

# Polish shipyard workers' initiate regime change, 1970-71

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## Timing

Time period notes:

Campaign slowed after December 1970

14 December

1970

to:

March

1971

## Location and Goals

Country:

Poland

Location City/State/Province:

Gdańsk, Szczecin, and many other cities

Location Description:

Shipyards

[View Location on Map](#)

Goals:

The cancellation of increase in food prices

## Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 106. Industry strike › Shipyard workers
- 117. General strike
- 173. Nonviolent occupation › Workers occupied shipyards

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 015. Group lobbying
- 106. Industry strike › Shipyard workers
- 173. Nonviolent occupation › Workers occupied shipyards

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 015. Group lobbying

Methods in 4th segment:

- 116. Generalised strike

Methods in 5th segment:

- 116. Generalised strike

- 117. General strike

Methods in 6th segment:

- 015. Group lobbying

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 182. Stay-in strike

Notes on Methods:

Strikes occurred in waves, with the most participation from 14-20 December, mostly from shipyard workers.

Segment Length:

Approximately 2 weeks

## **Classifications**

Classification:

Defense

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Group characterization:

- industrial workers

## **Leaders, partners, allies, elites**

Leaders:

Not known

Partners:

Not known

External allies:

Not known

Involvement of social elites:

Not known

## **Joining/exiting order of social groups**

Groups in 1st Segment:

- General Workers
- Shipyard workers

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Strike Committees

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length:

Approximately 2 weeks

## Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Polish United Workers' Party (Polish: Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza, PZPR)

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

Some campaigners caused property destruction and clashed with police

Repressive Violence:

Police opened fire on protesters, made mass arrests.

Government called in large numbers of military to repress the strikers with force

## Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

6 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Total points:

10 out of 10 points

Notes on outcomes:

Conspiracy within the Communist Party casts some doubt on the influence of strikers on overthrowing the Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party

In the face of a stagnating post-war economy, Polish Communist leader Władysław Gomułka, the First Secretary of the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR), decided to end government subsidies for food and other everyday items in late 1970. Although the system of fixed, artificially low food prices kept urban discontent in check, it was unsustainable, absorbing approximately one third of the budget.

On 12 December 1970, just before Christmas, the government announced a sharp increase in the prices of many key consumer commodities, especially foodstuffs, along with a cancellation of Christmas bonuses. The proposed prices meant a reduction of nearly half the real wages of urban workers. "Operacja cenowa" ("price action"), as it was called, especially injured families with the lowest incomes who were already struggling to make ends meet.

On the morning of Monday, 14 December 1970, thousands of workers from Lenin Shipyard in Gdańsk put down their tools and demanded the introduced price increases be rescinded. Because management was unable to meet their demand, the workers left the yard a few hours later and marched to the building of the Municipal Headquarters of the Polish United Workers' Party (KW PZPR), the party that had ruled the People's Republic of Poland since 1952.

Along the way, the shipyard workers were joined by others, many of them youth. The demonstrators requested to speak with the Secretary of the Provincial Committee of the Communist Party Alojzy Karkoszka, but he was in Warsaw at the VI's Central Committee meeting. Demonstrators, tired of not having their demands listened to, moved to the streets of Gdańsk, but without destroying or damaging anything.

Protestors began to chant more and more radical rhetoric. As the protestors calmly left the government office at about 16:00 hrs, more than nine hours after the strike began at the Lenin Shipyard and nearly five hours after the protestors left the shipyard, the police attacked the march with tear gas and grenades. Violent street fighting broke out between both sides and lasted into the evening. Because no artillery was used, no one died, but at least a dozen people were injured.

Following the march on the Polish United Workers' Party's office in Gdańsk, the government placed a telecommunications block over the urban area comprising the three port cities of Gdańsk, Gdynia, and Sopot (known as the Trójmiasto), cutting it off from the rest of the country.

The next day, the strike spread from the Lenin Shipyard to Gdańsk Harbour and the Gdańsk Ship Renovation Yard. Early again the next morning, shipyard workers appeared on the streets and went to the KW PZPR building where several of the protestors were being detained from the previous day. In many parts of the city, protestors clashed with "security forces." This time, security forces used firearms.

In Wierzeźki 20,000 workers demonstrated in the square in front of the main train station. The militia, armed with machine guns, intervened. Mutual aggression from both sides intensified as time went by. Some of the campaigners torched several police cars and mail trucks, and some set fire to a local government office building. The vast majority of people passively watched, but they were reportedly happy to see the building burn, as it was a symbol of hatred and power. When the fire began to engulf the Party's offices on the next floor, the crowd blockaded the fire department from intervening. The militia killed at least 7 people and injured hundreds, and roughly 500 demonstrators were arrested.

