

# A Polish Petrograd

Zbigniew Kowalewski, a former leader of the left-wing in Solidarnosc, describes how Solidarnosc fought for workers' control in Lodz in 1980-1. This is an abridged translation of a chapter from his book, 'Rendez-nous nos usines'.

**Lodz, the second conurbation in the country by number of inhabitants and one of the main industrial centres of Poland, is a town where the textile industry, going back to the era of 'wildcat capitalism', remains the most important sector, although more modern sectors like electrical engineering come close behind.**

"Lodz is a city of women who are exhausted, jaded, ill, and prematurely aged, a city of people crippled socially and economically", declared an organiser of the Committee of Social Self-Defence (KSS-KOR) in the summer of 1980. "The percentage of still births in Lodz is the highest in Europe", he said in relation to one of the worst effects of the super-exploitation imposed on the mass of working women by the system of piecework...

In June and July 1981, you could see on the streets that the city was literally collapsing under the economic crisis. Each day Lodz was more like the dramatic image which John Reed has left us of Petrograd in the months and weeks before the October revolution. All over the place there were huge queues in front of the shops, not only in daytime but also at night, and especially at the butchers'. Sometimes you had to queue for three days and two nights to get meat with your ration tickets. Different members of the family would take turns in the queue, but mostly you saw women, most of whom worked. After spending the night and the morning in a queue, they went to the factory, completely exhausted, without having the time to eat anything, and they were unable to

keep up with the machines. Many fainted right on the shop floor, and the risk of work accidents went up. The regional leadership of Solidarnosc reported that 20 to 30% of the ration tickets for meat were unusable because of the shortage of supplies...

During the first half of July, the regional leadership never stopped playing the firefighter. Almost every day, and sometimes five or six times in one day, Solidarnosc factory councils — especially in the textile sector — announced that the workers would strike the following day. No-one could buy the goods in short supply, everyone was exhausted from spending their time in the queues, there was no point continuing work to earn money which was good for nothing but to paper the walls: such were the arguments put forward. It was necessary to intervene, to convince people that strikes would not improve supplies, to explain that we should not protest piecemeal, that it would do no good, that decisions about protest actions against the shortages should not be taken at the level of the factories but only by the general assembly of the trade union delegates of the region.

The situation was visibly explosive and Solidarnosc risked losing control of it. Social tension also began to mount in other industrial centres. However, the national leadership of Solidarnosc gave the impression of being completely passive in face of this rising tide.

On 10 July, the regional leadership decided to take the initiative and to give it, if possible, national scope. An appeal to all trade unionists in the region said:

"The situation developing at the na-



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tional level since June is more than disturbing. On the one hand there is the increasing inflexibility of the authorities in face of the demands of society and, on the other, the lack of real perspectives for a way out from the economic crisis which is constantly deepening and bringing about a growing radicalisation of the masses' thinking. The 200,000 representatives of the top circles of the bureaucracy and of the pressure groups which defend their positions and their privileges have managed effectively to block the real process of reconstruction of the republic. The last ten months have been wasted. We are on the brink of economic catastrophe and we cannot go on any longer like this. Instead of the measures which have been decided, the authorities give us only empty speeches and pseudo-decisions. That is why it is time to say to the PUWP (the ruling party) and to the authorities which it has put in place that we do not want to shed blood, to overthrow the socialist regime or violate international treaties, but we are determined to carry through the reconstruction of the republic of which our trade union is the guarantor. We have prepared and available projects offering a solution to all the essential questions — social, economic and political — which our state confronts today. Society is willing to undertake this task and to follow it through to the end".

It was the first time that a Solidarnosc leadership body warned the bureaucratic authorities that the union was willing to assume its responsibilities and take on the destiny of the nation. At the same time, the Lodz leadership asked the National Coordinating Committee (KKP) of Solidarnosc and representatives of all the regional leaderships to meet urgently on 17 July in Lodz... (There was no such meeting, but on Monday 27 July action started in Lodz).

At 3.00 p.m., a procession of 19 buses from the city transport service drove slowly down Piotrkowska Street — the main street of Lodz — headlights shining and horns blaring. The buses were decorated with national flags and, in huge letters, the word 'hunger'.

