

LABOR AND UNION IDENTITY IN POLAND:

1989-2000

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Executive Summary

Unionism in Poland is marked by the paradox of symbolically strong unions at the national level and poor outcomes in the workplace. The political dominance, since 1989, of Solidarity has led one observer to call Poland a “unionocracy.” During this same period, however, Polish unions have been unable to improve the conditions of their working-class constituents, who have suffered a dramatic decline in labor conditions and loss of influence in the workplace. The reality is thus a weak and quiescent labor movement in post-communist Poland, despite its prominence in the political leadership. The aim of this essay is to examine and account for the decline of unions in Poland since 1989. While structural changes and global economic pressures certainly constitute an important part of the explanation, the focus here will be on ideological factors – in particular, the pro-market sensibilities of unions themselves.

Introduction

Unionism in Poland is marked by the paradox of symbolically strong unions at the national level and poor outcomes in the workplace. Poland is, of course, the country whose name almost seems synonymous with strong unionism. The collapse of communism began with the emergence of the region's first independent trade union, Solidarity, and since 1989 that union has several times produced the country's political leadership. In 1989 Solidarity created the first non-communist government in Eastern Europe, and a year later union president Lech Walesa was elected president of Poland. After his defeat in 1995, only a couple of years elapsed before the union seemed to regain political power. When Solidarity Electoral Action (AWS) won parliamentary elections in Poland in 1997, it seemed the trade unions had won too.

Of course, AWS was not *just* a trade union organization. Over twenty different self-proclaimed right-wing groups and parties counted themselves as its official founders. Yet AWS was clearly led by a trade union. Marian Krzaklewski, the head of the Solidarity trade union, was the undisputed leader of AWS. Its other members were unable to enter parliament without union support, and knew it. After AWS won the elections, Krzaklewski chose the prime minister without even consulting other AWS deputies. With all this coming after the earlier experience of Walesa's presidency, it is no surprise that commentators began to speak about all-powerful trade unions. In the words of one observer, Poland had become a "unionocracy."¹

But what exactly is union strength? To argue convincingly that unions are strong, one must show that they are able and committed to improve the position of their constituents. Polish unions, however, have won little except the regular cooptation of their leaders. Since 1989, Polish unions have watched over a dramatic decline in labor conditions and a profound dismantling of worker influence. The litany of setbacks is well-known, particularly in the first

post-communist years: 1) A 30% decline in real wages from 1989-91; 2) The abolition of workers' self-management boards and a general decline in union influence; 3) Double-digit unemployment rates, reaching up to 25% in some regions; 4) The loss of hundreds of thousands of once-secure jobs, and the creation of new jobs often lacking basic health and safety conditions and frequently outside the legal economy altogether.

One might have expected workers to consolidate behind unions at a time like this, particularly given the legacy of Polish labor since 1980. Yet union membership dropped, as it did throughout the region. Asked who best represents their interests, workers regularly respond "no one." Even when the economy began growing again in 1995, unions did not recover their strength. Membership in Solidarity, for example, declined from about 2 million in 1995 to 1.2 by the end of the century. In the fast-growing private sphere, the tendency is toward no unions at all. Political leaders may have tried to ride trade union organizations to political power, reflecting unions' dominant position in civil society in the 1980s, but they have not done much to defend members' interests once there.

The aim of this essay is to examine and account for the decline of unions in Poland since 1989. While structural changes and global economic pressures certainly constitute an important part of the explanation, the focus here will be on ideological factors – in particular, the pro-market sensibilities of unions themselves. While unions are easy to form in Poland and there are plenty of them, I will speak here only about those that count: Solidarity, OPZZ (the former quasi-official union confederation created after Solidarity was outlawed), and Solidarity-'80 (the militant, nationalist split from Solidarity that gained some prominence beginning in 1992). Mainly, however, I talk about Solidarity, for despite its close connection to political power in the decade since 1989, and a smaller membership than OPZZ, it remains the main force of union

mobilization. OPZZ remains too hobbled by its past, saddled with a conservative local leadership of mostly older men with low-level managerial positions that makes it inadequate as an organ of labor protest. The growth of Solidarity-'80, meanwhile, has been restrained by a militancy out of touch with the popular mood. The story of Polish labor weakness and quiescence is largely the story of Solidarity.

Periodizing the Post-Communist Decade

Except for a short period between 1992-93, Solidarity has been intimately involved in governmental activity: first supporting it, then opposing it, then ostensibly running it. We can periodize the first post-communist decade as follows: the union attempt to impose market reform (1989-92); an interlude of budding class militancy (1992-93); and the turn to direct political engagement (1994-present, with 1997 as the moment of political victory). While the entire decade has been marked by a great deal of activity by Solidarity, as befits an organization with its unmatched symbolic resources,² the reality is that except for the moment between 1992-93, the union leadership has not sought to mobilize workers to win class benefits for labor. Instead, it has cashed in on Solidarity's renown to either push an ideological agenda or its own political ambitions. Though ever-present in the decade of transformation, unions have done little to improve the interests of workers as workers. The paradoxical reality is thus a weak and quiescent labor movement in post-communist Poland, despite its public prominence.

