May Strikes in Poland - A Post-Mortem

SUMMARY: THE WAVE OF LABOR UNREST IN POLAND APPEARS TO HAVE SUBSIDED, AT LEAST FOR NOW. SOLIDARITY IS THE BIG LOSER AS IT FAILED TO RECAPTURE THE MAGIC OF 1980 IN AN ATMOSPHERE RADICALLY DIFFERENT FROM THE EUPHORIC HEAVINESS THAT SWEPT UP THE POPULATION DURING THE POLISH AUGUST. THE GOVERNMENT HANDLED LABOR UNREST MORE ADAPTED THAN ANY OF ITS PREDECESSORS BUT THE COST OF THE RESORT TO FORCE MAY BE HIGH IN TERMS OF ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT BY THE WEST. BUSINESSMEN AND BANKERS FROM THE WEST WILL NOW BE EVEN MORE SKETTISH. THE CHURCH, A JUGGLER WITHOUT PEER IN THE WAPSAW PACT, ROLLS ON.

AN ANTI-CRISIS PACT WITH SOLIDARITY IS LESS LIKELY THAN EVER, ALTHOUGH THE AUTHORITIES WILL PROBABLY PURSUE A RELATIVELY SOFT LINE TOWARDS STRIKERS AND SOLIDARITY ACTIVISTS, AT LEAST WITH RESPECT TO JAIL TERMS METED OUT FOR ACTIVITY ASSOCIATED WITH THE STRIKES. WHETHER SOLIDARITY REPRESENTS THE INTERESTS OF THE SOCIETY AS A WHOLE AFTER THE COLLAPSE OF THE STRIKES IS DEBATABLE, BUT IN ANY CASE THE UNDERLYING CAUSES OF THE WORKER DISSATISFACTION MANIFESTED OVER THE PAST TWO WEEKS REMAIN. A COMBINATION OF PREEMPTIVE CONCESSIONS TO WORKERS AND THE IMPLIED THREAT OF INTIMIDATION WILL PROBABLY KEEP THE LID ON OVER THE NEXT MONTHS; THE ADOPTION OF SPECIA POWERS TO ACCELERATE ECONOMIC REFORM MAY PRODUCE RESULTS THAT WILL ASSUAGE ECONOMIC COMPLAINTS TO A CERTAIN EXTENT, BUT THE AUTHORITIES APPEAR TO HAVE LOST CONFI- DENCE IN DEALING WITH THE WAGE-PRICE CONUNDRUM AND DISCONTENT IS SO DEEPLY ROOTED THAT A RENEWAL OF OPEN SOCIAL UNREST CANNOT BE RULED OUT. IN SUM.

THE BRUSHFIRE OF LABOR UNREST THAT FLASHED OVER POLAND TWO WEEKS AGO APPEARS TO BE EXTINGUISHED. THIS CABLE WILL POKER THROUGH THE MEMBERS, REVIEWING EVENTS AND MAKING PRELIMINARY JUDGMENTS ON THE CONSEQUENCES OF POLAND'S BIGGEST MANIFESTATION OF SOCIAL UNREST SINCE THE IMPOSITION OF MARTIAL LAW IN DECEMBER 1981.

WHY THE STRIKES BROKE OUT: OPINION POLLS, BOTH OFFICIAL AND UNOFFICIAL, NOTED OVER THE PAST TWO YEARS A SIGNIFICANT DECLINE IN PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN THE FUTURE OF THE COUNTRY. A RECENT POLL OF THE OFFICIAL CBOS POLLING ORGANIZATION, FOR EXAMPLE, SHOWED THAT SIXTY PERCENT OF THE RESPONDENTS EXPECTED (BUT DID NOT NECESSARILY SUPPORT) SOMETHING DRAMATIC TO HAPPEN. THE FEBRUARY PRICE RISES DEEPENED OVERALL PESSIMISM; AS IN THE PAST FEW POLES BELIEVED GOVERNMENT CLAIMS, REPEATED IN FIRST-QUARTER ECONOMIC RESULTS RELEASED IN MIDDAY, THAT THE INCREASE IN WAGES OUTSTRIPPED THE RISE IN PRICES. THE PERCEPTION OF A FALLING STANDARD OF LIVING WAS THE CATALYST FOR PROTESTS.

