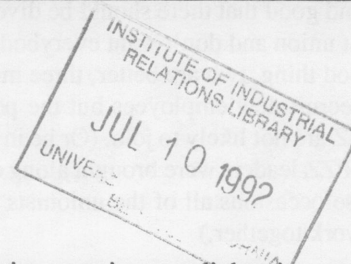


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SOLIDARNOSC FOREVER?



by Marty Morgenstern

Last year, through the efforts of Clark Kerr, former President of the University of California and the first director of Cal Berkeley's Institute of Industrial Relations, the Institute received money from University sources (\$25,000 each from the offices of University President and the Chancellor of the Berkeley campus) for a project undertaken on behalf of the members of Poland's Solidarnosc trade union. The goal is to develop and deliver labor education courses similar to those offered to U.S. workers, but adopted to the Polish situation.

In order to gain an understanding of the union and the society with which we would be working, Professors Clair Brown (Economics Department, and Associate Director of the Institute) and Lloyd Ulman (former Director of the Institute and also an economist), Don Vial (former Chair of the Labor Center and the California Public Utilities Commission) and I visited Poland for two weeks this past May. This article reports on that trip, with emphasis on the unique structure and politics of the Solidarnosc union.

Some Highlights of the Trip

We arrived in Warsaw on May 12, where we were met by Jaroslaw Zielinski, Head of Education for Solidarnosc, who, along with several members of his staff, came down from the union's national headquarters in Gdansk to outline their plan for our project. Arrangements were made for us to spend three days in Warsaw, then travel to Wroclaw and Katowice, the capitol cities of the regions of lower and upper Silesia respectively, (these two regions have fully half of Solidarnosc's members between them) and then to meet with Zielinski again in Gdansk. This idea was to get a feel for the training needs of the union across a broad geographic spectrum.

It was a fascinating experience, enlightening, surprising and in some ways, more than a little confusing. We met with the Solidarnosc regional leaders in each of the four cities, and in each city we were able to visit several workplaces and meet with members of the Solidarnosc factory commissions and other workers and managers.

We spent two days at the huge URSUS tractor factory near Warsaw, scene of the first big Solidarnosc strike outside of Gdansk, and, in Upper Silesia, we went 415 meters underground at the Andaluzja mine, where 37 union miners were fired for leading a strike/sit-in in 1988. We breathed foul fumes in a foundry that produces valuable ferrachrome, but endangers its workers (who are therefore entitled to 26 free extra vacation days annually in the company sanitarium) and threatens the water supply in the city of Wroclaw. In Gdansk we toured the famous shipyard where Solidarity was born on August 14, 1980, and, at the invitation of local leaders, photographed the Soviet military ships under construction, before moving on to inspect the harbor facility. Finally, two of us had a photo opportunity with Lech Walesa himself.

Some Surprising Things We Learned

Solidarnosc, which once could claim 10 million supporters now has but 2,230,000 actual members (about 20% of the workforce). The All-Poland Organization of Trade Unions, (OPZZ), the union (or federation of unions) established as an alternative (or replacement) to Solidarnosc by the communist government during the period of martial law, claims six million members. Solidarnosc leaders call this figure inflated — they say many retired workers are not even aware that they are still considered OPZZ members and others are paying dues of one zloty a month, (there are 9500 zloty to a dollar) — but they acknowledge that OPZZ has at least as many members as Solidarnosc. In the workplaces we visited, all unarguably Solidarnosc strongholds, membership figures for the two organizations were about the same, with as many or more workers belonging to no union as belonging to either.

Under these circumstances we found it strange that, in each and every factory, when we talked about the kind of labor education programs that might be designed for Solidarnosc, the one subject matter that was quickly and universally rejected, was organizing. The reasons sounded essentially the same at each factory; people join our union because they see our good work and believe in our cause; we had 95% membership when joining Solidarnosc was the only way to register opposition to the government, now that we have removed that government it is natural and good that there should be diversity; we are not a government union and don't want everybody to belong; if one union is good thing, two are better, three might be still better; we try to recruit new employees but the people already here and in OPZZ are not likely to join. (Or be invited, it seemed — yet often OPZZ leaders were brought along on our factory tour and on these occasions all of the unionists would tell us how well they work together.)

Solidarnosc leaders claim that membership figures notwithstanding, OPZZ is the less active organization. Certainly the workers elected to the Workers Councils (more about them later) were mostly from the list of Solidarnosc candidates (when an election had been held since the end of martial law, surprisingly this wasn't always the case). They also told us that most of the Solidarnosc members were the real (i.e. blue collar) workers, it was the white collar and middle management types that belong to OPZZ. (They have a lot of managers in Poland, an incredible 20% of the workforce at Ursus are managers, even though they only start counting at the third level of supervision.)

