Comment: Poland

by Brian Aarons

The Polish "spring" which, for sixteen eventful months, offered new hopes of democratic renewal in an Eastern European country, has ended in yet another undemocratic imposition of the prevailing bureaucratic model of socialism.

Soviet troops did not intervene as they did in Czechoslovakia in 1968, and a new "twist" was added with the imposition of military rule in a proclaimed socialist country. But, in essence, the politics of the two situations are very similar; the Soviet leaders who set the pace in Eastern Europe still will not allow any "deviation" from their model of "real socialism". By one means or another, they intend to keep the basic model the way it is, and has been, throughout Eastern Europe.

Space is not available here to properly discuss any of the issues raised by the Polish events which, hopefully, will be discussed more extensively in future issues. I will just briefly discuss what seems to me to be three of the major questions.

1. Why did 16 months of unprecedented social upheaval end with General Jaruzelski's declaration of martial law? Explanations vary widely, ranging from those who support military rule as the only way to save socialism and as "the first step to Poland's recovery", to those Western propagandists who proclaim that it's all the inevitable outcome of the communist or socialist system.

Were there other options, given all the formidable internal problems and external pressures? In my view, yes, but only if a significant section of the Party had been prepared to set out boldly on a course of reforming and renewing Polish socialism.

A real and lasting renewal of Polish socialism depended on an alliance developing between the reform-minded wing of the party and at least some of the leadership of Solidarity. That alliance would have had to involve a program of democratic reform in the workplace and in society at large. It also had to include a realistic program of economic recovery over which the masses could feel they had some real control — a program which could visibly promise at least the hope of a real recovery, not yet another round of bureaucratic bungling and corruption.

Such an alliance provided the only possibility of resolving the many conflicts and contradictions between the various social forces. In turn, such an alliance was only a real possibility if a genuine reforming wing had emerged in the party and won a majority for a decisive program of reform and renewal.

Unfortunately, the party seemed hamstringed by the divisions within it. Those favoring substantial reforms never won a clearcut majority. The result of the inner-party struggle between reformers and hardliners (the latter encouraged, supported and promoted by the Soviet leadership) was the emergence of a "centrist" leadership around Kania. This leadership wanted some reforms but did not have a clearcut program for the substantial reforms that were required (and wanted by the masses). Nor did it seem to have any clear strategy for getting out of the difficult and complex situation.

This lack of a credible reform program and of a strategy for implementing it, undermined the possibility of the party winning back the mass support it had lost through earlier blunders. It was also an obstacle to the party being able to get agreement with Solidarity, or even with those Solidarity leaders who genuinely wanted a compromise within the limits of "realpolitik".

Of course, the PUWP leaders were under enormous and conflicting pressures, with Solidarity pushing for major reforms, large sections of the people growing desperate and frustrated at food shortages and the
government’s failure to solve basic problems, party hardliners pushing for “tough” solutions, and the Soviet Union and other “socialist allies” labelling Solidarity’s demands as attempted counter-revolution.

There were also extremist responses within Solidarity. But these were, in part, a response to mass anger at food shortages and other things. Moreover, most of Solidarity’s leaders held to a “moderate” course. It was only when the government wanted to push an anti-strike law through parliament that the “moderate” majority swung around to a harder line.

Had the party and the government declared a major program of social and economic reform, hardliners and extremists of all kinds would have been isolated and there would have been every chance of regaining some of the party’s lost credibility.

2. The Polish events sharply reraise the longstanding need for marxists to understand and analyse the Soviet model of socialism.

In particular, the collapse of the Polish economy forcefully drives home the lesson that a socialist economy can only work efficiently when it is controlled in real ways by the mass of the workers themselves. Such control can guard against bureaucratic corruption and mismanagement of the type which proved so disastrous in Poland. (Managers subject to election and recall based on their expertise and performance, not on blind loyalty to superiors and “the line”, are more likely to produce results.)

Democratic debate on overall national economic goals can also help to avoid the massive policy mistakes which led the Gierek leadership into the misguided strategy of developing Poland’s economy via massive loans from the West. (Of course, democratic debate is no absolute guarantee against mistakes.)

But, most importantly of all, democratic involvement and real control by the working people themselves provides the only solid foundation for a successful, efficient and dynamic socialist economy. Centralised state planning can be very successful in developing a backward economy and in distributing wealth with some equity. But it has become clear that an over-centralised and bureaucratic socialist economy runs into difficulty once a certain level of development is reached. In a developed, complex economy, only the creative initiative of the workers and a degree of freedom for individual enterprises can counteract the tendency to bureaucratic stagnation.

Private profit is the “motive force” of capitalism — a motive force which has proved more dynamic and long-lasting than socialists once thought, despite all the inefficiencies and crises it produces. Against this, socialism can only tap the “motive force” of popular initiative and creativity which, in turn, can only come from people’s real sense of controlling social affairs.

3. The declaration of martial law in Poland has also prompted further debates in the international communist movement. Several communist parties, including the mass parties in Italy, Japan and Spain, have sharply criticised the declaration of martial law. Some of them have issued long statements which not only condemn military rule but also extensively analyse the underlying causes of the Polish crisis. The Italian communists have even spoken of a crisis in the whole Soviet system because of its apparent incapacity to renew itself.

Such statements clearly stem from more than a passing criticism of a single mistake. As could be expected, the Soviet Communist Party has responded with sharp and bitter criticisms of the PCI leaders. With the PCI talking about a “third way” between capitalism and Soviet-style socialism, further vigorous debate seems set to take place in the communist movement about models of socialism and roads to socialism.