

Poland under martial law

Fifth Estate Collective

1982

As we witness the imposition of military rule in Poland it seems clear it was not something to have been unexpected. However, that realization does nothing to limit our anger and sadness as we helplessly watch tanks and faceless armed men crush at least the public manifestations of a movement that threatened to turn the world upside down.

That the rulers saw a military dictatorship as a necessity makes clearer than ever that a powerful movement composed of millions of Poles existed which wished to sweep away the entire edifice of that country's police state. The attempts to contain the movement within the orderly boundaries of the Solidarity union organization or to threaten it into submission had failed miserably and the rulers turned to the only recourse left to them—the armed might of the state.

Will the repression be successful? Our hopes for that country lie in the continuing reports that filter out of Poland of continued militant and passive resistance, of slowdowns and sabotage, of uprisings in the internment camps, of underground publications, of mutinies on the part of army troops, but also from what we know of the extent of the Polish movement—one which encompassed almost the entire nation. It was comprised of reformists and revolutionaries, trade unionists and syndicalists, right wing and left wing activists, nationalists and internationalists, religious Catholics and atheists, pro-capitalists, social democrats, communists and even anarchists.

Each wanted something different and only a few of the goals were ones that really excited us, but with a near unanimity, 30 million Polish workers, farmers, intellectuals, clerical and service personnel and students wanted an end to the oppressive rule of the reigning order. Thwarting this is a handful of men supported by a police and military apparatus which intends to enforce its will on a multitude. Again, will it be successful? The Polish military council faces a sullen and restive population already unwilling to follow orders, one which has had a 16-month taste of free expression and social experimentation, and it seems difficult to conceive of direct suppression being successful in reestablishing state rule as it previously existed.

(Let us add parenthetically, that while we retain the same criticisms of the Solidarity organization that we have since its inception [see our last four issues], we extend our unconditional solidarity and support to all of those interned and to those who are involved in the resistance against martial law. We call for: The release of all prisoners! Mutiny by the troops! The smashing of martial law and the destruction of the Jaruzelski junta!)

The immediate reason for the crackdown and whether it was initiated by the Russians have been debated endlessly in the daily media and in some ways are not highly relevant except to the Cold Warriors of the White House and Pentagon. It does seem clear that the plans for military rule came well in advance of the actual event, with its contingency phase beginning with Gen. Wojciech Jaruzelski's elevation to party head last year. All that was needed was an immediate excuse which could have been provided by any number of events.

As it turned out, the final "provocation," cited by both Polish and Western observers came on Saturday, December 12, when Solidarity leaders meeting in Gdansk proposed a nationwide referendum on the establishment of a non-communist government and for redefining Poland's military relationship with the Soviet Union. This com-

bined with the threat of a large demonstration planned for Warsaw to protest the breaking of a fire cadets' strike was the pretext which the government used to set the military take-over in motion.

Was Solidarity Really Planning A Coup?

While the words uttered were the worst that could fall upon the ears of the Polish and Soviet bureaucrats—a challenge to the primacy of the party and Poland's military alliance with the Russians—was Solidarity really planning a “coup” as the authorities charged? There doesn't seem to be a shred of evidence to support the contention—no weapons stockpiles, no insurrectionary military plans, no militia leaders, nothing. A state, no matter how isolated it is politically, cannot be easily overthrown by an unarmed populace if its military mechanism remains intact. And certainly the Solidarity leaders could not have been so foolish as to believe that even if they were to somehow topple the government that the Soviet Union would have been forestalled from intervening.

What, in fact, may have been in the works at the Gdansk gathering was a complicated and sophisticated attempt by the Solidarity leadership to overcome the impasse with the government they had arrived at over questions of political and economic authority within Poland. They almost certainly had no actual intention of trying to completely dislodge the communist authorities, but rather had reached a desperation point where Solidarity's immense popularity had begun to erode and the situation was beginning to slip ever further beyond their control.

