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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 EBULLIENCE THAT SWIFT UP THE POPULATION DURING THE POLISH AUGUST. THE GOVERNMENT HANDLED LABOR UNREST MORE ADPTLY 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 SKITTISH. THE CHURCH, A JUGGRNAUT WITHOUT PEER IN THE WARSAW 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 SPECIAL POWERS TO ACCELERATE ECONOMIC REFORM MAY PRODUCE RESULTS THAT WILL ASSUAGE ECONOMIC COMPLAINTS TO A CERTAIN EXTENT, BUT THE AUTHORITIES APPEAR TO HAVE LOST CONFIDENCE IN DEALING WITH THE WAGE PRICE CONUNDRUM AND DISCONTENT IS SO DEEPLY ROOTED THAT A RENEWAL OF OPEN SOCIAL UNREST CANNOT BE RULED OUT. INI SUMMARY.

THE BRUSHFIRE OF LABOR UNREST THAT FLASHED OVER POLAND TWO WEEKS AGO APPEARS TO BE EXTINGUISHED. THIS CABLE WILL POKE THROUGH THE EMBERS, 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.

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RECAPITULATION OF EVENTS: LABOR UNREST BEGAN SPONTANEOUSLY (ASSUMING THAT ONE DISCOUNTS THEORIES CURRENTLY MAKING THE ROUNDS) BUT THE STRIKES QUICKLY BECAME IDENTIFIED WITH SOLIDARITY. GOVERNMENT/ENTERPRISE PROMISES PACIFIED STRIKERS IN BYDGOSZCZ AND STALOWA WOLA. THE EPISCOPATE OF THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH IN POLAND INTERVENED AFTER THE STRIKES SPREAD TO NOWA HUTA AND THE LENIN SHIPYARD IN GDANSK. THE GOVERNMENT SENT IN THE POLICE TO BREAK THE STRIKE AT THE LENIN STEEL MILL IN NOWA HUTA, CITING ECONOMIC IMPERATIVES AS JUSTIFICATION, LESS THAN A FULL DAY AFTER THE CHURCH-BACKED MEDIATION EFFORT HAD BEGUN. THIS POLICE ACTION BROKE THE LINK IN ANY POSSIBLE CHAIN REACTION IN WORKER PROTEST ACTIONS. THE DREAMS OF A COMEBACK FOR SOLIDARITY FADED IN ITS BIRTHPLACE, THE LENIN SHIPYARD IN GDANSK, WHERE, CORDONED OFF BY POLICE, A FEW HUNDRED STRIKERS WITH LECH WALESZA HELD OUT UNTIL THEIR CAUSE BECAME PATENTLY HOPELESS.

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 YEARS BELIEVED GOVERNMENT CLAIMS, REPEATED IN FIRST-QUARTER ECONOMIC RESULTS RELEASED IN MID-APRIL, THAT THE INCREASE IN WAGES OUTSTRIPPED THE RISE IN PRICES. THE PERCEPTION OF A FALLING STANDARD OF LIVING WAS THE CATALYST FOR PROTESTS.

WHY THE STRIKES FAILED: THE SHORT ANSWER IS THAT 1988 WAS NOT 1980. SOCIETY DID NOT ACTIVELY BACK THE STRIKES (IN THE EARLY STAGES OF THE STRIKES, A GOVERNMENT POLL INDICATED THE SUPPORT OF 34 PERCENT OF THE RESPONDENTS FOR THE STRIKES). THE MOOD EIGHT YEARS AFTER AUGUST WAS COMPLETELY DIFFERENT FROM 1980: THEN PROTESTING WORKERS RODE THE CREST OF A WAVE OF ENTHUSIASM AND ALMOST ENGULFED THE FOUNDATIONS OF A RICKETY POST-STALINIST SYSTEM; THE DRAMA

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 SHIBBELOTH 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. WALESAS 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 WALESAS AS A LEADER SUFFERED SEVERE BLOWS TO THEIR REPUTATIONS.