Let us look at the evolution of this labor movement, beginning with the breakthrough year of 1989. Unlike other countries in Eastern Europe, Poland experienced 1989 not as a time when independent unions were finally possible, but as the moment when they no longer seemed necessary. This, in any case, is how Solidarity interpreted the moment. It had focused so much

on the need for political transformation that at the moment of victory the union's economic aims seemed not only secondary but troublesome.

Having imbibed a stylized ideology according to which my enemy's enemy is my friend, Solidarity now heralded as the savior of today nothing other than the capitalist bogeyman of the past. In this view, the main danger to that new savior was the union's own members. At Solidarity's first National Commission meeting after the communist government fell, Lech Walesa explicitly appealed against the rebuilding of a strong Solidarity: "We will not catch up to Europe if we build a strong union."³ In the weeks ahead he argued the point repeatedly: we oppose a strong union because a strong union would oppose reform. "We cannot have a strong trade union," he announced, "until we have a strong economy."⁴

Walesa's position was not without its critics, but we see the seeds of union crisis even in that criticism. Wladyslaw Frasyniuk, the popular union leader from Wroclaw, argued *for* a "strong union," but only because he thought that was necessary to persuade people to accept market reform.⁵ Similarly, Warsaw union leader Zbigniew Bujak contended that only a "strong union" could ward off attacks from anti-reformers unwilling to impose the "tough economic decisions" lying ahead.⁶ Both Bujak and Frasyniuk had resisted entering parliament precisely because they believed in the need for a trade union. As their remarks made clear, however, they imagined a trade union only as an institution pushing the reform agenda on anyone who resisted it, whether workers, managers, or bureaucrats.

Instead of building a strong union, Solidarity set out to build a weak one, meaning a union that would follow the government as the latter pursued its painful economic reform. As a result, the new Solidarity emerged as a much smaller one than in the past. This was due to three

factors: a changing political environment, a changing intellectual consensus, and an unwillingness of unionists to recruit.

The new political environment itself refers to three developments. First, there is the obvious fact that with democratization a matter of fact, Solidarity membership no longer contributed to larger political goals. It also refers to the abolition of universal union membership, something introduced under the old regime. When the government in 1984 risked reviving trade unions in the aftermath of the first Solidarity experience, it broke with the traditional communist practice of encouraging (i.e., requiring) 100% employee membership. Many workers refrained from union membership and saw no need to rejoin just because Solidarity had reemerged. (There was considerable rank-and-file distrust of unions in general, as some suspected that Solidarity would now be simply the new “official” trade union.)

Finally, this new political environment meant that workers no longer saw the need to break with OPZZ. Without the burden of universal membership, OPZZ never functioned according to the standard “transmission belt” model of communist unionism. It even occasionally organized protests against governmental policies, a practice that accelerated after Solidarity and the party began their roundtable negotiations.

OPZZ therefore did not experience the kind of crushing existential blow that befell other communist-party unions at the time. Since there had been no compulsion to join, members felt little immediate need to flee. And since the structures remained intact, OPZZ held onto most of its resources, such as vacation homes and mutual aid funds. Unlike in 1980, workers in 1989 did not need to join Solidarity either to express their desire for systemic reform (it had already occurred), or to follow those who controlled all the resources (the old unions retained theirs).

The identity and resource mobilization factors that drove Solidarity's spectacular numbers in 1980 no longer applied at the end of the decade.

The changing intellectual consensus led to a smaller Solidarity because it meant that intellectuals and higher educated employees were no longer anxious to join trade unions. First, they too had other opportunities. Those who in the past had joined Solidarity to use as a battering ram against the constraints of the old system now had other ways to get ahead. Some joined the government, some business, and political activists joined the Civic Committees that were formed to contest the first elections.⁷

Besides not needing to join the union anymore, liberal intellectuals no longer wanted to. As the greatest converts to market ideology, vigorous proponents of "joining the West," they saw unions not only as no longer necessary for fighting communism, but as inappropriate to capitalism, too. Their flagship journal *Gazeta Wyborcza*, the daily newspaper formally associated with Solidarity until mid-1990, regularly presented unions as institutions of the past capable only of jeopardizing reform.⁸ We see here the widespread influence of Hayekian ideas on the opposition over the previous decade, the pervasiveness of a purist "free market" ideology that had little to do with the realities of the Europe they hoped to join.⁹ Those intellectuals who still saw some usefulness for unions, tended to see them as useful for blue collar workers only, certainly not for people like themselves. And so, Solidarity revived without the educated members of the past. Factory locals were still usually *run* by professionals, who correctly saw these posts as stepping stones to higher positions.¹⁰ But the Solidarity rank-and-file was now almost exclusively blue collar.

Of course, it no longer organized all blue-collar workers. As noted above, many stayed on with OPZZ. Many more, however, were non-unionized, either because they stayed unaligned

in the 1980s or because they were working in the new private enterprises that grew wildly after 1989. This was a difficult group to organize, including many workers in small shops or the new service sector not traditionally associated with unionism.

