



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Polish workers general strike for economic rights, 1980

July

1980

to: September

1980

Country: Poland

Location City/State/Province: *cities included Gdansk, Ursus, Huta Warszawa, Poznan, Tczew, Mielec, Swidnica, Lublin, Sopot, Gdynia, and Szczecin*

Goals:

The list of 21 demands presented by the Inter-Factory Strike Committee to the government:

1. Acceptance of free trade unions independent of the Communist Party and of enterprises, in accordance with convention No. 87 of the International Labor Organization concerning the right to form free trade unions, which was ratified by the Communist Government of Poland.
2. A guarantee of the right to strike and of the security of strikers and those aiding them.
3. Compliance with the constitutional guarantee of freedom of speech, the press and publication, including freedom for independent publishers, and the availability of the mass media to representatives of all faiths.
4. A return of former rights to: 1) People dismissed from work after the 1970 and 1976 strikes, and 2) Students expelled from school because of their views. The release of all political prisoners, among them Edward Zdrozinski, Jan Kozlowski, and Marek Kozlowski. A halt in repression of the individual because of personal conviction.
5. Availability to the mass media of information about the formation of the Inter-factory Strike Committee and publication of its demands.
6. The undertaking of actions aimed at bringing the country out of its crisis situation by the following means: a) making public complete information about the social-economic situation, and b) enabling all sectors and social classes to take part in discussion of the reform programme.
7. Compensation of all workers taking part in the strike for the period of the strike, with vacation pay from the Central Council of Trade Unions.
8. An increase in the base pay of each worker by 2,000 zlotys a month as compensation for the recent raise in prices.
9. Guaranteed automatic increases in pay on the basis of increases in prices and the decline in real income.
10. A full supply of food products for the domestic market, with exports limited to surpluses.
11. The abolition of 'commercial' prices and of other sales for hard currency in special shops.
12. The selection of management personnel on the basis of qualifications, not party membership. Privileges of the secret police,

regular police and party apparatus are to be eliminated by equalizing family subsidies, abolishing special stores, etc.

13. The introduction of food coupons for meat and meat products (during the period in which control of the market situation is regained).
14. Reduction in the age for retirement for women to 50 and for men to 55, or after 30 years' employment in Poland for women and 35 years for men, regardless of age.
15. Conformity of old-age pensions and annuities with what has actually been paid in.
16. Improvements in the working conditions of the health service to insure full medical care for workers.
17. Assurances of a reasonable number of places in day-care centers and kindergartens for the children of working mothers.
18. Paid maternity leave for three years.
19. A decrease in the waiting period for apartments.
20. An increase in the commuter's allowance to 100 zlotys from 40, with a supplemental benefit on separation.
21. A day of rest on Saturday. Workers in the brigade system or round-the-clock jobs are to be compensated for the loss of free Saturdays with an increased leave or other paid time off.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 105. Establishment strike
- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 105. Establishment strike
- 106. Industry strike
- 117. General strike
- 172. Nonviolent obstruction

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 105. Establishment strike
- 106. Industry strike
- 117. General strike

Methods in 4th segment:

- 106. Industry strike
- 117. General strike
- 182. Stay-in strike

Methods in 5th segment:

- 106. Industry strike
- 117. General strike
- 179. Alternative social institutions
- 182. Stay-in strike
- 184. Defiance of blockades

Methods in 6th segment:

- 117. General strike
- 179. Alternative social institutions
- 182. Stay-in strike
- 184. Defiance of blockades

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 001. Public speeches
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 013. Deputations
- 025. Displays of portraits
- 037. Singing

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Democracy

Economic Justice

Group characterization:

- Inter-Factory Strike Committee
- multi-industry workers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Lech Walesa and the Inter-Factory Strike Committee (MKS)

Partners:

Workers in most industries throughout Poland

External allies:

Government security forces who joined the strike

Involvement of social elites:

Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Workers (throughout Poland)

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Lublin railway workers

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

- Inter-factory Strike Committee (MKS)
- Lech Walesa
- Lenin Shipyard workers

Groups in 5th Segment:

- Solidarity (union)

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: *Approximately 10 days*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Single-party government regime installed by Soviet forces.

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

None known

Repressive Violence:

Arrests, detentions

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

3 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

During the general strike, some industry workers were awarded wage increases in the governments attempt to put down the strike. However of the detailed demands outlined by the Inter-Factory Strike Committee, only several were reportedly awarded. Sources state explicitly that others wouldn't be won for years after the strike. Some sources posit that the gains won by the strikers were largely political ploys the regime used to absorb or neutralize radical movement among the workers, without effectively improving their living or working conditions.

The Solidarity union, even though becoming less centered on labor issues, was involved in the restructuring of the Polish government into a multi-party democracy in the late 1980s.

Strikes spread throughout Poland during the general strike and communication networks were formed. The workers who organized in 1980 later formed the Solidarity union.

The Soviet forces that liberated Poland from Nazi occupation after World War II installed a government under which workers, employed by state-owned businesses, could not organize or represent themselves. During the 1970s, frustration with the one-party system grew and by the end of the decade, the Polish economy was near collapse.