JARUZELSKI MAY NOW BE REINFORCED IN HIS OFTEN EXPRESSED VIEW THAT WALESAS 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 FORCE 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 JARUZELSKI GOVERNMENT HAS PROBABLY, FOR THE TIME BEING AT LEAST, SOURED 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 SAFER, MORE PROFITABLE HAVENS. THE FATE OF THE GOVERNMENT'S ECONOMIC REFORM PROGRAM HANGS 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 GOCLAWSKI CONSTITUTE A SIGNIFICANT STEP FORWARD IN THE CHURCH'S POSITION AS AN ARBITER IN PUBLIC BETWEEN THE GOVERNMENT AND SOCIETY (THE LATE STEFAN CARDINAL WYSZYNSKI TRIED TO MEDIATE THE STRIKES IN 1980, BUT ONLY BY PERSONAL EMISSARY. WYSZYNSKI 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 PRESUMABLY 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 HOLD 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 WRITES 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 WIELOWIEYSKI 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 CEREMEK 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 WERE CERTAIN THAT WALESA WOULD ACCEDE TO HIS TERMS, TERMS WHICH WOULD FINISH OFF WALESA AS A POLITICAL FORCE).

WHAT NEXT: CHANGES IN GOVERNMENT? WORKER PROTESTS IN 1970 AND 1980 TOPPLED GOVERNMENTS AND BADLY SHOOK THE REGIME IN 1976- WITH THAT HISTORY IN MIND AND IN VIEW OF THE FACT THAT TO DATE, AT ANY CASE, THE GOVERNMENT HAS WEATHERED THE CHALLENGE, IT IS UNLIKELY THAT JARUZELSKI WILL CLEAN HOUSE SOON, MAKING CHANGES SPECIFICALLY TIED TO THE LABOR UNREST. FOR THE TIME BEING, THERE WILL BE NO FALL GUYS.

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 WALESA'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 PIPEDREAM 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.

WHAT NEXT: SHORT-TERM SCENARIOS: THE LABOR UNREST STRUCK A GOVERNMENT NERVE THAT HAS THROBBED INTERMITTENTLY OVER THE DECADES. THE AUTHORITIES HAVE RENEWED, FOR THE UMPTENTH TIME, THEIR COMMITMENT TO ECONOMIC REFORM AND, AS OF MAY 11 TOOK SPECIAL POWERS TO ACCELERATE ITS PACE. THE GOVERNMENT OBVIOUSLY HOPES THAT THE SECOND STAGE OF ECONOMIC REFORM, WITH THE USE OF THE

SPECIAL POWERS, WILL KICK INTO GEAR, TRANSFORMING THE POLISH ECONOMY INTO A PRODUCTIVE ONE ABLE TO SATISFY THE DEMANDS AND EXPECTATIONS OF ITS CITIZENS, THUS REDUCING THE CHANCES OF SOCIAL UNREST. THE SPECIAL POWERS, IF USED CONSTRUCTIVELY, COULD IN FACT ACCELERATE THE ECONOMIC REFORM AND THUS BE A POSITIVE DEVELOPMENT. HOWEVER, THE POSSIBILITY FOR ABUSE OF THE POWERS OBVIOUSLY EXISTS, AND THERE IS A DILEMMA INHERENT IN THE USE OF "SPECIAL POWERS," WHICH INCREASES THE POWER OF THE CENTRAL AUTHORITIES, TO LIBERALIZE THE ECONOMY, TO MAKE IT MORE RESPONSIVE TO MARKET FORCES.

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 PPESSUPE 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 SEEM 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 RYSHUFFLE 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,  
WHENEVER, AND WHEREVER THEY ARISE, SO LONG  
AS IT REMAINS EXCLUDED FROM A SHARE OF POWER  
AND RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE COUNTRY'S FATE.