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Solidarnosc Anniversary

A Revolution Betrayed

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The purpose of the noisy ceremonies of the anniversary of the birth of Solidarność is to hide its real nature - a workers' revolution conducted in the name of authentically socialist values.

“A revolution can be led to defeat in two ways - by being crushed or by being betrayed. The tragedy of the Polish Revolution of 1980-81 is that it lost twice over. It was first of all crushed, then betrayed. It was betrayed by those who among today's political elites, claim as theirs August 1980 and their 'genealogy of solidarity'. By restoring capitalism they have betrayed the social interests of which this revolution was the expression and they have turned their backs on all these aspirations.” That is what I wrote in **Robotnik** **Ń,İŃ ski** on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of August 1980 [1].

“Today, in the context of a general falsification of the nature and the history of August and of the events of the sixteen months that followed, they are trying to present it as a “national anti-communist élan” with which it has nothing in common. At the same time they are effacing all the traces that it can (fortunately many of them cannot be effaced), that would indicate that what happened was a typical and classical proletarian revolution. For more than 150 years, in other words since the establishment of capitalist domination, such revolutions have occurred from time to time across the world, made by workers in the name of the defence of their rights, their dignity and the interests of their social class.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/ALechWalesa1982.jpg>]

Lech Walesa addresses Gdansk shipyard workers 1982

“The fact that these revolutions were aimed against capitalism, whereas the Polish Revolution of 1980-81 was directed against a regime that pretended to be socialist does not change anything. So-called “really existing socialism” appeared as a result of a double process - on the one hand the overthrow of capitalism and on the other hand the monopolisation of political and economic power, which should have belonged to the working class, by the parasitical bureaucratic layer.

“It dominated this class and lived by exploiting its labour, although - unlike in the capitalist system - the relations of exploitation no longer had social roots in the relations of production.” [2]

There was a chance to overthrow the bureaucratic dictatorship, while preserving the nationalised and planned economy, and on this basis to establish working-class power and start to build a socialism of the workers, self-managing and democratic. That is the truth that they are trying to hide today. Why then is NSZZ Solidarność today identified with restoration of capitalism, which started ten years after August 1980 and which has brought the working class increased and brutal exploitation, corresponding once again to the relations of production, an absolute dictatorship of capital, under which it is even possible to not pay workers for the work they have done, the loss of all social conquests, mass unemployment and pauperisation, the perspective of emigrating in search of work and bread?

Solidarność transformed

No one asks whether there is a continuity between the Solidarność that appeared following August 1980 and the Solidarność of today. However there is nothing obvious about that. There is a form of continuity, but also a glaring discontinuity. The essential question is, what is dominant? And the answer is discontinuity. That is why the

Solidarność of today on the one hand lays claim to its genealogy and on the other is totally incapable of presenting the real history of the Solidarność of 1980-81, and falsifies this history.

That is why the commemorative ceremonies of the 25th anniversary of August, which the media are pushing so hard, are taking place with so few participants, why the overwhelming majority of the militants of Solidarność of that period are not taking part in them and why the overwhelming majority of the working class is indifferent to them. That is why those trade unionists and the solidarity committees with Solidarność in Western Europe, who during the state of siege [3] came to help it, risking their own security, driven by class and internationalist, and not anti-communist, motives, are not taking part.

Destroyed by the state of siege, Solidarność was never able to be reborn as a mass movement of working-class autonomy and workers' democracy. What happened to it is not difficult to explain. During an impetuous rise of workers' struggles such a movement can develop by itself for a certain time. But to survive after defeats and to be capable of rebuilding itself - without even speaking of the possibility of a decisive victory, which can only be the establishment of workers' power - it absolutely needs a party, capable of preserving its political gains and of guaranteeing its class independence and able to arm it with a corresponding programme and an effective fighting strategy.

The outline of such a programme - of an anti-bureaucratic revolution, working-class and based on democracy and workers' councils - appeared in Poland 15 years before August. I am thinking of the **Open Letter to the Party** written by Jacek Kuron and Karol Modzelewski [4].

After March 1968 [5] the opposition grouped around them, and the authors themselves, discreetly abandoned this programme, and with it Marxism.

The programme of the "Open Letter" was already foreign to the militants of the KOR [6] when they gained influence among workers. In the autumn of 1980 Kuron, questioned on Marxism, settled the matter by affirming that it was "a philosophy of the social movement of the 19th century, which has been outdated for a long time". At the end of his life, attacking the consequences of the restoration of capitalism, in which he had largely participated, he again asserted that he was a Marxist. In the recesses of the programmatic commission at the First Congress of Solidarność, Kuron called me "someone nałve, who still believes the stupidities that Karol and I wrote in the Open Letter."

If we look at the "democratic opposition" from a historical perspective, we are struck by its instrumental attitude towards the working class, which sharply recalls that of Pilsudski [7] and his supporters. By defending in the Polish Socialist Party the idea that "the independence of Poland is for the working class", Kazimierz Kelles-Krauz warned against those who in reality considered that "the working class is the instrument of independence".

