The Polish Crisis

Is there a way out?

by Monty Johnstone and Andreas Westphal

Since World War II the Polish crisis has been the most open and prolonged social and political conflict in what is sometimes called real existing socialism. Debate in and between the international communist parties is sharp, particularly between the Communist Party of Italy and the Soviet Communist Party.

In this issue, ALR reprints part of an article published in the January 1982 issue of the British Communist Party's journal, Marxism Today. Written in November 1981, the article was overtaken by events. But parts of its analysis bear reprinting even now.

The portion of the article ALR is reproducing deals with the need for a social and political evolution towards what the authors call an historic compromise. Before the imposition of martial law, things appeared to be possibly moving in that direction. However, this undoubtedly difficult and complex process was cut short by the unfolding of the second of Johnstone and Westphal's three scenarios— a Polish army and police clampdown. The authors were among the very few who gave this possibility greater weight than direct Soviet intervention.

Whether military rule can really help to resolve the deep-seated difficulties Poland faces is extremely doubtful. More likely, Poland (and ultimately the whole of Eastern Europe) will have to eventually adopt some form of Johnstone and Westphal's first scenario. Only then would the social and political situation in Poland be reflected in the present name of the Polish state—People's Poland.

The struggles of the Polish workers in the summer of 1980 ushered in a new and stormy period in their country's history. August 1980 brought to the surface a long-smouldering structural crisis, in which political and economic elements are inextricably linked. The absence of democratic political structures had had disastrous effects on the economy which it will take many years to overcome.

The Gdansk Agreement of August 31, 1980 recognised the establishment of "new self-governing trade unions" as "authentic representatives of the working class". The formation and legal registration of Solidarity with its 9½ million members— followed by that of Rural Solidarity to represent three
million private farmers — represents something qualitatively new and without precedent in any socialist country.

Poland is today experiencing a crisis of hegemony. The Polish United Workers' Party, recognised in the constitution as the "leading political force in society in the construction of socialism", has committed itself to work for democratic renewal but is unable effectively to lead the people because it does not enjoy their confidence. The decisive forces in Solidarity and the Catholic Church, which do enjoy such confidence, do not aspire to become political parties taking over the leadership of the government from the PUWP.

In such a situation, the only hope for Poland would seem to lie in a historical compromise concluded between the PUWP, Solidarity and the Catholic Church to tackle the crisis on the basis of genuine socialist democracy and along the lines that can win the active support of the majority of the people.

The political system

The upheavals of 1980, like those of 1956 and 1970, represented the crisis of a certain model of socialism. On each occasion working class discontent, denied adequate channels of expression, had built up and finally burst out in explosions. They brought about changes in the Party leadership, important concessions and a denunciation of bureaucracy and of the autocratic practices of the previous Party secretary. Yet on each occasion, after a certain period, the pendulum swung back again to the same concentration of power.

The root of the trouble lies not in the character of individuals but in the nature of the power structures inherited from the Stalin period, within which successive Party leaders operated and enjoyed the corrupting fruits of uncontested power. What has been involved in Poland, as in other socialist countries, has been the subordination of all social and political organisations to an unchallengeable and irremovable governing Communist Party. The latter has, by an extension of the same process, been effectively subordinated to the Political Bureau and sometimes, within this, to the First Secretary and a small group around him.

The negative effects of this system in Poland reflected themselves in arbitrariness and growing corruption not only in the political sphere but equally in the economy subordinated to it. Lack of control from below not only deprived the working people of the democratic rights with which socialism promises to provide them in full measure. It also made for economic inefficiency and disregard for economic reality in general and the subordination of consumer interests and social welfare to capital accumulation. It deprived both the political system and the economy of the feedback mechanisms essential for preventing the accumulation of abuses, errors and the corruption that became so rife at all levels.

The Catholic Church, embracing 80 percent of the population, has in recent years represented an increasingly strong element of pluralism in Poland, although it has been anxious not to play any directly political role. The establishment and legal registration of the 9½ million Solidarity has, however, gone far beyond this in its effects on the country's effective power structure. It represents an exceptionally powerful pluralistic phenomenon unique in the socialist countries.

Whilst repudiating allegations of wishing to take power, Solidarity is most certainly an extremely strong pressure group acting on the existing organs of power at all levels and, in practice, introducing elements of dual power into the Polish political system.

