

Polish Food Riots

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“The whole of Poland is on strike today.”

— A worker from the city of Ursus, Poland, June, 1976

On July 20, six Polish workers from Ursus (a suburb of Warsaw) and seven from the city of Radom were sentenced to prison terms ranging from three to ten years for their alleged participation in a series of food riots that swept Poland in June.

Labeled as “rowdies, drunkards and parasites” by the Polish government (the ruling “communist” United Workers Party), the workers were convicted of “damaging state property and blocking railroad traffic” and “attacking people and property” during the violent demonstrations that spontaneously erupted throughout the country in response to the government’s second attempt in six years to raise food and fuel prices.

This new wave of riots that began on June 25th, came only hours after an official statement by Polish Prime Minister Piotr Jaroszewicz in which he proclaimed the government’s new increases; increases that went from 30 to 60% on fish and rice, to 100% on sugar; increases that would have put these food staples out of the reach of many workers.

Under Polish police state capitalism workers were pushed to the point where violence was the only avenue left for them to express their feelings. In Ursus, 5,000 enraged workers at the Ursus Tractor Factory took the tractors they’d just built and used them to tear up railroad tracks leading to Warsaw, while wage-slaves working in the leather and fertilizer factories of Radom set fire to the UWP headquarters.

(Other sources reported that strikes took place in the city of Olsztyn, the Zeran auto plant in Warsaw, the Warynski crane plant, and sit-ins were staged by shipyard workers in the Baltic ports of Gdansk and Szczecin.)

1970 Food Riots

The UWP’s last attempt at implementing price raising came on December 13, 1970, when the government, then headed by Wladyslaw Gomulka, in an official announcement named 46 items of food and fuel to be increased, and 40 other items—all consumer durables—to be reduced in price. Along with all this, the Party proposed a new wage structure that would go into effect on January 1, 1971 freezing all wages for one year.

Price increases included: milk up 8%, fish 11%, sugar 14.2%, flour 16%, meat 17.6%, jam 36.8% and coffee up 92%. The prices of fuels such as coke and coal increased from 10 to 20% depending on the grade. (Two years beforehand, meat prices were raised 40% with the prices of vegetables skyrocketing out of range and the availability of imported fruits practically disappearing.)

Reaction to the increases came almost immediately. On December 14, 1970 the workers of the Lenin shipyard in the city of Gdansk struck and went into the streets armed with hammers, chains and lengths of pipe.

The workers headed for the UWP headquarters singing the “Internationale” and were met by the armed militia and police who fired into the crowd killing seven and injuring numerous others. A battle ensued between the workers and the state’s armed forces, resulting in the burning of the UWP office.

Over the following week, the strikes and riots spread throughout Poland, encompassing a wide range of demands such as government subsidised housing, pay raises (there hadn’t been any pay increases for the last five years and women are paid considerably less than men), the removal of all price hikes, the right of workers to build new unions and for more control of the factories.

The Party’s initial response to this came on Thursday, December 17, 1970. In Peter E. Newell’s article, “Class Struggle in Poland,” in *Anarchy* No. 4, he lays out plainly the feelings of Gomulka’s government:

“It was not until Thursday, December 17, that the top government and Party leadership really began to explain—and explain away—the situation to the Polish nation. Warsaw television broadcast an order to the police and troops to fire on rioters who attacked people and buildings; and continued that the government solemnly invoked the authority of the Constitution to order the use of all legal means, including arms, against persons perpetrating violent attempts against life and limb of citizens, the pilfering and destruction of property and public amenities. It also called on all the people to obey all regulations issued by the State organs to ensure public order. A state of emergency had been declared.”

On the same day, Cyrankiewicz, the then Prime Minister, spoke of the riots on Polish TV, saying:

“Our past is full of heroism and glory, but also of disasters and ill-considered reactions. For the last—two centuries we have been going from defeat to defeat. The existence of the nation is at stake. There were tragic clashes in which the forces maintaining order were forced to use arms. These are the painful results of lack of reason, and understanding, and feelings of responsibility, on the part of those who abandoned work, and went to the streets, giving chance to adventurers and enemies; to vandalism, looting and murder. Hostile forces are trying to create new bonfires of anarchy, to disturb the normal rhythm of work in the factories and disorganize the life of our country.”

The Polish workers took no heed to the threats from the government as the demonstrations continued to grow with more violence.

In a last resort to stop the convulsions within the country, a special meeting of the central committee of the UWP on December 20, 1970 brought about the forced resignation of Wladslaw Gomulka, with Edward Gierek replacing him as the First Secretary of the United Workers Party. (Prime Minister Cyrankiewicz was replaced by Piotr Jaroszewicz during the same palace coup.)

That evening Gierek spoke to the nation over television and radio asking the people to return to work and calm, and said that his new government would look into the problems “within the next few days” in an attempt to bring the people and the Party closer together. His first official act was to repeal the State of Emergency, which gave the militia, army and State security police the authority to use guns against strikers, rioters and looters, and put a freeze on all food prices (this freeze was not the concession it first appeared to be. It meant that the price increases which sparked the riots would remain in force).

This stagnant situation existed until the middle of January 1971, when the workers, sick of the fact that nothing had changed, re-opened their strike wave, calling for lower food prices and higher wages. This time the government listened, reduced prices and insured a 4% wage increase.

The workers finally won some of the things they were fighting for, but the cost was high. Unofficial accounts state the number of dead at 300 and thousands injured. The workers won reforms but the Party and the bureaucracy still rule.

Lowest Standard of Living

Since the 1970 through 1971 riots, the living standard has risen considerably as wages have increased 40% with an annual growth rate of 11%, one of the highest in the world (though Poland still has the lowest standard of living in Eastern Europe).

On the face of it, it seemed that Gierek had found a way to keep the workers prospering and the economy growing, but just the opposite has happened. He has, in fact, found himself in a larger hole than Gomulka was in 1970.

Faced with a possible revolution and an almost collapsed economy, the only out Gierek had in 1971 was to borrow from the West to pay for the expansion in production and wage increases. The December 5, 1975 issue of the Financial Times of London stated that during the last five years Poland has imported "several billion dollars worth of machinery; everything from complete chemical plants to fizzy drink machines."

Polish state capitalism can't go on continually existing on credit (last years foreign debt was equivalent to the total of the country's exports for 1974). The Western countries are now calling for payment. This puts the UWP in a corner and like any capitalist nation in a time of crisis, the working class of Poland will be forced to pay for it through wage cuts and price increases.

On June 24, 1976 the Polish government tried just that and the workers took up the fight against them, making the government push back the proposed increased food prices within 24 hours.

But this isn't the end. The Polish economy has been suffering a period of decline since the '60's and complete collapse is knocking at the door. There will surely be more repressive moves by the UWP over the next couple of years and if the June riots are any indication of the workers feelings towards the Party's tactics, they are not going to be peaceful ones.

Related: see an update in Polish Workers Face Repression, FE #278, November, 1976.



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