On June 30, 1980, the government announced a 'reorganization of meat distribution' which resulted in an immediate 60% price increase and greater difficulty in obtaining meat.

On July 1, strikes broke out in factories throughout Poland, including in Ursus, Huta Warszawa, Poznan, Tczew, Mielec, and Swidnica. Workers escaped retaliation by taking their own shipyards and factories hostage. The regime outlined its position toward the strikes: there would be no repression, and negotiations were to be held at the local level with factory managers. By treating the strikes individually, the government hoped to keep the workers divided. However, this actually encouraged the formation of discussion groups and associations for collective decision-making. The newly formed networks discredited established official unions that only transmitted information from above.

By July 15, fifty strikes had broken out or were still going on. Most of the strikes lasted for only a few days, enough to make management give in to some demands. Many strikers were 'bought off' with higher wages.

On July 17, in the city of Lublin, railway workers discovered a train filled with fish on route to the USSR. They shut down rail traffic by leaving trains and engines on the tracks. A large multi-industry strike paralyzed the city including buses, bread and milk delivery, nursing, construction, and water services. A deputy Prime Minister, sent by the government, issued a summons to return to work. Workers in Lublin ended the strike two days later.

However, strikes continued throughout the rest of Poland through the beginning of August. The government had faith in its strategy of partial concessions. However concessions granted in one place inspired nearby workers, actually encouraging the strike.

After the strikes had continued for over six weeks, the government tried arresting strikers most committed to the idea of 'free trade unions,' but the strategy proved ineffective. The first repressive measure by the government took place on August 11. The police detained and held Marek Glessman, a leader of the garbage collectors' strike. Two days later in Gdansk, three Lenin Shipyard workers were fired due to connections with an underground union.

Soon after, Gdansk (with cities Sopot and Gdynia) joined the general strike, concentrating around the Lenin Shipyard. The Soviet regime threatened to stop the strike by sealing off the shipyard. Shipyard workers, students, and professionals slipped through roadblocks to spread news of the strike. By August 17, twenty-four enterprises in the region were on strike. By August 18, the number had grown to 180. The shipyard strike committee transformed into an inter-factory committee composed of delegates from each factory. The Gdansk-based Inter-factory Strike Committee (MKS) elected Lech Walesa, a shipyard electrician, as its head. The newly formed strike committee expanded the economic demands of the initial strike, calling for free unions, access to the media, repeal of all repressive measures and an end to certain ruling class privileges.

The government ignored the MKS, proceeding only to meet with representatives from individual factories. Meanwhile, MKS committees were set up in surrounding regions. Soon a general strike had spread throughout Poland without anyone having to issue a call. The government soon changed its policy as lower ranks of the Party, including security forces, joined the strikers.

By late August, the MKS represented nearly 400,000 workers. MKS garnered support from foreign trade unions and media

coverage and later presented their 21 demands to the regime. A deputy Prime Minister met for discussions with the Gdansk MKS, and separately with the Szczecin MKS. In Gdansk, negotiations ended with the signing of the 'Gdansk accords' where the regime agreed to free unions, wage increases, and limits on censorship. Negotiations at Szczecin were unsuccessful.

Work resumed in both Gdansk and Szczecin on September 1 and the two MKS committees were converted into branches of Solidarnosc (Solidarity), the free national trade union that arose from the Lenin Shipyard strike. An apparent calm made the government hopeful that it had put down any resistance. However, the worker organization formed during the strike was maintained among the workers, and the negotiated resolution was not accepted everywhere. The aviation factory in Mielec resumed its strike on September 4, and added twenty-three demands to the earlier twenty-one of Gdansk.

By the end of September, nearly 90% of all workers were represented in Solidarity, which had a national structure and regional branches. While some strike leaders praised the workers for a partial victory, commentators are wary of the outcome. Officially, strikers had won the right to strike and form independent unions, however for months they had already been exercising those powers. Critics note that after the negotiations the organizational structures developed during the strike had to be submerged under hierarchical structures of Solidarity. As for the original demands of the strike, pay raises would not be immediate, only gradual, according to industrial sector and at the discretion of the government. There would be no sliding scale but merely an adjustment hinging on the cost of basic necessities. As for food provisions, and meat supplies in particular, no definite gains seem to have been awarded.

Solidarity continued to grow considerably using strikes to exercise power against the single party regime. What began as a labor organization supported by workers, Solidarity soon became more of a national reform lobby with membership reaching 10 million. Within Solidarity, there was disagreement as to how political its objectives should be. In fact, a national day of protest, along with several political actions carried out by Solidarity, led to Soviet suspension of free unions, arrests of Solidarity leadership, and media censorship late in 1981. It would take a new wave of strikes and underground resistance by Solidarity to rebuild the Polish nation on a multiparty democratic model.

Research Notes

Influences:

The degree of success achieved by this campaign against overwhelming odds led Polish workers to continue to organize and struggle nonviolently, eventually overthrowing the regime. (2)

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Additional Notes:

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