POLAND'S

by Denis Freney, who was in Poland in July, at the time of the PUWP Congress

REVOLT
The Polish people's revolt is now a year old. That, in itself, makes it unusual in attempts to develop socialist democracy, for example, in Czechoslovakia.

But perhaps the single most important and unique aspect of the Polish experience is that the momentum for change came from the base — from the organised working class itself. The workers, organised in Solidarity, remain the force for change.

In Poland, the working class is officially the ruling class. This is consecrated in the national constitution and in the Party's ideology. But the reality of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" was, and remains, a dictatorship by the Party and the state apparatus in the name of the working class. It, in fact, became a dictatorship over the proletariat.

In 1956, 1968, 1970, 1976 and 1980, the working class (or, in 1968, the students and intellectuals) revolted against this dictatorship, around demands to do with civil liberties, prices and food supplies. But in a country where strikes were, by definition, counter-revolutionary, this became a revolt against the political and economic system itself.

**Workers shot**

On two occasions in 1956 and 1970 the police shot down many workers. Government and Party leaders lost their official positions, but the system was not substantially changed. In 1968 and 1976, the movements were crushed and dozens of workers, students and intellectuals jailed.

The unique aspect of the Polish workers' movement is its long history as an independent force, and the maturity it developed politically and organisationally.

The independent existence and growing maturity of the Polish working class challenged the rationale of the regime as no other force could. In the stalinist period up to 1956, the apparatus — the bureaucracy — in its vast majority believed in its own ideology and self-proclaimed historic mission as the representative of, or substitute for, the working class. By the 'seventies, its majority was cynical and self-seeking.

By the time workers staged their successful revolt in August 1980, there was widespread corruption throughout the apparatus and society. The opening of the Polish economy to multinational penetration contributed to this corruption.

The degeneration also became ideological: the anti-semitism of 1966-68 broke with the historic traditions of marxism. The traditional anti-semitism of the Polish people was seen as a means of diverting the workers. But worse, there was, and remains, a strand in the bureaucracy which is itself deeply anti-semitic.

The Party-State justified its rule in large part by the economic and social advances achieved. These remained within an ideological framework under which socialism and then communism would be achieved, primarily through economic advance. Thus, the question of socialist democracy could be marginalised.

In Poland, the Gierek leadership so undermined the basis of economic and social advancement that this rationale of the Party-State was brought into question.

The economic collapse is most visible in the field of food production and supply. Poland is agriculturally rich, yet the struggle to find the most basic foodstuffs means that workers and their families must queue for hours to get enough to eat. Some cases of malnutrition have even been recorded. After hours of patient queueing, workers have so far been able to find enough to eat. But, in the coming winter, real hunger may appear.

Even more maddening for the Poles is the virtual non-existence of other basics: soap, detergents, shampoo, cigarettes, matches and cooking oil. Alongside this is the flourishing black market, fed by the wholesale hijacking of food supplies and other essentials. The sacking of hundreds of officials for corruption (though few have been tried) has not allayed the suspicion that corruption...
continues at all levels and worsens the effect of the crisis.

Food distribution in Poland has always been a problem. Centralised internal trade leads to the most irrational shortages and then over-supply. The chaos has worsened markedly in recent years. Because of its immediate impact on workers, the problems in the internal distribution system symbolise the deficiencies of a centralised bureaucratic system on the whole economy. Corruption only worsens the inbuilt inefficiency of the system.

Nor is it enough to blame all the current ills on the previous Gierrek government. The Kania leadership has had an admittedly difficult task balancing the need to respond to mass pressures for significant social and political reform against the objective constraints imposed by Soviet policies. But it has now been in power for a year and workers see few significant changes in their economic situation yet taking place. Until the inefficient centralised bureaucracy's control over the economy is removed, and workers themselves feel in control of the economy and society, nothing substantial can be achieved.

In such a situation, to simply raise prices to real levels (an essential part of any economic reform) or to cut rations, is a recipe for a social explosion with disastrous consequences.

The Polish working class is an independent force. For the past year, workers have put their faith in Solidarity which is their organisation. But, like all massive organisations, Solidarity is open to bureaucratisation, thus becoming isolated from its base.

Allegiances can change rapidly and people can be moved by the dynamics of the situation. There is no guarantee that the unity which is now expressed in support for Solidarity is permanent. It could be shattered if Solidarity does not satisfy the workers' aspirations and needs.

Given the past, there is no real prospect that the workers would then turn to the Party. Rather, their frustration could explode into actions outside the control of Solidarity's leadership, risking Polish or Soviet armed intervention. Alternatively, demagogues who are blindly anti-socialist such as KPN (Confederation for Independent Poland), or provocateurs from any number of secret services, could take control.

That perspective was put to me time and again by Solidarity activists and independent observers. It is in that framework that we must also measure classifications in the western media of "moderates" or "centre forces", and "radicals" or "extremists".