The point, however, is that no unions sought to organize any of these workers. This stemmed partly from a general belief, part of the new hegemonic pro-market ideology, that the private sector did not need trade unions. Survey evidence shows conclusively that Polish union leaders believe employee institutions, such as unions or works councils, are important in state-owned firms, not private ones.¹¹ The more important reason for the absence of organizing the unorganized – and this concerns the unaligned in traditional state firms as well – is an ingrained belief that it is unseemly, “unmanly,” and smacked too much of communism to solicit for new members.¹² “If they want to join, they’ll join,” a regional Solidarity leader in Rzeszow told me in 1993. “Asking people to join – that’s something the old system did, not us.”¹³ Continuing the struggle against communism, the unions helped to undermine themselves.

With a leadership afraid of a strong union movement, the new Solidarity emerged as a union committed to bringing about the new government’s overall plan of systemic reform. Intellectuals were not the only ones who had embraced a market economy; union activists did, too. They understood it to mean no more queues, the end of the nomenklatura system, and good pay for hard work. They also understood it as a more just system. Justice always entails a counter-systemic principle. If in capitalist societies this usually means balancing out capital’s dominance with a dose of state interventionism, in socialist societies it entails more emphasis on market mechanisms. As Ivan Szelenyi put it, “while under capitalism the market creates the basic inequalities and the administrative allocation of welfare modifies and moderates them slightly, under socialism the major inequalities are created by administrative allocation, and the

market can be used to reduce inequalities.”¹⁴ Lower-level Solidarity activists saw marketization as synonymous with reform and democracy, and understood tough economic times as the price to be paid for future prosperity.¹⁵

And so the much feared “social explosion” of the rank-and-file never happened. Besides the quelling effect of the pro-market, union-skeptical views discussed above,¹⁶ union activists were kept in line by organizational pressures and by post-communist specificities that made some forms of militancy compatible with subservience to new market rules.

Organizational pressure refers to the leadership’s insistence on towing the line. Such pressure was unavailable in 1980, when the nature of the conflict against the state meant that no one could be excluded from Solidarity. Democracy facilitates greater organizational discipline since excluded opponents are free to set up alternative organizations, thus reducing inhibitions against the exercise of discipline. The official Solidarity leadership began excluding opponents already before 1989, when Walesa kept his three militant 1981 rivals for the union presidency out of all new union bodies and kept western material aid out of their hands. This practice of exclusion continued after 1989 as well. The strategy worked: union militants left Solidarity and created their own organizations (most notably, “Solidarity ’80”). The message for those who remained was that union allegiance meant loyalty to the leadership’s moderate line.

Finally, labor unrest was contained by the post-communist peculiarity that makes acceptance of market reform not incompatible with certain forms of militancy. Support for neoliberalism in a post-communist context, after all, does not entail the kind of deference to management it does in a capitalist context. Rather, managers were seen as the problem to be overcome, and Solidarity saw itself as the force to overcome them. In this way, Solidarity

activists could continue to be “militant” even while fighting for a program that would reduce union influence.

Thanks to anti-communism, unionists who in a capitalist context might have mobilized against marketization mobilized instead against managers in the *name* of marketization. Solidarity was in fact actively involved in the enterprises in 1990, forcing the resignation of old managers, the election of new ones committed to privatization, and preparing plans for privatization themselves.¹⁷ Unions may have been quiescent in terms of defending labor interests, but they were not passive. They just used their energies to promote reform rather than obstruct it. When core militant workers protested, Solidarity turned against them in a flash. The only significant strike of 1990 occurred in the railways. The workers had a good case: they were protesting a peculiar provision that penalized them precisely for being moderate in the past.¹⁸ Nevertheless, national Solidarity denounced the strikers and got them to return to work without having won anything. Social protest was minimal, therefore, because workers’ representatives continually tried to prevent it.

Lech Walesa said shock therapy would cause a downturn for three months, and then things would get better. When they didn’t, labor discontent emerged, and Solidarity had to do something about it. Its strategy was to channel that discontent away from the new capitalist system and onto the old communist one. In this new view, articulated by Walesa in his campaign for president of Poland (a campaign itself intended to minimize anger against the new system), the problem was not capitalism but that there was not enough of it. “Real” capitalism was being blocked by enemies who must be uprooted.

Chief among the enemies were the old communists, against whom Walesa promised a radical lustration law. But “egghead intellectuals” were also targeted, and even, in a hint of a

nationalist-populist evolution of the movement, “Jews.”¹⁹ By diverting anger at the economic system toward personalized enemies, Solidarity maintained labor support for market reform, but at the price of promulgating a dangerous, vindictive political culture. When Walesa was himself caught up in a lustration crisis in 1992,²⁰ the working class anger that Walesa had diverted against “communists” now rebounded against him. With the economy still deep in recession, Solidarity could no longer use anti-communism to maintain labor discipline.