Political observers in Gdansk pointed to the call for the referendum more as a pressure tactic to be used against the government than an actual threat. A regional Solidarity leader in attendance noted in the Dec. 13 New York Times that “the referendums were a new weapon for the union, a replacement for strikes.” The same issue of the Times further states, “The inclusion of the questions about the Soviet military ‘guarantees’ were part of an overall attempt to convince Moscow that its security could be better served if its military interests were protected by long-term agreements with a wider segment of society than the 2.7 million member Communist Party.”

The implications of this view are several: 1) that Solidarity was signaling to the Soviets that it had a credibility with the Polish people that the demoralized Party no longer enjoyed; 2) that it was willing to accept the limits of power imposed by its position within the Soviet bloc and; 3) it would discipline the Polish working class for the necessary sacrifices ahead in exchange for vastly expanding its political role and a sweeping number of dramatic democratic reforms. The tactic of posing a referendum no matter how “radical” its content as a substitute for economic strikes should be seen as in keeping with the Solidarity leadership's continuing efforts to block work stoppages.

Solidarity Couldn't Deliver the Goods

But if all of this is true, why did the Polish military, most assuredly with the insistence of their Soviet masters, clamp the lid down on what appeared to be their best bet for having to only suffer a superficial reconstruction of Polish society (not to minimize the effect of democratizing a police state), all the while leaving the state capitalist economy, the Party and the Warsaw Pact alliance intact? It is, of course, difficult to fathom the thinking of Kremlin and Warsaw decision makers, but several things occur immediately as explanations. 1) Neither the rulers of Russia nor Poland were interested in sophisticated compromises which would diffuse their power and risk serving as an example for other Eastern Bloc nations. Rather than depending on a short-run, stop-gap solution which contained the likely possibility of future challenges to their authority, they preferred to use their traditional heavy-handed methods of military repression they have refined since the end of World War II. Or 2) what we indicated last issue [see “Poland at the Crossroad: Solidarity and State Pitted Against Polish Workers,” FE #307, November 19, 1981] that they perceived Lech Walesa's official union mechanism as being unable to deliver the goods. That is, the Polish movement had grown to such proportions, was so undisciplined and uncontrolled, contained so many diffuse elements, wanted so many different things, that Solidarity was viewed as being incapable of managing the situation adequately enough to be given a hand in the supervision of the state as was suggested in the Fall, for a “Front of National Agreement” between the Party, church and Solidarity.

However, the front was, as the December 13, 1981 New York Times put it, “an idea whose time had passed or not yet come.” (our emphasis) General Jaruzelski, now chief of Poland’s military council, to add to his list of other titles, has stressed continually that the reforms of the last 16 months would continue and the Military Council of National Salvation would work to end corruption (this has included the arrest of numerous officials from the previous regime), improve much needed food supplies and return the country to the rule of law. A government official was quoted as saying that the general would soon unveil a program that “Would amount to a new model for social, political, and economic life in Poland.”

To that end, three groups comprised of high-ranking leaders from the ostensibly suspended Communist Party have been established to recommend proposals for reforms. One of the appointed groups, led by Hieronym Ku-biak, a Politburo member, has even resurrected the idea of the tripartite government which would eliminate the direct rule of the Party and substitute a new party which would encompass church and union influences as well as reform elements from the existing Party. The other groups have made proposals which echo Solidarity’s calls for decentralization of the economy, autonomy of workplaces and a degree of self-management.

A more recent statement by Captain Wieslaw Gornicki, adviser to General Jaruzelski, emphasized that there would most certainly be a role for a tamed and docile—Solidarity organization in the “new “ Poland. In a Jan. 5 interview, the adviser said that the ruling military council has “no intention of dissolving Solidarity” and that “in our system there is a place for an independent, self-governing trade union—independent from the state employer...” In an even more candid admission, Gornicki formulated a future for Solidarity that defines the role of all unions: “The important lesson we have drawn from the pre-August 1980 situation is, while we cannot afford an opposition party, the system cannot operate properly without an external control element.”