While Solidarity's program resolution speaks of examining the need for setting up a second self-government or social-economic chamber alongside Poland's present single-chamber parliament (the Sejm) to supervise economic policy, "radical" elements in Solidarity demand such a second chamber, which would be controlled by Solidarity, as a political counterweight or opposition to the PUWP-controlled Sejm. Seen in such a
context, it could at best be a recipe for constitutional confusion and deadlock, and at worst a prescription for escalating political confrontation.

Meanwhile the Sejm, which for so long played the role of a rubber stamp to the PUWP and the government, has been exercising more and more legislative initiative, as did the Czechoslovak parliament during the Prague Spring. On more than one occasion the government and the PUWP have been forced to back down and modify their proposals in face of opposition from both backbench Communist members and from the non-Communist parliamentary groups. In October this secured both the retention of concessions made to Solidarity on the self-management bill and the withdrawal — at least for the immediate period ahead — of a proposal for a temporary ban on strikes.

**Parties and elections**

Poland has always been, at least nominally, a multi-party state. Two non-Communist parties exist alongside the PUWP, officially acknowledging its leadership, which has since 1976 been enshrined in the Constitution. The Sejm, elected in March 1980, comprises 258 PUWP members, 113 from the United Peasant Party, 38 from the Democratic Party and 48 non-party members including three small Catholic groups. The non-Communist groups are now playing an increasingly autonomous role, helping to enrich the hitherto normally dreary and predictable Sejm debates. Outside Parliament the non-Communist parties have more and more been taking independent stands on political issues.

Up till now, elections have always been held for both parliamentary and local elections on a single list of the National Unity Front, led by the PUWP and embracing all the abovementioned parties and groups. There is today widespread agreement not only in Solidarity but among all except the conservative minority in the PUWP on the desirability of changing this thoroughly discredited electoral system. Thus, on October 8, Hieronim Kubiak, Political Bureau member and Secretary of the Central Committee of the PUWP, said: "The elaboration of a new pluralist formula for the National Unity Front, of a new method of election and of a reorganisation of the legislative system in the spirit of self-management and the expansion of civil liberties is an important task. Under no circumstances can there be any question of restoring the pre-August 1980 order." However, specific proposals seem to have been put off till nearer March 1984 when the next parliamentary elections are due. It should not prove impossible for Solidarity and the PUWP to negotiate an agreement before then on a new democratic electoral system, which will give the electors a possibility of political choice.

For some time there have been moves in some circles to form new political parties. The idea of a "Polish Labour Party" (PPS), launched by Jerzy Milewski, a Solidarity expert in Gdansk, has support among some sections of Solidarity, whose congress, however, declined to sponsor it. In Warsaw, Jacek Kuron, a former leader of KOR-KSS, has been involved in forming a "Club of the self-governing Republic", which has been the subject of police investigations. The attitude of the PUWP leadership to all such attempts is at present very hostile. How much popular support such projects get will depend to no small extent on how far the Peasant and Democratic Parties develop as autonomous organisations and are seen as giving expression to the views of the most important sections of critical non-communist opinion.

Should the demand for a "Labour Party" obtain popular support, it would seem better to allow it to exist freely and legally and to confront its ideas and criticisms in open political debate. An extreme rightwing nationalist party like the Confederation of Independent Poland (KPN) might, however, require a different approach.

One of the most important points in the Gdansk Agreement stipulates: "The activity of the radio and TV and of the press and publications should serve for the expression of a diversity of ideas, views and opinions. It should be subject to public control." Very
considerable progress has been made since then in that direction. However, the insistence of the PUWP on its “right” to control the media provokes continuous clashes and resentment, as does the persistent refusal to allow Solidarity to publish a daily paper on the spurious grounds of paper shortage, whilst organisations with much less support are allotted paper for theirs. The PUWP’s break with the old authoritarian power structures would appear that much more decisive if it were to show itself less reluctant to extend to other popular forces the same democratic rights as communists everywhere demand for themselves.

Towards a historic compromise?

On the evening of November 4, Lech Walesa, Archbishop Glemp, the Catholic Primate of Poland, and General Jaruzelski met to discuss the formation of a Front of National Accord. Though at best only the first step in a long process, it could become the symbol of the desire of the three great social forces in Poland to lay a basis for working together for overcoming the crisis and democratising Polish society. This would be the perspective of a genuinely historic compromise.

This scenario would involve Solidarity giving up organising its activities in the expectation of a sharpening conflict with the government. Instead it would make proposals for social reform which would certainly compete with those of the PUWP. Such competition would, however, be seen as a necessary part of the working out of a compromise. The Catholic Church, as a conservative force in many social questions, would co-operate in the development of the socialist system. The PUWP would renounce any attempt to enforce its claim to exercise a leading role by administrative means and constitutionally prescribed privileges. Instead, it would struggle on different social and political levels to convince the population of its ideas and be prepared for the period ahead to give up claims to exclusive positions of political power.