They were covered with a multitude of posters which, so the local press claimed, contained aggressive slogans insulting the government and the PUWP — in a word, 'anti-socialist' slogans.

The following day, at the same hour and in the same street, there was a procession of 46 lorries, trucks and buses from the PKS factory. And on the third day it was the turn of 56 trailers, tankers, huge cranes and special vehicles from the construction enterprise Transbud to defile in the same place. Each day these processions attracted large crowds which expressed their support for the action. The representatives of the regional leadership of Solidarnosc accompanying the procession explained by loudspeaker to the masses present what the aim of this demonstration was and stressed that it was a form of protest implying a minimum of

material cost and allowing us to avoid stopping productive work. The columns of vehicles always stopped for two minutes in front of the town hall to sound their horns. The use of the means of transport had an important symbolic value, for it was an expression of the workers' demand to control the means of production.

The fourth day, 30 July, marked the climax of this initiative, with the 'hunger march'. For the first time, Solidarnosc called on the workers to take to the streets. Until then, most protest actions — following the model of the August 1980 strikes in this respect — had taken place inside the workplaces. In the popular consciousness, street demonstrations were identified with the workers' revolts of December 1970 and June 1976 which had ended in violence and blood. This time, in Lodz, we were breaking with a taboo: it was a way to show the workers that they could control their own struggle elsewhere than just behind the walls of the factories.

There was great anxiety in the regional leadership about the risk that the most aggressive sectors of the authorities would try to take advantage of the demonstration to stage a provocation, and seize this opportunity to launch a vast operation of repression in the streets. This fear was evident in the initial proposal to limit participation in the march to 5,000 women; the decision finally taken was to go up to 8,000. Every possible security measure was taken, down to the last detail.

Authorisation for the march was sought and obtained from the mayor. The conditions on which the police would be present and under which they might intervene were agreed with him. The procession was to be strictly demarcated with huge lorries at the front and at the back, with the sides marked off by a thick rope carried by the stewards. The chief stewards would have walkie-talkies bought in Western Europe. The women workers were to come from their factories in organised groups, and in the numbers agreed for each workplace.

All this was outflanked, but only in the sense that instead of the planned 8,000 women there were 50,000 women workers on the march. There were women of all ages, including many pensioners. Many of them came with their children or babies in their arms or in push-chairs.

One of the most impressive aspects of this demonstration was the content of hundreds of placards and banners. All had been made in the factories themselves, the Solidarnosc regional leadership having abstained from indicating their contents so as to give free rein to the spontaneous expression of the women workers.

At the head of the procession was a big banner with the central slogan: 'Hungry of all countries, unite!' Others stood out: 'Arise, ye prisoners of starvation!', 'Peace and liberty', 'Three shifts, the same hunger', 'Our children are hungry and dirty', 'We have nothing to lose but our hunger', 'No to the new ration norms'.

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Numerous placards attacked the regime and its 'leading force' with such slogans as: 'After 36 years with the PUWP in power, we are hungry and tomorrow we will be naked', 'People's power or the power of hunger?'. 'Marxist-Leninist' ideology was ridiculed: 'Is socialism the doctrine of hunger, poverty, and filth?'. 'We are proceeding towards communism — please do not eat during the journey'. Proposals were put to the bureaucracy: 'If you have nothing left to sell, sell us the power'. Or warnings: 'Hunger deprives people of reason. It can deprive you of power'.

After being blessed by the bishop, the procession set off from the cathedral square. There was a first meeting in front of the town hall, but noone appeared at the windows: they were all closed. Then there was a second meeting at Liberty Square, where the march ended.