This became clear in the summer of 1992. Between July and August, workers in the auto, steel, copper, coal, and aircraft manufacturing industries all went on strike. Wages were the key issue: higher wages in auto and steel, simply getting their wages in the tottering aircraft industry. Despite rank-and-file anger with Walesa over the lustration issue, Solidarity still saw itself as the “protective parasol” for market reform, and immediately opposed the strikes as “contrary to labor’s interests.” Three years after 1989, these arguments had worn thin. Though some of these strikes were initiated by local Solidarity activists, the non-Solidarity unions (chiefly Solidarity ’80) soon emerged strong. They were not able to prevail. Opposition from Solidarity, pressure from the government, and small concessions by management led to a collapse of the strike wave by mid-September. But the forceful expression of discontent shook Solidarity, leading to a new stage of action.

No longer plausibly able to divert that anger, and unable to ignore it, Solidarity finally made that anger its own. For a short time, Solidarity became a militant organization championing workers’ economic interests rather than lecturing them on the need for restraint. The unions’ survival as a dominant social force hinged on this transition. And so in December 1992, it was Solidarity that organized a massive strike in the coal mines, bringing out some 180,000 miners throughout the country, making it the largest single coal strike in European

history. It ultimately settled without having won much for the miners, suggesting that its aim was more to demonstrate leadership in the workforce than to win gains for its members.²¹

In early 1993, Solidarity then brought hospital workers and teachers out on strike, precisely those sectors that had always refrained from striking in the past. In the every-sector-for-itself system of the past years, it was their reluctance to protest that led to their dramatic relative decline vis-à-vis other professions, and many blamed Solidarity for allowing it to happen. In compensation, Solidarity now organized a massive strike wave on their behalf, coming into direct conflict with the government and not turning back. When the government, still run by Solidarity-allied politicians, said pay hikes would break the budget, Solidarity parliamentarians fought to revise the budget. When the budget was passed anyway and the government refused to change it, Solidarity deputies tendered a vote of no confidence and the government fell by one vote.

The parasol, it seemed, had finally folded up. Solidarity had pushed an economic fight to the point of ousting a government of pure Solidarity pedigree. And perhaps, if the Solidarity-affiliated parties had won the new elections, the union would have continued its new practice of acting like a proper union. But the 1993 elections brought the Union of the Democratic Left (SLD), led by former communists, to power, and Solidarity entered into its third phase.

This phase has seen a decisive turn to direct political engagement, and further away from economic trade-unionism. It began with Solidarity turning from hostility to government policy to hostility to the government per se. With its old enemy in power, Solidarity now denounced every government initiative regardless of what it was, even those that were clearly pro-labor. When the new government raised public sector pay, increased retirement pensions, granted employees more free shares of their privatized firms, cracked down on employer violations of

labor law, and energetically convened a tripartite commission headed by a respected former Solidarity underground activist whom the SLD specially invited for the job – Solidarity found ways to denounce the government. Virtually everything Solidarity had asked the liberals to do, and then ousted for not doing, the SLD now did, and Solidarity never forgave them.

The government's more pro-union position stemmed both from its quest for legitimacy and its own considerable union base. Solidarity may not have had a single party representing it but OPZZ did: over one-fourth of SLD deputies were OPZZ unionists. Aware that it needed to reach out to Solidarity to gain broader social legitimacy, the government made a number of gestures. Immediately upon coming to power, the new Labor minister offered to travel to Gdansk to meet with the Solidarity leadership. But the union spurned this like it did most SLD offers.

Solidarity was guided both by ideological enmity and simple electoral logic. The political fragmentation of the right (Solidarity proudly considered itself a “right-wing” organization), combined with an electoral law promoting large parties, had meant that only one rightist party broke the 5% threshold for entry into parliament. Almost a third of the electorate had its vote wasted. As the only right-wing political group with local organization and name recognition, Solidarity saw itself as the only force that could defeat the communists. And so it turned from its budding class agenda back into the anti-communist movement it once was.

If a pro-union party had succeeded in organizing workers, the union might have been able to embrace a more limited union role. The liberals who ran Solidarity in 1989 had the best chance of creating such a party. They had engineered the spectacular electoral victory of June 1989 with enormous working-class support, and were well-placed to continue to get their votes, provided they proffered a program that spoke to labor's needs and offered even symbolically to

include them. But those leaders, who went on to form the Democratic Union, and then the Freedom Union, saw their historical role as representing the interests of a nascent bourgeoisie instead. Labor for them was the group doomed to suffer for the foreseeable future, and the liberals' gentlemanly cult of "honesty" compelled them to tell workers this "truth" and to legislate it into being.

Far from trying to organize labor discontent and direct it toward liberal democratic ends, by encouraging participation or getting workers involved in party work, the liberals simply ignored workers. When I asked a Democratic Union leader in a small, declining industrial city in 1993 what it was doing to win the votes of townspeople whose livelihoods were threatened, he replied, simply, "nothing." The "reality," he continued, was that "we have nothing to offer them; their lives are only going to get worse." In this way, workers were left without a party to call their own. And Solidarity was pushed onto the political road.

