

Poland

'A bitter cup overflows'

By Anna Schultz

Anna Walentynowicz, 50 years old and a mother of two, has worked in the Lenin Shipyards in Gdansk, Poland, for 30 years as a welder and crane operator. An outspoken fighter for an independent union and harassed for some time by the shipyard management because of it, Mrs. Walentynowicz was fired last month when she went on sick leave.

A week later, at 6 a.m. Aug. 14, two shops firing. By 11 a.m. the entire yard of 16,000 workers was out, a strike committee formed and the demands of the strike had multiplied.

Though it is a little publicized fact, Anna Walentynowicz's dismissal thus became a catalyst for the newest and most powerful strike wave ever to sweep Poland as half-a-million workers brought over 500 factories to a grinding halt in the country's Baltic Coast region.

At the time of this writing, strike leaders, having won major concessions from the government, have declared an end to the 17-day strike. The main demands the workers voiced and won—the right to form independent trade unions and to strike, as well as the opening up of state-controlled media to a wider variety of opinion—took aim at the very heart of Party chieftain Gierek's brand of "socialism."

STRIKERS' POWER

The signing of the accord demonstrated the tremendous power wielded by the strikers. It was in effect an unprecedented admission by the Polish authorities that the workers' rights had not been guaranteed by a government which itself professes to be run "in the workers' interests."

With the strikers back to work the big question that remains is, will the government remain true to its promises? Three times in post-World War II history—in 1956, 1970 and 1976—Poland's workers rose in protest of economic conditions. Each time they won significant concessions, twice even bringing down the leadership. But each time, the government reneged on many of its promises and gradually most of the key gains were reversed.

Today the workers remember only too well the Poznan uprising in 1956 when 5,000 spontaneously-formed workers councils gained official recognition. Only two years later they were once again state and party-run. The little power they had was eventually eliminated to the point where today they serve primarily as disciplinary bodies to deal with absenteeism and the like. Workers call them "a fifth tire on a car."

This time around, the workers once again demonstrated their muscle; and there were new political casualties, including the dismissal of the Prime Minister and three other



POLISH STRIKE LEADER Lech Walesa is paraded on workers' shoulders in Gdansk after signing agreement to end walkout.

ruling Politburo members. In fact, the struggle was even more widespread than in previous upheavals, better organized and more explicitly political.

Nevertheless, the workers are cautious. As one striker put it, "We don't want to have to go on strike every 10 years to put things right again." They know that it is going to be a fight all the way to keep the new independent unions truly effective.

Among the other gains won by the strikers were moderate wage increases. These economic demands are in no small way related to the present economic crisis Poland is in. The symptoms of this crisis translated into the everyday lives of the Polish people, have meant long lines in front of stores, shortages of meat and other foods and of housing, rotating electricity brownouts, public transportation breakdowns, etc.

The factors contributing to this crisis, which is said to be the worst since the immediate post-war period, are many.

Part of the problem began when Gierek came to power in 1970 and launched a crash program of industrial expansion that relied heavily on loans from the West. As a result, Poland today has a national debt of \$20 billion, making it the most indebted country of the entire Eastern Bloc. When the recent Western recession hit and tariffs went up, Poland's overcentralized and inflexible management system was unable to respond and Polish leaders had a full-fledged economic crisis on their hands.

Yet another factor contributing to the crisis is Poland's abnormal economic dependence and unequal trade relationship with the Soviet Union. Poland, for instance, buys 80% of its

oil from the USSR. Though the prices are below world market, trade is carried out strictly on Soviet terms. If the quota is exceeded, Poland, like the USSR's other trade partners, is forced to pay on the spot market at world prices.

Because Poland must pay for its oil and other commodities from the USSR with goods, it has been less able to rely on exporting goods to the West to obtain badly needed capital to repay its debts.

Yet another concession of the government was a promise to consider the abolition of "commercial shops" where items like meat are available at prices far over the normal level. The workers' demands had focused attention on the special privileges enjoyed by security personnel and Communist Party members in the form of higher allowances and access to these exclusive specialty shops.

One striker, Marian Zaczek, described the emergence of what he called the "red bourgeoisie," whom these specialty shops cater to:

"After the war they started out well in Poland with most people being more or less equal, but then it fell apart. Now it is the rich getting richer—I mean our privileged people—and the rest of us getting poorer. There has to be some kind of control over those who are ruling. There is a bunch of people who are surrounded by the police and military and they do whatever they want."

One has only to contrast Mr. Zaczek's observations with those of American correspondent Anna Louise Strong writing in the post-war Poland and one begins to get an idea of some of the fundamental changes that have taken place in the country, both in its social system and the class that is in power today:

"For the ordinary Polish citizen the meaning of democracy was that Nazi race slavery is over... so that every citizen must pitch in. It meant energetic peasants organizing committees, coming to congresses in Lublin, going home to divide the land. It meant workers in factories organizing trade unions, sending delegates to city councils. It meant all kinds of people shouting and organizing new ideas."

What the Polish strikes have shown is a growing awareness among the workers that ultimately economic and political power can rest in their hands again as it did in the early days of socialist Poland, before the Soviet rulers consolidated their domination of this country.

This could be seen in the workers' determination to resist in the face of strong governmental pressure and implicit calls for restraint by the influential Roman Catholic Church. The church also tried to appear as a moderating influence on the strike by expressing sympathy for the workers.

Above all, the workers defied the threat of Soviet intervention... the presence of two Soviet armored divisions inside Poland; the Warsaw Pact maneuvers that will take place 60 miles from the strike-bound region Sept. 8-13, and perhaps most of all, the USSR's past record in dealing with unrest in Eastern Europe. One needs only to recall the invasion and occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968 to comprehend the strikers' courage.

WORLD SUPPORT

This is perhaps the main reason why the Polish workers' strikes won so much sympathy and admiration the world over. In this country, the most obvious examples of support have been Polish-American rallies, such as the one in Chicago Aug. 23 which drew 10,000 and the longshoremen's boycott of cargo coming from and going to Poland.

President Carter also warned against Soviet interference in Poland and expressed support for the Polish workers' struggle. (Of course, this same President who is so concerned for "genuine trade union rights" in a country tens of thousands of miles away and under Soviet domination, has himself not hesitated to sign strike-breaking injunctions against workers in this country, as he did in the railroad workers and miners walkouts.)

The strikes in Poland are also significant in that they may prove to be a preview of what is to come in other Eastern European countries and certainly will serve as impetus to the other workers' movements in this region.

This especially worries the Soviet authorities, who jammed Western broadcasts on the Polish situation to the USSR for the first time since 1973. What the state-controlled media told the Soviet people about the strikes has come in the form of diluted and brief reports.

For Moscow, the strikes in Poland are a sign of growing instability in what the Soviet Union likes to consider its "reliable rear area"—Eastern Europe. To Brezhnev and Co. a cohesive Warsaw Pact is crucial to its worldwide expansionist ventures, which have as of late included Afghanistan and Kampuchea, among other countries.

The Polish workers have in their struggle demonstrated how deep their grievances with the Polish state go. As Mrs. Walentynowicz, who was elected to the 13-member strike committee board at Lenin Shipyard, explained, "Many people say I was the cause, but I was only one little drop that caused a bitter cup to overflow."

At the same time, the Polish workers' victory testifies to the new strength they have found in their resistance, in their numbers and in their unity.