Yet when we were almost caught in a railroad strike — we left Gdansk on the pre-strike last train to Warsaw — it was led by OPZZ. Solidarnosc told us that managers, the top man on a train or in a small station for example, were the instigators. How was the strike settled? Walesa (right after posing with us in Gdansk) journeyed to the northern city of Slupsk, where it started, and told the strikers that though their demanded pay increase was just, they must return to work without it, and they did. Tadeusz Mazowiecki, who was one of Walesa's top advisers before the union leader picked him to be picked Prime Minister, opposed the strike and refused to accompany Walesa to the meeting. Any attempt to explain these events would be to conjectural for a report of this nature; better to remind the reader that much that we experienced in Poland was, at once, enlightening, surprising and confusing.

The Structure of Solidarity

The apparent anomalies notwithstanding, Solidarnosc is a powerful, well organized, highly democratic union that continues to be the single most important force in Polish life and politics. The union was born in a struggle against a highly centralized, totalitarian regime and its operation reflects a commitment to maintaining democracy with strong local institutions. Solidarnosc, unlike the AFL-CIO, is not a federation of autonomous national unions. Rather, the union is structured around its factory and regional boards (or regional commissions, the terms are used interchangeably) which operate with

a high degree of independence. Relative to the situation in most western unions, the regional structures exercise more authority and the national body less.

Workers in each factory or other workplace where a large Solidarnosc unit exists, elect representatives to a local congress which, in turn, elects a factory commission, a local revisory commission and delegates to a regional congress. (Where the unit is small, there is a direct election of these bodies.) The regional congress, in turn, elects a regional director and the members of the regional commission and the regional "revisory commission." (At every level of the union the revisory commission supervises and controls the union's finances and makes certain that the board and its presidium act "in accordance with the statutes.") The board elects its Presidium (usually 10 or 11 people) whose members become full or part time unionists, while the rest of the 40 or 50 board members remain on their jobs and attend frequent board meetings. Informal sub-regions are formed to further the ability of the region's members to deal with problems on a local level.

Regional board members, unlike members of a typical AFL-CIO local central labor body, do not work for, or serve as officials of, a separate national union (as none exist); they are responsible to no one but the local Solidarnosc members and structures. The highest governing body of Solidarnosc is the National Congress, which is made up of locally elected regional delegates. The congress elects the national commission and its chairperson, and, of course, a national revisory commission. The National Commission, like the regional commissions, meets at least monthly and elects a Presidium that meets weekly.

Under Solidarity's statutes all participants in an electoral conference must be locally chosen, all elections are confidential, proportional, one person one vote, and all officials of Solidarnosc, including national officers, must stand for election every two years.

Thus the union's major governing bodies include only members who work on the job along side of their constituents, or people who are directly elected by such colleagues. The electorate constantly get to see their leaders in action and are in a position to give very close and regular scrutiny to union governance and administration. As to money, 75% of all dues stay with the local factory commission, 21% goes to the region and 4% to the national headquarters (1% of which is designated for the national branches or professional sections).

Solidarity's governing statute proclaims that its "primary units are of regional character" and the union structure and distribution of dues clearly reflects this. However, besides the regions, 54 "branch unions" — which could some day become national organizations based on craft, enterprise or industry, like the unions that make up the AFL-CIO and similar federations in other western nations — do exist within Solidarnosc. At this time the branches are largely paper organizations. Even the few that are active are clearly and explicitly subordinated, by Solidarnosc's bylaws, to the regional structure. The branches have no role in the election of the national commis-

sion or officers and they exist only when and where the national or regional commissions decide to exercise their authority to constitute them.

This does not mean that the national branch organizations will never be important in Solidarity. As the nation pursues a private sector economy, market and industry-wide concerns will surely take on increased importance, and this will likely strengthen the national structures dedicated to these realities. Already two branches (construction and health care workers) are important enough to merit special mention in the union's statutes. Further pressure in this direction could be generated if the OPZZ, which is a federation of Autonomous branch unions, enjoys success in the expected expansion of Polish collective bargaining. (New laws on trade unions and collective bargaining are presently being considered in Parliament.)

Workers Councils

In Poland, worker's councils have a right to exist in all government (proprietary) enterprises, but not in private companies and not in public institutions involved in the actual and official work of government. To date little privatization has occurred and most enterprises have active worker's councils, elected by the enterprise's employees. Their legal authority is extensive, they have a major say in the selection and retention of top management and the right to approve all of the major business and financial plans and decisions of management. Where the council is functioning properly this means it can not only prevent layoffs and plant closings, but also that no change in a product line or production methods can occur without prior approval of the worker's council.

In theory the worker's council limits its authority to non-trade union matters, and coexists with Polish unions. This is not always easy. In the past the union, at the workplace, concerned itself almost exclusively with wages and individual worker grievances. As times have changed, the union has naturally expanded its scope beyond these narrow concerns and a few Solidarity leaders expressed, to us, a desire to see the authority of the councils transferred to the trade unions. We noticed tensions at the individual enterprise level, even after Solidarnosc had been successful in electing its members to the worker's council. In one factory the union's presidium leaders told us of the problems they had with the council in the past. Their chairperson said that now that his colleague on the presidium, and he pointed to the man next to him, was on the council, maybe things would go better. The colleague with two hats responded that he too hoped the relations between the council and the union would improve, but he wasn't certain that that would be the case. "The union worries only about its members, while the council must worry about the whole enterprise" he said, echoing a statement we heard repeatedly in our visits to workplaces.