The union's first response to the SLD victory was to try to promote conflict. It sought to turn every local conflict into a war aimed at ousting the government. When there were no local workplace conflicts, the union initiated political ones. Identity issues more and more replaced economic ones: Solidarity denounced the government for proposing an "atheistic" Constitution and seeking to liberalize abortion. (The fight against a woman's right to abortion all but consumed the Solidarity leadership in 1996.) It called for a tough anti-communist lustration law and for greater Church involvement in public life. Virtually the only economic issue it campaigned for was a "universal privatization" scheme giving employees a one-shot windfall as their share of privatized state assets. Even this had a clear pro-market pedigree: workers were to be empowered as potential investors or consumers, not as workers. On workplace issues or organizing the unorganized, Solidarity remained silent.

In 1995, the union put most of its energies into defeating SLD candidate Aleksandr Kwasniewski for president. When Kwasniewski won anyway, it turned its attention to building its own political party to recapture power from the communists. In 1997, Solidarity attracted a couple of dozen small right-wing parties that had failed to pass the 5% threshold and formed the “Solidarity Electoral Action” (AWS) coalition. Emphasizing nationalist, religious, and anti-communist issues rather than union ones, but deploying Solidarity locals as their campaign committees, AWS won parliamentary elections and took control in a coalition government with the third-place Freedom Union.

The late 1990s would see cries of “unionocracy” by political pundits, but far from proffering policy beneficial to unions, the AWS government initiated measures weakening union power, particularly in health and education, and passed legislation detailing conditions for the virtual liquidation of the mining sector. Union officials were indeed influential in government, but their policy emphasized “Christian values” and lustration, not union power or improvements for labor.

Formally speaking, the Solidarity trade union remained separate from AWS. But the union for the most part refrained from challenging the political authorities. When the AWS government introduced painful reforms in health and education, only the non-Solidarity unions responded with protests. In the growing private sector, Solidarity continued to discourage union organization, arguing that nothing should be done to hinder the introduction of new capital, especially foreign capital.²²

In 1999, four prominent Polish industrial sociologists published a volume on trade unions titled *Collapse of the Bastion?* The signs of demise were evident everywhere. Even as the economy grew, membership declined. Part of the problem, as just noted, was the creation of a

union-free private sector. Even the “Unionocracy” article admitted that union “influence in new private firms ... is practically nil.”²³ Scholarly research is clearer on the matter. In *Collapse of the Bastion*, Juliusz Gardawski shows that there are barely any unions in new private firms and that they “are undergoing steady erosion” in firms preparing for privatization (the so-called “commercialized” firms). In firms founded after 1989, only 17% had trade unions.²⁴ Only in state firms were unions holding their own. In other words, unions survive only with the property form of the past.

Members are leaving, and new ones aren’t joining. All unions have had a problem recruiting young workers. A Solidarity official trying to form a Youth Section in Gdansk, the heartland of the union, had to give it up “because there were not enough people willing to take part.”²⁵ Although “Solidarity-‘80” has managed to arouse some interest among younger workers, most union members are over 40 years of age.²⁶

Tripartism

Contrary to the immediate post-1989 period elsewhere in Eastern Europe, no one even proposed tripartism in Poland. The coming to power of Solidarity meant that its activists went into positions of state power, and saw no need to formally negotiate with unions whose interests they considered themselves to be representing. If unions had demanded a formal tripartite body, it certainly could have gotten one. But Walesa committed Solidarity to supporting government policy, and OPZZ, anxious to demonstrate new moderate credentials, followed suit. Nor did any demands come from parliament: between 1989-91 parliamentary opposition was entirely in the hands of the ex-communists, who neither wanted to boost a union movement that Solidarity was about to control, nor do anything (such as seeming overly sympathetic to trade unions) that might

challenge their new pro-market image. On the front page of the *Solidarity Weekly*, a leading union activist urged workers in the new era to “learn that their wages and jobs depend on productivity; that their salaries are a function of the talents and capabilities of the managers ...; and that the general state of our factories depends on the level of the cadre governing the firm.”²⁷ Tripartism is often seen by governing elites as a way of preserving social peace, but in this situation no one proposed tripartism because no one needed to. The unions made it clear that they were going to discipline themselves.

Unions had access to political decision-makers. Bonds of friendship and informal obligations allowed Solidarity unionists to come to Warsaw and demand – and receive – visits with top government officials. Most of them came to discuss the situation of their own particular firm, such as why it should get additional subsidies, why it should be allowed to raise wages without being taxed, or why it should be privatized in a particular way. (Union officials often worked together with management on these issues, leading some critics to see them merely as management’s tool.)²⁸

Anxious to demonstrate a new democratic style, officials met with OPZZ too, when the latter demanded it.²⁹ Contacts, therefore, were maintained by informal, ad-hoc, bilateral negotiations. Unions had a right to comment on legislation affecting them, but no institutional forms ensured this would happen. When it did, the unions were often unprepared to take advantage, since their own experts had gone over to the other side – including about 95% of Warsaw Solidarity experts. One journalist tells the story of a meeting of the Solidarity Presidium to work out the union’s position on an indexation bill before parliament: the union was unable to decide anything because “all its experts on this question had in fact joined the Ministry of Labor.”³⁰ Other unions also had the right to comment, but government officials did not take

them seriously, OPZZ because of its old-regime ties, and Solidarity-'80 because of its renegade status. Talking with unions meant talking with Solidarity, and since the latter did not pursue this, there were few organized consultations at all.

