due to have been held today in protest against the increases, after the Government had announced it would reconsider its original proposals.

The plans which the authorities withdrew would have raised the cost of living by up to 4.2 per cent. The officially recognised unions rejected them as inflationary and damaging to workers' living standards.

Mr Gryniewicz said: "The first stage is planned to include price rises of products which aroused the fewest reservations during consultations... flour and grain products."

"Such a growth will be accompanied by the lifting of their rationing, but the increase in the price of flour must be followed by price rises for bread and other grain products."

He did not indicate when rises would be introduced for more sensitive items, including meat which is tightly rationed, but added: "The concern for market equilibrium... does not make it possible to spread out these price rises over more stages or to introduce them over a longer period than the first half of 1985." — Reuter.

How touching the concern of the Polish bosses for equilibrium in the capitalist market.

And what of the Polish workers who in 1980 responded to similar price rises with mass strikes, occupations and extension of the struggle to all sections of the Polish economy and a blanket refusal to negotiate IN ANY WAY about the rises which they flatly rejected?

A fifteen minute general strike to protest against the rises, called during the workers lunch hour on one day. The difference between 1980 and 1985 is glaring - and appalling.

What then is the key difference between then and now? The Polish state is still capitalist, still reeling from economic crisis to economic crisis. The difference lies in one word SOLIDARNOSC.

Five years ago workers organised autonomously, en masse. Today the Solidarity union has coddled the workers into accepting its leadership and their own emasculation. For the union, like unions everywhere negotiate not to better the conditions of the workers, let alone to destroy capitalism, but to get the union, as representatives of the workers, a place in the sun, a position within the Polish capitalist state. The union is fighting for the continued existence of Polish capitalism, at present prevented from effectively doing so by the blinkered pro Russian faction now in power. The union, like its counterparts in the west knows that a blunt assault on capital by the proletariat will bring the whole house of cards down crashing to the ground. It cannot allow this and like unions everywhere seeks to divert the legitimate anger of

Workers into support for its specific capitalist programmes for the saving of capitalism, plans which in NO WAY assault the logic of capitalist barbarism.

The pathetic spectacle of a 15 minute strike during dinnertime clearly demonstrates the real intentions of Solidarity and the extent to which workers in the past five years have been diverted from their own class terrain into support for this bourgeois cross.

Is this then the end of the story for the Polish proletariat? - we think not.

Trotsky, in his history mentioned above, shows that since the crisis of 1917 did not disappear, the handing over of power to the bourgeois in February solved nothing. Indeed it merely exacerbated the crisis of Russian capital since the crisis, without a solution, merely deepened allowing workers more and more to see clearly the mistake they had made by handing over power to those whose sole 'raison d'etre' was the continuation of capitalism. So too in Poland; so too in the world at large. Since the crisis in Poland isn't going to go away the position of Solidarity in the defence of Polish capitalism must get clearer and clearer, just as the role of unions everywhere as the defenders of the capitalist system, sooner or later, must get clearer and clearer. And when that happens the Polish proletariat of 1980 will be reborn, only this time, much stronger, and much, much angrier.

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