Even though many important Solidarity leaders want to eliminate or restrict the councils, they have not yet been able to do so, probably because the elected members of the worker's councils have constituted a strong lobby, both within the legislature and within the union itself. Still the councils may not

maintain great power for much longer. The new laws on trade unions and local collective bargaining will likely expand the scope of those institutions, intruding upon areas that have heretofore been in the exclusive domain of the worker's councils. Further, the governments concern for attracting the foreign capital necessary for privatization seems to be leading to a decision to leave the private sector completely free of the "encumbrance" of worker's councils, a result that will be accomplished if the current restriction to public enterprises remains unchanged. Thus it seems likely that as government enterprises diminish, so will the worker's councils.

Future Political Developments

From everything we heard, both the government and Solidarnosc have no higher economic priority than privatizing Polish industry and moving quickly to a market economy. This attitude seems clearly borne of an explicit fear of outside domination and central planning that 45 years of Communism has left in its wake. Efforts to caution workers about the dangers that could accompany unbridled capitalism, dangers like low wages, onerous working conditions and unemployment, and all the social ills that follow, do not strike a responsive cord. As one Polish law professor said, "we will probably regret it, but now we do not worry about these problems because they are not in our collective memory." Instead, everywhere you go in Poland and everyday you are there, you hear one constant refrain: "nothing could be worse than the last 45 years."

The experiences of the past have had their impact on the structure of Solidarity. The high degree of local control, the revisory commissions, short terms of office and other controls over leaders and leadership bodies, and even the attitude of tolerance toward a rival union; all this clearly flows from an antipathy to the autocratic nature of the Polish communist party, and a commitment to the concept that democracy can be best guaranteed when power is highly decentralized and broadly diversified.

This thinking may also explain, at least in part, the unique Solidarnosc solution to the question of whether or not to support a Labor Party — the Polish union has spawned not one, but two labor parties. Last spring, Walesa, who is of course, the head of Solidarnosc, began criticizing the speed and effectiveness of the government's efforts to reform the economy. Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki responded that this difficult task required the full support of all of Solidarnosc, and called for the union's endorsement of the governments efforts. Walesa countered that the Poles had had enough of party unions under the communists. Several Solidarnosc members we met in May told us that Walesa believes that the union influence in politics can best be accomplished by its members running for political office as representatives of many different parties. However, just at this time a new political party, the Center Alliance, was organized by a key Walesa supporters, Lech Kaczynski, first vice president of Solidarnosc and his twin brother Jaroslaw, editor of the weekly Solidarnosc newspaper.

Not all of the veterans of the Solidarnosc movement have endorsed the new party. Many former Solidarnosc leaders now in the government, along with others who remain in high union posts, support the Mazowiecki government and attribute the criticisms and the formation of the new party to Walesa's desire to be elected President of Poland. Two of these unionists, Wladyslaw Frasyniuk, who is the union's regional President in Lower Silesia, and a member of the National Presidium (and the man many expect to succeed Walesa some day) and another well known Solidarnosc activist, Zbigniew Bujak, are now leading a second "labor" party, the Civic Movement-Democratic Action (ROAD, pronounced "roh od"). ROAD leaders say that with the formation of the two parties, political tension has been taken out of the union, and it can now concentrate on trade union matters, free of internal dissent. Walesa appears to agree with this concept, he has been quoted as saying "I support pluralism . . . I supported Center Alliance and now I support ROAD."

The two parties have agreed to change the constitution so that instead of being chosen by the SEJM (the major house of parliament), the next president will be popularly elected. The election will either be next spring or as early as this fall. When

it occurs Walesa will almost certainly be the candidate of the Central Alliance. It is considered possible that he will also head the ROAD ticket, but it is much more likely that Prime Minister Mazowiecki will be offered that spot. If he runs, Mazowiecki should prove to be Walesa's major opponent. It is generally considered that the Center Alliance is more blue collar oriented and close to Reagan-Thatcherism in the political spectrum, while ROAD has support from the "intellectual" wing of Solidarnosc and is, perhaps, closer to the U.S. democratic party. Of course, such generalities are inexact at best.

Throughout the '80s, Solidarnosc called itself a union, was structured like a political party, and functioned and achieved unimaginable success as a social movement. Now, while maintaining its political party-like regional structure, the union moves to separate itself from politics by spinning off two separate and competing political organizations. Can this unique and highly unconventional organization overcome the serious difficulties and dangers facing Polish workers, as the nation moves toward a free market economy? Judging by the shocking and swift events of this past year in Eastern Europe, there is no way to predict what the future of the region holds, but neither will history take long to provide its answer.

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