Both Repression and Recuperation for Poland

It appears that the “Polish solution” may turn out to be a combination of repression and recuperation, for despite the repeated assurances of “renewal” from the government, it is doubtful that one can occur under a martial law situation and one in which the ruling authorities are thoroughly distrusted and despised by the populace. Poland’s huge debt to the West, with its reliance on imported machinery and raw material, makes a rapid repair of social relations imperative. A collapse of the economy (coal production is down two-thirds from 1980), a default of the national debt or the need to depend solely on the Eastern economic bloc would cripple the Soviet Union’s credit standing with the West and condemn Poland to years of poverty.

So, a place for Solidarity or another “independent” union should be expected to be in place once martial law is lifted, perhaps even containing some of the same personnel. For instance, what of Lech Walesa, the man last issue’s article [FE #307, November 19, 1981] asserted was prepared to lead the Polish working class back into the clutches of state capitalism? As of this writing he remains under house arrest, bravely refusing to cooperate with the military authorities and even reportedly urging passive resistance to martial law. However, a December 28 British Broadcasting Corp. report of the end of Walesa’s very brief hunger strike stated that “it was put to him that he should not place his life in danger, for he might still have an important role to play in ending the current crisis.” So, after all, what the imposition of military rule is about in Poland is to tame the same elements that Walesa and the Solidarity leadership had so much trouble with—those courageous men and women who wanted something totally different from what had existed in their lives for so long and seemed to be willing to go to any lengths to get it.

Polish Struggle Not At An End

For the time being at least, the Poles have lost their independent union structure with Solidarity’s suppression. As one UPI account put it, “At 11 p.m. (December 12) the plug was pulled on nationwide telephone and Telex lines. Solidarity for one, lost the ability to send orders to branches around the nation.” But this only cripples the organization, not the movement, for what does remain is the traditional Polish means of communication which pre-dates

both the present regime and its economy—a nationwide system based on an interlocking network of families, villages, churches and communities that leaves no one isolated in the manner which a nation of TV watchers would be. News of the underground resistance still flashes across Poland at a rate almost comparable to that of electronic means contradicting the government accounts of life returning to “normal.”

The military rulers have allowed “The Flintstones” and the “Muppets” to return to Polish television, but the sale of paper is prohibited in a vain effort to squelch the independent production of leaflets and newsletters. Red and black government signs appear everywhere urging people to show support for the military regime with hard work. Posters exhort the population to: “Help the forces of law and order combat anarchy and lawlessness, and “The quickest road to normalization is strict martial law.” These 1984ish slogans do not even try to mask the real issues they so succinctly state: the rule of the state vs. that of freedom and self-association, in a word-anarchy. In an excellent leaflet we received from the Malcontents, c/o Bound Together Books, 1901 Hayes St., San Francisco CA 94117, they begin with the heading “All Law Is Martial Law.” And so it is, with those in Poland receiving the sharpest edge of state-its armed might.

At this point, it is impossible to declare the Polish struggle at an end. It’s failure to be internationalized to any great degree is in part a failure of Solidarity which often framed its appeals in crass nationalistic and religious wording, but the spread of the movement to other Soviet Bloc nations is still the key to the struggle going beyond the dead ends of trade unionism and national reforms. If this is the end of another in the long series of heroic but failed revolts against Eastern European police states then we salute its passing and must carry a sadness that we didn’t add measurably to the defense of the Polish workers. If it is still just a beginning of a movement that assaults the Eastern sector of capitalism-at its weakest link—then we wait with anticipation and only hope our participation will be greater in the next wave.



Fifth Estate Collective
Poland under martial law
1982

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/308-january-19-1982/poland-under-martial-law>
Fifth Estate #308, January 19, 1982

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net