By the 16th, almost all of Gdańsk was on strike. That morning when Lenin Shipyard workers tried to go through the gate to protest on the street for the third consecutive day, they met gunfire coming from a huge military blockade set up around the facility. According to official reports, only two people were killed and 11 injured as workers retreated back into the shipyard. Workers proceeded to instead occupy the shipyard for the next 10 hours.

From 14-19 December, in many cities along the coast like Elbląg, Słupsk and Tczew, as well as in the midland cities of Warsaw, Wrocław, Białystok and Nysa, street protests broke out of various intensities. In Szczecin, the most violent street fighting erupted as workers from the Adolf Warski shipyard began striking 3 days after their

counterparts in Gdańsk 200 miles away.

On 19 December alone about 100 plants in 7 provinces (out of 17 provinces in Poland) had strikes. All together tens of thousands of people were involved (22,280 just in the midland cities). Although only a minority attacked property, the damage exceeded 400 million Polish zlotys.

According to Mieczysław F. Rakowski, "Across the country the action intensified distribution of leaflets, slogans and inscriptions criticizing the Communist Party and calling to organize rallies and demonstrations. There was a real danger that the next week would create a situation that spirals out of control. Over Poland there hung the threat of violent chaos and the spilling of brotherly blood on a large scale."

Strikers in the Szczecin metropolitan area were probably the most organized, with actions taking place in nearly 120 plants. Strikes continued in Szczecin throughout December, and mass meetings at the shipyards took place daily. A powerful force called The Adolf Warski Citywide Strike committee was formed at this time. The role of this committee was unclear however, due in part to the majority of party members elected to it, and committee members often sought to restrain striking workers.

To pacify the protestors of the coastal cities, the authorities called in approximately 27,000 soldiers, 550 tanks, 750 armed vehicles and 2100 cars, 108 aircraft and helicopters, and 40 navy vessels. Throughout all of Poland, 61,000 soldiers, 1700 tanks, 1750 armed vehicles and 8700 cars were employed.

In the context of all the weaponry that was used, the official death count has caused many to question numbers. The official report said that, for all riots occurring until the end of December throughout Poland, only 45 people were killed and 1165 were injured. However, later investigations indicated that 7000 people died during fighting in Szczecin alone and doctors in the city have since confessed to being forced to sign death certificates of victims citing they had died of 'natural causes'. Regarding protesters' attacks on property, nineteen buildings were either set on fire or completely or partially destroyed including the KW PZPR in Gdansk and Szczecin.

According to at least one source, mid- and upper-level activists within the Communist Party already recognized by 15-16 December that Central Committee Secretary Gomulka needed to resign. On Friday, 18 December, the Administrative Head of the Central Committee of the Communist Party Stanisław Kania and deputy interior minister Franciszek Szlachcic secretly visited with Edward Gierek in Katowice and persuaded him that he should step in as the new Secretary.

Secretary Gomułka missed the 19 December meeting of the Bureau of Politics, reportedly because he was taken to the hospital for a stroke. On the day following that, 20 December, the Central Committee of the Communist Party convened and agreed that Gierek should replace Gomułka.

Gomułka's resignation was announced to the public as caused by reasons of health.

In the light of Gomulka's resignation, fewer protesters braved the winter cold.

The price increases, however, remained in place. Small numbers of workers began returning to work in mid-January 1971. The regime released a fake newspaper and television report claiming that shipyard workers promised increased productivity in support of Gierek's new leadership. The television spot aired footage of shipyard workers laughing and joking with Gierek at a mass meeting that had taken place three years ago to make it appear as if they supported him in his new role, with different banners and a new soundtrack edited in.

The deception triggered renewed strike. Within 24 hours all of Szczecin was on strike, again led by workers of

the Warski Shipyard. A larger, more democratic strike committee was formed and demanded to meet with Gierek face-to-face. Gierek met with the workers' delegates on 24 January and agreed to all of their demands except for the reversal of price increases. The demands included: free and democratic elections to the shipyard union branch, pay for the duration of the strike, an apology and correction of the falsified news reports in the media, no persecution of strikers, the publication of strikers' demands in newspapers, and cancellation of the price rises. Under pressure of further stoppages, the price increases were rescinded on 1 March 1971

## Research Notes

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Not viewed: "Black Thursday" ("Czarny Czwartek"), docudrama directed by Antoni Krauze

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