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POLISH CRISIS:

WHAT IS SOLIDARNOSC BECOMING?

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Summary:

Solidarnosc has never confined itself to the simple, traditional rôle of a trade union, even in the sense that this has come to be understood in Western countries. Nor has the government party refused to negotiate on its "political" demands such as relaxation of censorship, broadcast of church services, release of "political prisoners", or even workers self-management and control over union access to the media, although no agreement is yet reached on these last. Solidarnosc, for its part, has professed acknowledgement of the leading rôle of PUWP (not, one feels, with unblemished sincerity) and has been willing to work within the existing political framework while seeking to influence a wide range of social and economic policies.

(Poland)

It is this willingness to accept the fundamentals of Poland's post-war political structure, to keep within the "limits which must not be crossed" that now seems in doubt after the first phase of the Solidarnosc National Congress. It is by no means impossible, however, that Solidarnosc under Walesas' continued level-headed leadership will quietly descend from the mountain-top of Congress euphoria to resume the dialogue with the government/party on a realistic basis.

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Report

The Polish authorities (not to mention Tass, Trud, Neues Deutschland et al) are quite right in suggesting that Poland's socialist order is being challenged at the Solidarnosc Congress. Since the Solidarnosc membership is at least triple that of PUWP (not all of whose own members think much of Poland's socialist order as they have experienced it) this is hardly surprising. What is not certain is that Solidarnosc leadership emerging from the Congress will share the enthusiasm of many delegates for throwing caution (and realism) to the winds and so emasculating the authority of PUWP that hardly even a fig-leaf of its "leading rôle" would remain. This is what the implementation of the Congress resolution seeking free SEJM (parliamentary) and local council elections would amount to. Like many resolutions of party conventions more familiar to us, of course, this one may be given subterranean priority once the delegates have dispersed. So too, one hopes, with the resolution supporting the efforts in fraternal countries (including even Albania) to form their own versions of Solidarnosc, which Moscow has, understandably, termed "provocative".

Even if these extravagances are never heard of again, they must have reinforced fraternal conviction, if that was necessary, that the very existence of Solidarnosc is profoundly dangerous to the Soviet Communist system. This conviction is unlikely to be dissipated as Solidarnosc presses, as it almost certainly will, for acceptance of a version of workers' self-management that would virtually eliminate the rôle of the central government in the appointment of state enterprise directors and enterprise decision-making generally.

It is tempting to conclude that Solidarnosc activists are overplaying their hand, except that similar conclusions have regularly been proven wrong over the past year. What has been striking about this week's Congress, however,

is what seems to be a total lack of concern or even interest about what the Polish authorities, Moscow or anyone else might think of what is being said and done. The rattling of warships and sabres just over the horizon is making no impression whatsoever. Only one sensitive -- and perhaps crucial -- sacred cow remains sacrosanct: no one is casting a doubt, directly or indirectly, on Poland's strategic reliability.

Everyone, probably including Moscow, will be waiting for the other shoe to drop at the end of the month when Solidarnosc Congress reconvenes. If, as expected, Walesas' pre-eminent position is confirmed, we can count on a certain degree of realism from Solidarnosc side of the dialogue, although grass-roots pressures for a more extreme stance will have been made all too glaringly apparent. This will make it even more difficult for the government/party to take the tougher line Moscow would like to see towards Solidarnosc and its demands. Solidarnosc, on the other hand, will be back in the arena with the government/party and no longer able, as at Congress, to carry on as if the latter did not exist or were of no consequence. It will, however, be even more obviously what it has always been (although never acknowledged): the focus for all forces in Poland -- that is to say at least 90% of the population -- disgusted with the past leadership, discontented with the existing social and political institutions and demanding radical change. In this sense the government/party charges are well-founded: Solidarnosc has developed into a political opposition movement.

It is not, however, anti-socialist in the broader sense. Its leaders and members have almost all been brought up to respect, and do respect, socialist ideals. It is their implementation that Solidarnosc wishes to transform in order to create a freer, populist, more democratic, tolerant and egalitarian society. As a British Customs officer at London Airport (no doubt himself a participant in the recent UK civil service strikes) observed last week: "If British unions tried to get what Solidarity is asking for, they'd be called a bunch of ruddy communists." Defiance of authority is even less popular with the Polish government than with those in the West,

and Solidarnosc is absolutely right when it accuses the government/party of unwillingness to give up positions of privilege or to share power. There is, of course, some power-sharing de facto but their own predilections as well as fraternal pressures force the Polish authorities to resist any effort to institutionalize it or even make them acknowledge its existence.

The goals proclaimed by the declaration emerging from the first phase of the Solidarnosc Congress are certainly admirable, but will it play in Pinsk?