Only after the strike wave of 1992 did the government see the need for regular, institutionalized contact with trade unions. Labor Minister Jacek Kuron proposed a "Pact on State Enterprises" that included the creation of a tripartite commission. It began its work in January 1994. The first experiences were not promising. Solidarity refused to coordinate any positions with OPZZ, the newly elected government did not yet have a program for which it sought societal approval, and continuing wage controls meant that the employers' organization, which in any case represented only a tiny portion of employers, had no power to discuss what was most important to workers.

Solidarity had supported the establishment of the commission earlier in the year, but after the elections it turned its focus to toppling the government, not making deals with it. Tripartite meetings dragged on inconclusively until the public sector deal in early 1995. For the next two years, tripartism, along with an economy finally starting to grow, served to limit labor unrest. This is evident in the dramatic drop in the number of strikes – from 429 strikes with 211,000 participants in 1994 to 42 strikes and 18,000 strikers a year later.³¹

In 1997, with parliamentary elections pending, Solidarity refused to sign any more deals. When AWS won those elections, far from continuing with tripartism, union leaders reverted instead to their pre-1989 (and very Bolshevik) position that since the government represented union interests, it did not need formalized contacts with union representatives. Tripartism limped on, barely, until the new government's lack of interest precipitated OPZZ to walk out in 1999. According to one union negotiator, AWS ministers would come to tripartite meetings

saying they would not negotiate government proposals but only take questions.³² By the end of 1999, tripartism had fallen into such desuetude that an embarrassed government minister called for a special meeting to revive it. The government needed this, it seemed, more in order to mollify the EU and ILO than to work with the trade unions.

Possible Objections

There are two major objections to the claim about union weakness in Poland. The first points to the presence of unionists in government ever since 1989 and argues (or assumes) that unions exert influence through these personal connections. The second focuses on the large number of labor protests, and contends that labor has won concessions in enterprises and in public policy alike by its persistent presence in civil society.

The first objection has been a familiar refrain. Although it proved false in the first years after 1989 – Solidarity’s power clearly did not prevent the government from introducing radical market reform – it resurfaced again during the AWS administration. In 1999, Transport Minister Eugeniusz Morawski resigned because, he said, trade unions had too much control over the rail industry: “I cannot accept a situation where unions control the national railways,” he said in 1999, announcing its resignation.³³ Suddenly the alleged power of trade unions became the topic of the day. The influential weekly *Polityka* ran a cover story titled “Unionocracy” without even a question mark. Its first line: “Poland is governed by trade unions.”³⁴

The problem here is a false identification of unionists’ power and union power. Controversy over the transport minister’s resignation, for example, exclusively concerned the number of unionists (some “with only a secondary education,” the press emphasized) who had taken key leadership positions in the rail industry.³⁵ That unionists get jobs in companies and

ministries does not mean that the latter act on behalf of labor, but only that some individuals have used political connections to get management jobs. Solidarity has been a stepping stone into business and government ever since the Round Table accords of 1989. It has also been chiefly responsible for maintaining labor's acceptance of painful economic reform. Unionists as individuals may get clout thanks to national connections, but when they are unable to stop a steady deterioration of union influence and labor conditions, and when they do not even seek to organize the private sector, it is difficult to talk of union strength.

In his influential piece in *Polityka*, Mariusz Janicki also pointed to organizational aspects of union power. Unions are easy to form, go on strike whenever they feel like it and without regard for the law, and treat any challenge as an intolerable sign of disrespect for the movement that brought down communism. "Unions," he concludes, "constitute virtually a separate state."³⁶ Rather than seeing such organizational privileges as a sign of strength, however, I would suggest that we see them as a historical peculiarity of the Polish corporate governance structure.³⁷ My point is not that unions don't have a special position in Poland, but that they have not used this position to promote labor's economic interests, and have frequently even used it *against* those interests.

It is true that unions are easy to create: all you need is ten employees signing a union registration form. Old legislation still on the books gives unions the right to have full-time union officials paid for by the company, depending on the number of members. It mandates that companies consult unions on layoffs, and gives unions the right to question any layoffs. But these rules signify nothing other than that institutions called trade unions have long been involved in Polish enterprise management.

Union participation in corporate governance is partly a legacy of the past, when unions were a key part of the enterprise because the latter was the place where social benefits were administered and unions did much of the administering. It is also due to the particularities of post-communist capitalist transition: in the first years after 1989, managers usually supported unions in their protests against Warsaw, or even initiated such protests, since this was a way to help enterprises get capital. In the competition for funds or favors, such as debt forgiveness, Solidarity unions had clout where managers still did not. Having clout does not mean they use it on behalf of their employees. In one factory where I did research in 1993-94, company officials talked with unionists all the time. Then they went and did what they wanted to in the first place. (“We bargained with unionists over wage policy,” the personnel manager, himself a Solidarity member, told me in 1994, “and when they wouldn’t sign the deal we presented them with, we implemented the deal ourselves.”)³⁸ In the end, unions have helped get things done for the factory, not for workers. They remain part of the enterprise structure, not an autonomous source of employee strength.