The Party

Where does the Party — the Polish United Workers Party (PUWP) — stand in this dangerous situation?

By August 1980, the credibility of the PUWP among the workers had been very seriously weakened. The Party is identified with serious acts of police repression, economic mismanagement, censorship, widespread corruption and gross inefficiency.

The Party was the State; the State was the Party. Even during the last Party Congress, Party leaders of all varieties spoke of improving relations between the Party and "the public". Implicitly, they were talking of relations between the rulers and the ruled, which corresponds to the reality.

The Party leadership changed after August 1980, but the over-riding goal remained: to maintain the Party as the ruler of the country and to limit as much as possible the powers of Solidarity.

The first four months of 1981 were marked by the continuing bitter rearguard resistance of the Party leadership to Solidarity and its legal registration, to Rural Solidarity and to the independent students' union.

The Bydgoszcz incident, when police beat up Solidarity leaders, represented an attempt to control Solidarity as a legal organisation by force. After first trying to whitewash the incident, the Political Bureau was compelled to back down by a virtual uprising among the worker members of the Party.
The revolt of the Party’s rank and file held the promise of a real renovation of the Party. The rank and file imposed democratic elections for the Extraordinary Party Congress. Hundreds of Party officials were swept aside. The “horizontal movement” in the Party began to organise across the country in opposition to the vertically-organised Party apparatus.

But the Party apparatus proved too strong. It was itself pressured by the Soviet letter of June 5 to reassert control over both the country and the Party. Armed with the Soviet letter, applying various forms of pressure on those active in the horizontal movement, and appealing to the heavily-centralised version of “democratic centralism”, the apparatus banned the horizontal movement. It sacked its leader, Z. Iwanow, and others, from leading positions, and convinced many that the democratic reforms in election procedure were enough. The horizontal movement disappeared by July.

**Congress delegates**

The election of delegates to Congress resulted in a substantial majority for the Kania leadership, together with a vocal and confident conservative minority. Most delegates were inexperienced in the political activity of a Party Congress. They were inclined to accept the proposals of the Party leadership. But, at the same time, many of them reflected the concerns of their fellow workers.

Symbolic of this contradiction was an impromptu debate in the corridors outside the congress hall, broadcast on Polish TV. A group of worker delegates spoke out militantly before the cameras, saying the Party had to be a real workers’ party and they even supported Solidarity’s self-management plan. Then, another delegate, an official, entered the circle and put the official line: discipline, democratic centralism, Marxism-Leninism .... Code-words in Poland for the status quo.

Within a few moments, those worker delegates who had been so outspoken were nodding in agreement. Then they spoke out in support of him in almost total contradiction to what they had said a few minutes before!

The Central Committee elected at the Congress reflects the political composition of the delegates although it has a disproportionate representation of conservatives. The Political Bureau and the Secretariat reflect more the choice of the Kania leadership.

The first Central Committee meeting after the Congress supported the leadership’s opposition to Solidarity’s proposals for self-management and economic reform. It is not excluded that, in the future, the Central Committee and the Party rank and file may actively oppose the leadership’s confrontationist tactics against Solidarity. But, for the moment, the reforming movement within the Party has been contained within the current leadership’s perspectives and tactics.

Inside Solidarity, the period after Bydgoszcz has also been a testing one. Walesa’s unilateral action in calling off the strikes protesting against the Bydgoszcz incident led to a split with the “radical” elements who claim that it was not the decision itself they necessarily disagreed with, but the way Walesa acted.

Karol Modzelewski, one of the founders of the Polish opposition who was linked with KOR, resigned as Solidarity’s national adviser. Solidarity’s two vice-presidents, Lis and Gwiazda, were on the verge of resigning.

After Bydgoszcz, Solidarity’s right to exist was firmly established. The focus of Solidarity’s concern then moved to the economic crisis.

The government had placed its proposals for economic reform before parliament. The “radicals” in Solidarity were dissatisfied. First of all, they wanted the workers’ councils to have the right to elect the factory directors. Second, they believed that any economic reform would be ineffective if the centralised
bureaucracy still retained the power to arbitrarily intervene in the enterprises.

The discussion on self-management in the first half of 1981 was mainly restricted to intellectuals and economic specialists. In June, Solidarity branches in the country’s 18 biggest factories met and decided to take up the demand of full self-management. These big 18 factories formed an informal “network” which sponsored a counter draft law on self-management and a series of conferences on the subject.

When a conference was called in Gdansk in early July, over 1,000 workplaces and factories sent delegates and endorsed this counter draft which, first of all, gave workers’ councils the right to elect directors and, second, gave economic freedom within a market mechanism.

At the Party Congress, the counter draft law was the subject of a major attack. It was described as “anti-socialist”, “restoring capitalism”, and so on.

After the Congress, and after the government unilaterally cut rations and raised prices, the question of self-management became the key political issue.