At NCWA EUTA and at the shipyard in Gdansk stirred little more than a ripple of interest elsewhere in Poland. The silent majority of Poles (sixty percent according to polls accepted by both the government and the opposition) showed little sympathy for the pay demands, especially since they came from some of the best paid workers in Poland—Solidarity's call for trade union pluralism, its shibboleth for years, fell on deaf ears.

Solidarity's role: Solidarity was totally unprepared for the strikes and had to play catch-up-ball from the outset. Solidarity decided that it had to be at the forefront of the struggle in order to sustain its claims to represent the workers. Thus it cast the die, hoping against hope to recapture the magic of 1980. The trade union rolled snake eyes. Walesa's instinct was to stay above the fray, but in the end he had no choice but to go to his shipyard once a strike broke out to mount his last stand; he salvaged what he could of his dignity with the voluntary surrender on May 10. But there is no escaping the fact that Solidarity as an organization and Walesa as a leader suffered severe blows to their reputations.

Jaruzelski may now be reinforced in his often expressed view that Walesa and his advisers are generals without an army.

The government: Despite its evident success in bringing this phase to an end with comparatively little use of force, the government, however, hardly emerges triumphant from the skirmishes of the past few weeks. Through a combination of favorable circumstances, long experience in the use and threat of force, and luck, the government has done better than any of its predecessors thus far in taming similar unrest in the past, coping without the shooting of workers as in 1970, without the severe repression of workers (so far at any rate) as in 1976, and avoiding the total political collapse of 1980.
NEVERTHELESS, THE COST OF THE RESORT TO
POPE AT NOWA HUTA MAY BE HIGH. ONCE AGAIN
A REGIME THAT IN THEORY EMBODIES THE
ASPIRATIONS OF WORKERS IS SEEN STOMPING
ON THEM. BY SENDING IN THE POLICE, THE
JARUSZEWSKI GOVERNMENT HAS PROBABLY, FOR THE
TIME BEING AT LEAST, SOURCED ATTITUDES IN THE
WEST AND SQUANDERED SOME OF THE POLITICAL
GAINS THAT IT HAS ASSIDUOUSLY SOUGHT OVER
THE PAST SEVERAL YEARS. THE LINGERING
IMAGE OF LABOR UNREST IN ADDITION TO RISING
LABOR COSTS WILL PROBABLY SEND PRIVATE
INVESTMENT MONEY, RELUCTANT TO COME TO
POLAND IN ANY CASE, SCURRYING ELSEWHERE TO
SAFE, MORE PROFITABLE HAVENS. THE FATE
OF THE GOVERNMENT'S ECONOMIC REFORM PROGRAM
BANGS MORE PRECARIOUSLY IN THE BALANCE.

THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH: THE CHURCH, IN
CONTRAST WITH BOTH SOLIDARITY AND THE REGIME,
HAS EMERGED EVEN MORE CLEARLY AS THE DOMINANT
VOICE OF THE POLISH PEOPLE—INDEED THE ONLY
POWERFUL FORCE OUTSIDE THE GOVERNMENT. THE
SUPPORT FOR MEDIATION EFFORTS IN THE STRIKES
BY LAY CATHOLICS IN BOTH KRAKOW AND GDANSK,
AND THE ROLE PLAYED BY GDANSK BISHOP ORDINARY
TADEUSZ GOŁCZAWSKI CONSTITUTE A SIGNIFICANT
STEP FORWARD IN THE CHURCH'S POSITION AS AN
ARBITER IN PUBLIC BETWEEN THE GOVERNMENT
AND SOCIETY (THE LATE STEFAN CARDINAL WYSZYŃSKI
TRIED TO MEDIATE THE STRIKES IN 1980, BUT ONLY
BY PERSONAL EMISSARY. WYSZYŃSKI DID NOT ENGAGE
THE AUTHORITY OF THE EPISCOPATE AS A WHOLE,
WHICH HIS SUCCESSOR JOZEF CARDINAL GLEMP
EVIDENTLY DID.) THE POLICE RAID ON THE
LENIN STEELMILL IN NOWA HUTA, UNDERTAKEN
FREQUENTLY WITHOUT THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE
CHURCH, OBVIOUSLY UNDERCUT THE CHURCH-BACKED
MEDIATION EFFORT. THE CHURCH ISSUED A
PROTEST, PUBLISHED IN OFFICIAL PAPERS ON
MAY 9, AND DREW AN OFFICIAL (BUT UNPUBLISHED)
APOLOGY; IT IS DOUBTFUL THAT THE CHURCH WILL
HOARD A GRUDGE. FOR THE CHURCH, THE BOTTOM
LINE IS ALWAYS THE PRESERVATION OF THE
NATION; FOREIGN INTERVENTION MUST BE AVOIDED
AT ALL COSTS. THE CHURCH SAW THE RECENT WAVE
OF STRIKES AS PERHAPS MANIPULATED BY THE
GOVERNMENT, OBVIOUSLY LACKING IN GENUINE
SUPPORT, AND CERTAINLY COUNTERPRODUCTIVE,
MAYBE EVEN DANGEROUS. SOLIDARITY DIEHARDS
ARE AGAIN DISAPPOINTED WITH THE PERFORMANCE
OF THE EPISCOPATE (ESPECIALLY IN VIEW OF
REPORTS OF THE POPE'S SUPPORT) BUT THESE
ARE PEOPLE THAT THE CHURCH WROTE OFF LONG
AGO. WALESA, IT SHOULD BE REMEMBERED, REMAINS,
HOWEVER, A SPECIAL FAVORITE OF THE CHURCH.
WHAT NEXT: AN ANTI-CRISIS PACT? THE POLICE ACTION IN KRAKOW HAS PROBABLY CUT THE LEGS FROM UNDER WHATEVER SLIM CHANCE EXISTED FOR A DEAL BETWEEN THE GOVERNMENT AND LAY CATHOLICS CLOSE TO SOLIDARITY. IT WILL BE A WHILE BEFORE KIK CHAIRMAN ANDRZEJ STELMACHOWSKI AND KIK SECRETARY ANDRZEJ WIELOWIESKI TRUST THE WORD OF THE AUTHORITIES. AN ANTI-CRISIS PACT WITH SOLIDARITY, PROPOSED BY THE WARSAW REGIONAL COMMISSION OF SOLIDARITY IN JANUARY, ELABORATED UPON BY SOLIDARITY ADVISOR BRONISLAW GEREMEK IN AN INTERVIEW IN THE FEBRUARY ISSUE OF KONFRONTACJE, IS LESS LIKELY THAN EVER. ANTI-SOLIDARITY SENTIMENT IN THE REGIME RUNS HIGH. JARUZELSKI DISMISSED WALESA AS AN UNRELIABLE PARTNER LONG AGO; HE WILL SURELY NOT PICK UP THE PHONE (A LA GORBACHEV TO SACHAROV) TO CALL A FALLEN WALESA (UNLESS HE WAS CERTAIN THAT WALESA WOULD ACCede TO HIS TERMS, TERMS WHICH WOULD FINISH OFF WALIESA AS A POLITICAL FORCE).


14. WHAT NEXT: SOLIDARITY: SOLIDARITY WILL HAVE TO GO BACK TO THE DRAWING BOARD. SOLIDARITY ACTIVISTS, ESPECIALLY THOSE FAMILIAR TO THE WEST, WILL CONTINUE TO MAINTAIN IN GOOD CONSCIENCE THAT THE ORGANIZATION REPRESENTS THE POLISH PEOPLE, BUT INTERNALLY THE UNION IS CERTAIN TO BE RIFE WITH MUTUAL RECRIMINATIONS OVER THE FAILURES OF THE PAST TWO WEEKS. WALESA WILL NOT BE SPARED THE ROD, BUT NOW, ESPECIALLY IN DEFEAT, HE IS SOLIDARITY.