One can assume that such a historic compromise would have to include agreement at least on the following planes:—

The attainment of a compromise on self-management would have to proceed from the interests of the majority of society, which requires both the renunciation of economic sectionalism and PUWP domination.

A social control over the media would have to be established, putting an end to their use as an instrument of ideological domination by the PUWP and guaranteeing access to all forces associated with the historic compromise.

Possibilities would have to be created for giving institutional expression to the increasing pluralism that has developed in Polish society. This would entail candidates in local and national elections no longer being only permitted to stand on a single list put forward by the PUWP-controlled National Unity Front. This would not necessarily involve the formation of new parties, but would allow for regional initiatives and would enable Catholic groups and the already existing parties to contest separately if they wished to.

However, a second scenario is also possible. Such a historic compromise does not come about. Inside Solidarity those trends which are really committed to seeking such a compromise do not succeed in carrying the day. The PUWP, under pressure from Moscow, shows itself unwilling to give up sufficient of its prerogatives to be able to reach an agreement acceptable to Solidarity. The present political and economic tension becomes even more acute. In such a situation those favoring a return to the old set-up force the PUWP to change its strategy. The inclusive moves towards co-operation with Solidarity are broken off in favour of an authoritarian approach to overcoming the crisis. The PUWP on its own takes charge of the economic reform, and prevents any further discussion on a pluralistic reform of the political system. Such a strategy would certainly rely on support from a section of the population, which has grown tired after
The Polish Crisis

nearly eighteen months of instability and disorder and is fed up with the inability of the Party and Solidarity to work together. This section of the population would be ready to abandon any comprehensive democratisation if the PUWP could convince them that it could at least effectively tackle the economic crisis. Such a solution would not be acceptable to the majority of Solidarity, as the attainment of its basic demands like access to the media, pluralistic reform of the electoral system and democratic participation in central economic planning would be blocked. Solidarity would therefore no doubt adopt a strategy of sharpened confrontation which would only leave the PUWP the option of suppressing the opposition movement, for example by mass arrests of strikers or the imprisonment of representatives of the "radical" wing of Solidarity.

The role of the army

Already today the importance of the army is increasing significantly, and could become crucial in enforcing authoritarian solutions either on behalf of the party or on its own account. For the first time in a socialist country a general holds the post of first secretary of the Party, along with that of prime minister and minister of defence. Alongside Jaruzelski, three other ministers are generals. At the end of October task forces of about 2,000 soldiers were given authority to go into the villages and take action to clear the supply lines and ease the shortages of food and other essentials, thereby taking over responsibilities of the local authorities. They were recalled after a month, but troops have now been sent into the towns for the same purpose. Both actions highlight the image of the army as the most — or perhaps only — efficient part of the state apparatus. At the time of writing, the PUWP Central Committee has just approved the drafting of a far-reaching Emergency Powers bill giving the government the right to ban strikes and meetings and extend the jurisdiction of military courts. It also appears to have watered down the idea of the Front of National accord. All this seems to increase the possibility of this second scenario, which could pave the way for a third and even more disastrous one.

The third scenario is a Soviet intervention, possibly on the invitation of a Polish government under pressure from within and without. Whilst Moscow has tolerated more far-reaching developments in Poland than would have been thought possible in July 1980, this does not mean that there are no limits. From the point of view of the Soviet Union four essential factors militate against an intervention. Firstly, unlike in Czechoslovakia, they would have to reckon with massive resistance in Poland. Secondly, the Soviet Union would create additional problems for its own economy by acquiring responsibility for the Polish economy. Thirdly, as a result of the ever more aggressive concepts of the US government there would be the danger because of Poland of an escalation of the two blocks on the military plane, not in central Europe but somewhere in the world. Fourthly, the growing success of the peace movement in Western Europe would be undone at a stroke.

The connection of developments in Poland with the development of the European left should be underlined. If the historic compromise that we have discussed can be achieved, it would give an enormous boost to the left forces that stand for a pluralistic socialism in Western Europe. An authoritarian "solution" or a Soviet intervention would give the rightwing ideologists ammunition for attacking socialism as being in principle hostile to democracy. However, the success of the West European peace movement in preventing the stationing of NATO medium range missiles could increase the tolerance of the Soviet Union towards pluralistic developments in Poland.

NOTES