The *Polityka* piece also pointed to the prominence of labor protest, a theme stressed in recent scholarly work by Ekiert and Kubik and Maryjane Osa.³⁹ The question, however, is not whether there is protest but what the protests are actually about. The common assumption is that protest entails strength and defiance. Much of the time, however, Solidarity has led protests not in order to lead workers but to *contain* them. I have visited many manufacturing firms where Solidarity leaders explained that yes, they “led” a strike at their plant, but only because their members were demanding that someone do something (for example, about non-payment of wages), and they, the union leaders, wanted to make sure that the membership stays loyal to

them. What appears in newspapers and in the public imagination as Solidarity-sponsored protests may only refer to a union seeking to *demobilize* discontent.

One might also ask whether frequent rallies and protests are a sign not of strength but of weakness. Power, after all, is best exercised out of the public eye. Business interests are hardly less likely to be met just because they don't stage rallies in front of the Sejm. Miners have staged more strikes and protest action than any other group in Poland, but mines are being closed down all the same – perhaps more slowly than if there hadn't been any protests, but then all that can be said is that miners have been able to negotiate the terms of their own demise.

Unions have not disappeared in Poland. Historical legacies and the weakness of the party system keep them in the center of public attention. The bottom line, however, is that unions have used their enormous resources not to fight economically on behalf of labor, or even to create the kind of solid class identity that might help labor when post-communist primitive accumulation comes to an end. Their chief accomplishment has been to smooth the transformation into a liberal market economy by diverting labor anger onto “safe” targets. Successive cohorts of unionists have ridden this anger into power for themselves, but not into any lasting, long-term power for trade unions as organizations defending the interests of labor.

References

¹ Mariusz Janicki, “Związkokracja,” in *Polityka*, December 12, 1998, p.3.

² By symbolic resources I mean the assets an organization can attract by virtue of its historical associations and name recognition. Chief among such assets is the free and unlimited publicity for what the leaders of such an organization do in its name. This is an undertheorized topic in social movement theory; where it is more common to talk about how symbols are mobilized by movements (Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998], ch.7) than on how post-movement institutions cash in on the symbols of the past.

³ Cited by Pawel Lawinski, in “Ile Wytrzymacie?,” in *Tygodnik Solidarnosc* No.18, September 29, 1989, p.2.

⁴ Interview with *Gazeta Wyborcza*, cited in *Tygodnik Solidarnosc*, October 20, 1989, p.23.

⁵ See endnote 3.

⁶ Zbigniew Bujak, “Chcialbym zachowac niezalezna pozycje,” in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, No. 2, May 9, 1989, p.5.

⁷ On the Civic Committees, Tomek Grabowski, “The Party That Never Was: The Rise and Fall of the Solidarity Citizens’ Committees in Poland,” in *East European Politics and Societies* 10:2, Spring 1996, pp. 214-54.

⁸ See, for example, the coverage of a miners strike in January 1990, filled with derision for the strikers’ comportment and an attempt to portray them as unruly and unreasonable characters with whom “modern” citizens have nothing in common. We are told by the author, who not long ago wrote encomiums to unions in the underground press, that the strikers behave generally as hooligans, trying to bring in vodka into the plant and cursing their leaders (just the kind of story told by the communist authorities in the past), but we are not told about the conditions that led to the strike. Grzegorz Gorny, “Strajk gornikow,” in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, January 22, 1990.

⁹ Hayek’s works were published extensively by the underground press and distributed through Solidarity channels. This excitement went beyond Poland; see Hilary Wainwright’s description of coming to post-communist Czechoslovakia and finding Hayek on every student’s lips. (*Arguments for a New Left* [London: Verso, 1992]).

¹⁰ Solidarity leaders at the large Ursus Tractor Plant in Warsaw and the WSL Aircraft Manufacturing Plant in Mielec, for example, quickly went on to become directors of their respective firms. Many other post-1989 profession union leaders became government administrators.

¹¹ See David Ost and Marc Weinstein, “Unionists Against Unions: Towards Hierarchical Management in Post-Communist Poland,” in *East European Politics and Societies* 13:1, Winter 1999.

¹² “If they want to join, they’ll join,” a regional Solidarity leader in Rzeszow told me in 1993. “Asking people to join – that’s just something we don’t do. The old system did that.”

¹³ The AFL-CIO began a recruitment education program for Solidarity in 1993, teaching unions how to organize new members, but the program declined when the union turned its energies toward political organizing instead.

¹⁴ Ivan Szelenyi, *Urban Inequalities Under State Socialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p.11.

¹⁵ Ost and Weinstein, op. cit., also see survey results published by Juliusz Gardawski, *Robotnicy 1991* (Warsaw: Friedrich Ebert Foundation, 1992); and (together with Tomasz Zukowski) *Robotnicy 1993* (Warsaw: Friedrich Ebert Foundation, 1994). Also, see his *Poland's Industrial Workers on the Return to Democracy and Market Economy* (Warsaw: Friedrich Ebert Foundation, 1996).