These people wanted to use the working class as a striking force in order to open the way to the construction of a bourgeois state. That is the origin of the famous remark of the Pilsudkiites about the red tram. "The shadows of famous ancestors", called on by Adam Michnik, were a precedent that served as an inspiration [8].

Experts in capitalism

The programme abandoned by Kuron and by the oppositional milieu grouped around him was not taken up again by any political organisation or group. This is a paradox: in general major class struggles have a reviving programmatic

and political influence on left circles. They lead to the development of existing revolutionary organisations, to the birth of such organisations where they do not yet exist, to the radicalisation of the left wings of reformist parties. December [9] was such a shock that although Edward Gierek, the new leader of the PUWP, succeeded in lowering the tension - only relatively, as the Lodz strike demonstrated - it should have at least led to the emergence of a radical left opposition, if not the nucleus of a revolutionary party.

But nothing like that happened. It was the same after June 1976, which should have been interpreted as a forewarning of a great storm. Even worse, August 1980 did not lead to a change in this respect.

It is true that the left opposition was subjected to intensive control by the political police and to repression. The trial of Kuron and Modzelewski and the "trial of the three Trotskyists", like the repression of the supporters of the Sino-Albanian schism during the 1960s, clearly demonstrated that.

That lasted until the end, as is shown by a report that was made by the (Polish) Ministry of the Interior in 1987, which was preserved in the archives of the (East German) STASI. It indicates that the means and the forces used to pursue the Trotskyists were out of all proportion to their number and their influence and that even a conference of the special services of the "fraternal countries" held in Moscow had been devoted to them.

But there was something else much more important. It was that the "Marxist-Leninist ideology" of the regime, identified then by almost everyone in Poland with Marxism, was totally void of class content. It could not serve to elaborate a programme of immediate or transitional demands that could be used by a real movement of working-class autonomy, nor to help work out its tactics and strategy. It was therefore necessary to break with this ideology and rediscover Marxism - as a theory of the conditions, the forms and the consequences of the class struggle and as a political programme.

March 1968 had had a very important effect in the long term, which is not generally noticed. During the whole post-war period, basing itself on the agreement between Piasecki and General Sierov [10], the nationalist-clerical Right had disposed of a legal institutional and organisational base.

Moczar's campaign in March 1968 had allowed it to become active and to extend its influence. In the ideological climate created at that time, this Right had also grown in the ranks of the opposition, often moreover maintaining numerous links with its representatives on the side of the regime.

The new profound crisis of "really existing socialism" in 1980 had reinforced the restorationist tendencies within the bureaucracy, in particular its economic wing, and among a section of the intelligentsia. Numerous restorationist elements among the intellectuals oscillated between the bureaucracy and Solidarność, advising both of them to adopt market-oriented economic reforms. They were influential on the level of the national leadership - and in particular in its apparatus and its agencies - which the workers had much more difficulty in democratically controlling than they did with workplace commissions or regional leaderships. At this level the advisers and the experts gravely abused their functions in order to determine the policy of Solidarność.

Democracy stifled

The impetuous development of independent working-class self-organisation and activity, the progressive accumulation of experiences in the domains of workers' democracy and of the class struggle, the development of consciousness, the growing aspirations for workers' control of enterprises, for workers' self-management and

democratic planning - that was one side of the coin. The other side, which as time went by threatened more and more to lead to an impasse, was the lack of a political party of the working class.

This side could not remain a vacuum and by the force of events the vacuum was filled by political currents that represented other social interests. During the national congress there was a subterranean struggle, which rarely and briefly broke into the open, between the current of the KOR, the nationalist Right and the elements who were orienting in function of their class consciousness or even simply their class instinct, much more numerous but atomised; between the radical current of the self-management movement in the workplaces and those elements who were not only conciliators towards the bureaucracy, but who also represented more or less crystallised restorationist tendencies, even though they were masked; between the partisans and the opponents of workers' democracy, of independence from the Catholic Church, of the struggle for workers' power.

In general, on the essential questions, the "classist" tendency carried the day. But when the questions passed from the hands of an assembly as democratic as the congress of delegates was, to the national apparatus, the worst was to be feared. Undoubtedly the sharpest fight had been conducted during this congress over the laws that had just been adopted by the Diet on self-management of enterprises and on state enterprises. Disavowing the compromise that had been concluded behind its back by Lech Walesa with the Diet, the congress voted that it "decided to submit to a referendum in the workplaces the passages in the two laws that went most flagrantly against the union's position and consequently threatened self-management."

The same congress specified that the union "in the struggle for workers' self-management and socialised enterprises will continue to act in accord with the wishes of the workers" and called for the "creation of genuine workers' councils according to the principles and in accord with the position of the union" and not with the above-mentioned laws. After the vote, which the majority of delegates had applauded, Jacek Merkel, one of the principal Walesaites in the Presidium of the National Council (later to be one of the liberal leaders of Gdansk) said to me: "You've won, so what? After the congress we'll bury the referendum in any case." Which was done, in defence of the compromise.