THE FACT THAT WALESA HAD PRIMARILY YOUNG WORKERS AT HIS SIDE TO THE END AT THE SHIPYARD MAY BE A SILVER LINING FOR SOLIDARITY; WALESA HIMSELF HAD EXPRESSED CONCERN ABOUT THE LACK OF APPEAL OF SOLIDARITY TO THE YOUNG OF THIS NEW PERIOD. BUT IT REMAINS TO BE SEEN WHETHER THE INVOLVEMENT OF YOUNG WORKERS MEANS A LONG-TERM COMMITMENT TO SOCIO-POLITICAL
ACTIVISM OR WAS RATHER AN EXERCISE IN BACK TO THE FUTUR NOSTALGIA. (THE DOWNSIDE FROM WALES'S POINT OF VIEW, HOWEVER, MUST BE THE LACK OF SUPPORT FROM HIS PEERS AMONG WORKERS.)

WHAT NEXT: THE STUDENT FACTOR: THE WILD CARD IN THE DECK AS DEALT RECENTLY IS UNIVERSITY STUDENTS. THE REVIVAL OF THE INDEPENDENT STUDENT ASSOCIATION (NZS) IS AN INTERESTING PHENOMENON AND SOME IN THE OPPOSITION CLAIM THAT THIS IS A MORE POLITICALLY ASTUTE AND ENERGETIC GENERATION OF STUDENTS THAN IN THE RECENT PAST, BUT THE FORGING OF A WORKER-STUDENT ALLIANCE, A CHIMERA IN THE PAST, WOULD SEEM TO BE A PIPE DREAM AT THIS STAGE. EVEN DURING SOLIDARITY'S 1980-81 HEYDAY, LEGAL NZS ATTRACTED NO MORE THAN THIRTY PERCENT OF THE STUDENT BODY TO ITS RANKS. IN ANY CASE, THE SCHOOL YEAR IS NEAR AN END; ANOTHER UPSURGE OF STUDENT ACTIVISM IS UNLIKELY BEFORE THE SUMMER.


IN THE SHORT RUN, BARRING RENEWED OUTBREAKS OF LABOR UNREST, THE AUTHORITIES WILL BE "MAGNANIMOUS" TOWARDS STRIKERS AND SOLIDARITY ACTIVISTS. TO DATE NO ONE HAS BEEN SENTENCED TO MORE THAN THREE MONTHS IN PRISON. MOST WILL PROBABLY BE RELEASED BEFORE THEIR SENTENCES ARE COMPLETED. REEMPLOYMENT OF
Workers who struck may be a dicier issue, but here we would guess that most will be allowed to return to their old workstands.

The government will continue its strategy of distancing itself from local demand for wage increases but countenance pay increases as necessary to quell worker dissatisfaction at the source. The authorities will also try to burnish the image of the OPZZ (National Confederation of Trade Unions—The Officially Sanctioned Unions) as a credible, responsible representative of worker interests, although that probably remains a Sisyphean task (the most recent example of government "acquiescence" to OPZZ pressure concerned the provisions in the Special Powers Law that would have reportedly banned strikes to the end of the year and curtailed trade union rights in other ways. The 1982 Law on trade unions would seek to provide the authorities ample legal means to throttle unwanted strikes).

The government will also continue to court the Church, hoping that the population in general will see as desirable and inevitable a partnership between Church and State. The Episcopate, however, will continue to push its own agenda for improvements for society without convulsions, while steering clear of any identification with the government.

Solidarity this time around was unable to mobilize existing tensions, but the government knows that it faces rough sailing over the full course. The government will be quick to put out fires, but another flare up, perhaps more serious than the events in early May, cannot be excluded. Steps taken under the Special Powers Provisions to close factories and reshuffle the labor force, while economically sensible and perhaps indispensable to a meaningful rationalization of the economy, could provide the spark. Whatever happens, Solidarity, defeated but unbowed, will be there because it cannot not try to lead worker protests however, wherever, and wherever they arise, so long as it remains excluded from a share of power and responsibility for the country's fate.