**Lech Walesa**

Walesa and those supporting him had propagated the idea that Solidarity should be simply a trade union in the traditional sense, leaving economic management to the government. But the dangers of such a concept, which allows strikes as well as compromise, clearly emerged in the explosion of anger against the price rises and ration cuts.

Within a few weeks, Walesa became an exponent of full self-management. Solidarity will therefore hold its first national congress in early September backing self-management.

Walesa’s change of position was also dictated by two other factors: first, the hardline government opposition expressed in its use of the media against Solidarity and, second, a survey which showed one-third of Solidarity members already disillusioned with what the organisation had achieved.

With the workers’ anger tinder-dry, the smallest spark could lead to riots and chaos. In such a situation, the “irresponsible” people were those who took a simple trade union line.

The decline of the Church’s influence inside Solidarity was another factor which changed the situation. The Church, before August 1980 the sole organisation independent of the Party and State, had been able to reinforce its traditional role in Poland as a focus for national identity. The Church became unhappy when Solidarity developed as a second and attractive independent force. It tried to take Solidarity under its wing through the influence it exerted over Walesa.

The Church hierarchy is a conservative social force: it certainly has no enthusiasm for full workers’ self-management. Its lack of enthusiasm is shared by Western governments and media.

The “radicals” recently felt strong enough to campaign against Church influence in Solidarity. They published in *Solidarity Weekly* an article asking “Is the Church trying to take over Solidarity?” Walesa acknowledged that both the Church and the Party had, indeed, tried to “take over” Solidarity, but that he had always insisted on its independence as a self-governing workers’ organisation.

Inside Solidarity, the balance has therefore shifted towards a decisive struggle for full self-management and a thorough economic reform. Only when the government agrees will Solidarity feel able to try to persuade the workers to accept price restructuring and other necessary sacrifices everyone will have to make.

Even if there is full self-management and a drastic cutback in the powers of the centralised bureaucracy, there will be at least four or five years of hardship ahead of the Polish people. The food shortages cannot be overcome overnight. Farmers must be given real freedom from bureaucratic control, and priority in supply of machinery. But even with that, and a fair payment for what they produce, farmers will continue to be
dissatisfied with the few consumer goods available to them.

Rural Solidarity has a key role to play in the coming period. In return for a genuine reform, it has to persuade farmers to produce as much as possible even if the real incentive to do so is limited by the reality.

How will the Soviet Union react to a genuine economic reform, including self-management? Is the Party leadership taking a hard line on these issues because it fears the Soviet Union will intervene militarily, at whatever cost, to stop such deep-going reforms?

No one really knows if this interpretation is correct. In any case, the centralised bureaucracy has its own interests to defend when it comes to self-management.

Any analysis which regards Soviet pressure as the central issue, and therefore imagines that a neat solution is acceptance of the government plan for limited economic reform and freezing the situation as it is, ignores the reality. The workers are an independent, volatile force. The situation is not one where you can expect the workers to passively accept any imposed solution.

If the situation were frozen, then the dangers of a spontaneous, uncontrolled explosion, demagogy and provocation are enormous. The dangers would grow as the economic crisis worsened and further Soviet intervention, perhaps including armed force, would be inevitable.

The implications of the Polish experience for Australian socialists is beyond the scope of this article. Yet, clearly, it demands as much consideration as did the Czechoslovak events in 1968. After 1968, the CPA and many other communist parties in Europe and elsewhere, re-evaluated their conception of the sort of socialist society they were fighting for.

The CPA adopted the model of self-management, extended to the whole of society, combined with a multi-party political system, independent trade unions and fuller civil liberties than exist in the most advanced capitalist democracy. As a model, it is good.

Now we see in Poland that such a model is, within the framework of Poland’s “geopolitical reality”, at the centre of the workers’ demands. When a model becomes reality it can be a shock: the Party is often being led, not leading; the Church plays a role; many workers identifying communism with what existed in Poland are “anti-communist”; rightist, anarchist and other ideas are expressed.

This model upsets schemas which somehow see a socialist democracy in which the Party would still make the basic decisions and everybody outside it would bow spontaneously before the Party’s greater wisdom.

Socialist democracy certainly won’t be like that; Poland is a living example. Contradictory social forces will confront each other. There are many unexplored implications for socialists that require a more thorough analysis of what we mean by socialist democracy and self-management.

The need for a more detailed analysis of the “socialist countries” also arises from Polish events. The nationalised economic base certainly remains an historic achievement. In Poland, it means that no one talks of handing over the factories to the old or any new capitalists, but rather of putting these factories under workers’ self-management.

Poland has again posed that a nationalised economy may not be enough to allow us to describe such countries as “socialist” or even “socialist-based”.

The credibility of communism and even of socialism in the capitalist world, above all in the advanced capitalist countries, depends in large part, on a joint effort by all Marxists to develop such an analysis. That task has already begun, but it still has a long way to go.