Comment: Poland

With the Polish situation more settled than it has been for some months, the world awaits the outcome of the crucial Congress of the Polish United Workers Party (Poland’s Communist Party), due in mid-July. This congress will determine whether the months-old movement towards a socialist democracy will speed up, with the party’s approval, or whether the party will try to reverse the process, or at least "hold the line" at the current position.

All the signs are that most of the party’s rank and file want the process of socialist renewal to speed up and broaden its aims.

If the congress endorses a program of renewal and reforms, the clash between the Solidarity trade union and the party will diminish considerably, and there will be every possibility for a productive party/union alliance to creatively tackle Poland’s deep economic, social and political problems.

Already the possibilities of such a partnership are very real. The party leadership has recently conceded major demands, including that of farmers for a Rural Solidarity, and the Solidarity leadership is recognising the need for realistic economic measures, even possible increases in food prices.

The Soviet leadership has not welcomed the process taking place in Poland. In fact, they have made plain their wish to see it “reversed”. The propaganda barrage from Moscow, Prague and East Berlin has recalled only too vividly the campaign against the Czechoslovak party before the 1968 invasion.

It would be nice to be able to rule out a Czech-style intervention in Poland’s affairs. Certainly the threat of one has receded in the past few weeks. However, given the obvious unhappiness of the Soviet leaders and others in Eastern Europe, the “track record” suggests caution in ruling it out altogether.

But the situation is somewhat different today from what it was in 1968. There is far greater active working class participation in Poland’s reforms. If the Soviet Union intervened in Poland, it would have to count on determined and prolonged resistance by the Polish workers and people — and possibly the army.

And while Czechoslovakia in 1968 was a very big mouthful to swallow, taking several years to fully digest, Poland in 1981 would be virtually indigestible. The Soviet Union would be taking over Poland’s huge foreign debts and other big economic problems — a massive burden on top of its own problems of economic development and foreign-aid commitments elsewhere.

However, in the minds of at least some Soviet leaders, there must be powerful reasons for intervening against the “Polish disease”. To all-too-many Soviet leaders, the Polish events raise a spectre of change throughout Eastern Europe, including in the USSR, in directions which they do not like. Rightly or wrongly, such people see their own positions, and the social values they hold dear, deeply threatened.

Which course will finally be adopted remains to be seen. It is to be hoped that sanity, and socialist principles, will prevail and that at least some elements in the Soviet leadership will learn from, rather than fear, the Polish events. Should that happen, the positive influence of Poland on the world-wide prospects for socialism, and on international affairs generally, will be great.

Intervention, on the other hand, would do tremendous damage to the world socialist movement, perhaps even worse than the 1968 Czech intervention, and would open up a very bleak period in the world situation.

Poland, therefore, has an importance far beyond its own borders. Indeed, the Polish experiment may well be one of crucial importance to the future of humankind.