¹⁶ The belief that hard work without union rights leads to good outcomes followed in part from Poles’ widespread experience as illegal laborers in the West, where they worked tough jobs without any benefits or protection for wages that, though a pittance in the “guest” country, turned to gold when brought back home. Because of a relatively liberal visa policy, Poland supplied more black market labor to the West than any East European country except Yugoslavia.

¹⁷ See Janusz Dabrowski, Michael Federowicz, and Anthony Levitas, “Polish State Enterprises and the Property of Performance: Stabilization, Marketization, Privatization,” in *Politics and Society* 19:4, December 1991, pp. 403-38.

¹⁸ Rail workers had refrained from striking in 1989, when other core sectors won wage increases, largely due to a pervasive ethos proscribing strikes in sectors of generalized public use such as transport, health, and education. Other workers had struck for them in 1980, but not in the new, more individualist era of 1989. When the government passed a law indexing wage increases according to pay levels of late 1989, rail workers lost out since their failure to strike meant they had failed to win the wage increases other workers had. They struck in order to rectify this injustice, demanding average rail wages be set at 116% of the national average. See Kazimierz Kloc, “Przyczyny i Przebieg Strajku na PKP w maju 1990,” in *Studia nad Ruchami Społecznymi*, vol. 5 [Warsaw: Institute of Sociology, Warsaw University, 1990], pp. 159-201.)

¹⁹ Mirosława Grabowska and Ireneusz Krzeminski (eds.), *Bitwa o Belweder* (Warsaw: Mysl, 1991); on Jews, see Konstanty Gebert's chapter “Rola antysemizmu.”

²⁰ Walesa was accused by the Interior Minister of being a former communist “collaborator.”

²¹ See Wojciech Blaziak, “Gorniczy Strajk Generalny na Slasku,” in Marek Szczepanski, ed., *Gornicy Gornoslascy -- ludzie zbedni, ludzie luzni?* (Krakow: amp, 1994).

²² When GM opened a new greenfield site in Gliwice in November 1998, local Solidarity officials told me they saw no need to try to unionize the plant. The notion that private capital

might work more effectively with unions than without apparently makes more sense to West European capitalists than to East European unionists.

²³ Mariusz Janicki, “Związkokracja,” in *Polityka*, December 12, 1998.

²⁴ Juliusz Gardawski, “Zasięg związków zawodowych w wybranych działach przemysłu i sekcjach usług publicznych,” in Gardawski et. al., *Rozpad Bastionu?* (Warsaw: Instytut Spraw Publicznych, 1999).

²⁵ See “Juniorzy,” in *Magazyn Solidarnosc* No.10, October 1996, p.5.

²⁶ No precise figures are available, but union activists and industrial sociologists both agree that this is the case.

²⁷ Wojciech Arkuszewski, “Od gory do dolu” [From top to bottom], in *Tygodnik Solidarnosc*, Sept. 22, 1989.

²⁸ “Unionists would come in for negotiations,” said Jan Litynski, a Solidarity parliamentary leader in 1990, “and there’d always be some guy sitting in the back not saying anything. And it would always turn out to be the director!” Personal conversation, October 1998.

²⁹ OPZZ of course had better access to SLD officials, but the powerlessness of the latter in the first post-communist years made pursuing such contacts hardly worthwhile.

³⁰ Anna Bikont, “Zwyciezyl i cos peklo,” in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, January 29, 1990, p.5.

³¹ *Rocznik Statystyczny 1995 and 1998* (Warsaw: GUS). Totals were as follows:

	<u>No. of strikes</u>	<u>No. of strikers</u>
1990	250	115,687
1991	305	221,547
1992	6351	752,472
1993	7443	383,222
1994	429	211,442
1995	42	18,114
1996	21	42,250
1997	35	14,210

³² Conversation with Ewa Tomaszewska, June 1999.

³³ Quoted in *Trybuna*, “Tak chciala S,” November 25, 1998, p.1.

³⁴ Mariusz Janicki, “Związkokracja,” in *Polityka*, December 12, 1998.

³⁵ Two Solidarity union leaders had entered the company’s managerial board (*zarzad*), six local officials became regional directors, and these officials appointed their buddies to other positions. See Mieczyslaw Wodzicki, “Kadrowe trzesienie na torach,” in *Trybuna*, November 24, 1998.

³⁶ Janicki, op. cit., p.3.

³⁷ Michal Federowicz, "Pojecie 'corporate governance' w odniesieniu do przemian ustrojowych," paper presented at conference on "Socjologia gospodarcza *sensu largo*," Lodz, February 1999. The term refers to the way enterprise management guarantees smooth decision-making and capital flow in reality, as opposed to legality.

³⁸ Interview in Mielec, May 1994.

³⁹ Grzegorz Ekiert and Jan Kubik, "Contentious Politics in New Democracies: East Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, 1989-1993," in *World Politics* 50, July 1998, pp. 547-81; and *Rebellious Civil Society: Popular Protest and Democratic Consolidation in Poland* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999). Maryjane Osa, "Contention and Democracy: Labor Protest in Poland, 1989-1993," in *Communist and Postcommunist Studies* 31:1, 1998, pp.29-42.