In spite of the vote by the congress, it was necessary to pursue the internal struggle on this question. If it had not been for the state of siege, there was that a strong probability that we would have won the day, because in Solidarność it was not easy to go against the workers of the big enterprises. Those who had their support could easily win, including against Walesa.

Against the interests of the workers

When the state of siege crushed the mass movement of the workers, everything changed. Very quickly their wishes stopped being taken into account, ceased to be decisive. Solidarność underwent a fundamental metamorphosis. A mass organisation gave way to small groups and structures, which to a large extent allowed themselves to be driven back on the churches and which were invaded by right-wing political groups, conservatives, clerical-nationalists and liberals. Their common programme was anti-communism, the alliance with imperialism and the restoration of capitalism.

Solidarność, which was rebuilt on such bases, lost its class independence. Entangled in interests hostile to those of the workers, it could only simulate a defence of them, all the while selling them out, playing in this way the shameful role of a trade union cover for the capitalist and neo-liberal transformation. So there is nothing surprising about the fact that it has ceased to be the organisation of the majority of the working class and that it only counts in its ranks a small minority.

This article is reproduced from the monthly Nowy Robotnik (New Worker) n° 18 of August 15th 2005. Nowy Robotnik replaced the monthly Robotnik Œ,Œ ski (Worker of Silesia) when the editorial board of this paper of the new Polish Left was broadened and when its circulation took on a national character.

[1] Beginning in July 1980, following price rises, the strike wave lasted throughout the summer, broadening out with the start of the strike with occupation of the "Lenin" shipyard in Gdansk on August 14th. This strike, spreading to all the workplaces in the region, forced the bureaucracy to negotiate in front of the general assembly of delegates of strike committees and succeeded on August 31st, in getting the Deputy Prime Minister, M. Jagielski to sign an agreement which provided for strike committees to form "new unions, independent and self-managed". On September 4th the strike committees of the miners of Upper Silesia, centralised in the "Manifest Lipcowy" mine in Jastrzebie, imposed a similar agreement. See the issues of International Viewpoint for August and September 1980.

[2] Robotnik Œ,Œ ski, August 2000

[3] During the night of 12th to 13th December 1981 General Jaruzelski, who combined the positions of Prime Minister and First Secretary of the PUWP (Polish United Workers' Party, the Polish Stalinist party), carried out a coup d'État by proclaiming the state of siege. Thousands of trade union militants were arrested, the means of communication were suppressed, a curfew was imposed and the general strike was crushed by the army, factory by factory (in the "Wujek" mine in Silesia, where the workers tried to defend themselves, the army opened fire, leaving several dead). The union quickly reorganised clandestinely, but the efficient repression (arrests and especially repeated sackings) ended up by cutting the trade union structures off from their roots in the enterprises. The clandestine national leadership of the union proved incapable of taking leadership of the spontaneous uprising on August 31st 1982 which brought several million demonstrators onto the streets. After this failure, the mass movement receded.

[4] "Open Letter to the PUWP", published in English in Revolutionary Marxist Students in Poland Speak Out, New York, 1968.

[5] In March 1968 the Polish opposition organised a demonstration against the censorship of a play. In response to the repression of this demonstration students in the majority of Polish cities went on strike. This movement was severely repressed and the regime, inspired by the Minister of the Interior, M. Moczar, unleashed an anti-Semitic campaign in order to liquidate the communist Left. This repression was followed by a wave of emigration.

[6] The KOR ("Committee to Defend Workers") was established to defend the workers arrested after the strikes and demonstrations of June 1976 in protest against food price increases. The following year it decided to broaden its terms of reference and became the Committee of Social Self-defence" (KOR

[7] Jozef Pilsudski, organiser of the military apparatus of the Polish Socialist Party (PPS, the independentist wing of the Polish workers' movement), split along with his sector after the failure of the Russian Revolution of 1905. Organiser of the Polish Legion attached to the Austrian army during the First World War, he took power in Warsaw on November 11th, 1918, proclaiming the country's independence and publicly abandoning the idea of socialism (from which comes the expression "to get off the red tram at the 'Independence' stop"). In 1926 he carried out a coup d'État - with the help of the unions whose strike prevented the loyalist sectors of the army from intervening!), installed a strong state and organised the repression of the workers' movement, including the PPS, while maintaining a parliamentary façade.

[8] At the end of the 1970s Adam Michnik, who had begun his oppositional activity by founding the student club "Seekers of Contradictions" in 1966 and was one of the leaders of the student movement in 1968, circulated an essay with this title, in which he rehabilitated the traditions of the Polish nationalist Right.

[9] In December 1970 police opened fire on striking workers in the Baltic ports, killing and wounding hundreds. This led to the replacement of Wladyslaw Gomulka by Edward Gierak as First Secretary of the POUP.

[10] Leader of the fascist wing of the Polish Resistance, Piasecki was arrested by the Soviet Army in 1945 and made an agreement with the Stalinist General Sierov, Governor of Warsaw, undertaking to bring the Polish clerical Right towards the new regime. Because of this he disposed

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of a publishing house and had institutional backing until his death, even trying sometimes to compete with the Catholic hierarchy.