Janina Konczak, the initiator of the march, and Andrzej Slowik both spoke, presenting Solidarnosc's demands on the local authorities and on the government concerning the provision of food for the population and accusing the authorities of incompetence and irresponsibility. The only thing the authorities 'guaranteed' women was that they worked eight hours a day and spent 12 in queues, said Konczak. Slowik declared:

**"The time has come to render accounts. We are giving three weeks to the local authorities for them to put an end to the chaos which reigns in the provision of food, and to get rid of the people responsible for this scandalous situation. We do not want to take power, but we are capable of keeping a check.**

**We undertake as of now to keep a check on the institutions which are supposed to look after the distribution of food. We will check what happens to meat from production through to sale in the shops.**

**When we announced this protest action, the stocks in the shops improved as if by chance. Who was hiding the food that appeared so suddenly, and why? What are those who were hoarding this food trying to do?**

**Three weeks from now, we will make a balance sheet of this protest action and the results we have got".**

The slogan for the struggle was launched: social control over distribution.

The women workers of the textile industry, the most explosive sector of the working class in Lodz, were the backbone of this protest against poverty. But they did not participate much in daily trade-union activity. They had neither the time nor the strength.

Super-exploited in their work, they were also overburdened with domestic tasks. The traditional division of household tasks between the sexes was still alive in working-class families, and there was no feminist consciousness proper. One little symbol: the stewards of the march were all male.

In the textile industry, the workers,

mostly women, almost exclusively elected men to the Solidarnosc commissions. On the other hand, in the more modern industries which employed more skilled workers, the women were much more active in the union. It was there that the struggle for social control and self-management got the biggest response and was carried on with most determination. In those factories, the workers of both sexes were less inclined to one-off actions of revolt and more conscious of the need to seek fundamental solutions to the problems posed to their class and to work for them. It was among them that it became possible to recruit the trade-union activists who would have to look after the tasks of control over distribution.

In parallel to the action at Lodz, there were similar demonstrations in several towns of the region and of neighbouring regions: Zelow, Zdunska Wola, Lask, Pabianice, Tomaszow, Belchatow, Piotrkow...

It was in that context, where Solidarnosc had retaken the initiative in mass struggle throughout the country, that the members of the presidium of the regional leadership met the mayor of Lodz... After

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a devastating balance-sheet of the inertia of the local authorities and of his own incapacity had been presented to the mayor, it was demanded of him that he grant Solidarnosc the authority to control the provision of food in the town.

In principle, this was impossible. On 8 August, for the first time and unilaterally, the government had broken off negotiations with the national leadership of Solidarnosc, who were demanding, among other things, precisely this right to control the production, the circulation and the distribution of food. It was then that deputy prime minister Rakowski uttered the famous words: **"He who controls the production of food in fact holds power, for the question of food supplies is a political question. Your demand about control constitutes a programme for the seizure of power".**

The government was inflexible: if Solidarnosc wanted to make checks, it could do so, but exclusively within the framework of the law on social control. This law was one of the numerous 'democratic' figleaves of the totalitarian regime. The possibilities of social control that it gave to social organisations were almost non-existent. But if the resistance of the regime was very strong at the national level, in Lodz there was a different

relation of forces, which Solidarnosc had built up bit by bit, systematically, during the 'hot summer'.

The mayor was made to understand in the meeting that if he did not agree to deal with the problem in a radical way, and at once, the masses would certainly not hesitate this time to make heads roll in the local authority. The trade-union leaders of Lodz had always believed that changing personalities inside the regime would solve nothing, so long as the social movement was unable to put forward new leaders. The very system of power had to be changed, and the question of individuals was only a secondary aspect. But it was clear that the masses, driven to desperation, were likely to want somebody's head, and this was an argument to use in negotiation, as a means of pressure on an individual who obviously wanted to keep his position.

The mayor knew that this time he could not get out of the situation safe and sound without making some concessions. He informed the Solidarnosc leaders that there was another legal basis than the law on social control for exercising some real control. He explained that in fact there was a law on the powers of mayors and provincial officials not only giving them wide powers of control, but permitting them to transfer this right to representatives of any social organisation in the country, on condition that they be duly mandated for this purpose. I will give you twenty or so authorisations so that control can be exercised in my name, he said...

The mayor had given an inch: we had to take an ell. Solidarnosc needed 150 authorisations straight away, a number corresponding to the number of trade-unionists already prepared for tasks of control, and 1500 a bit later for those who would be trained without delay. We had to put the mayor up against it, using the argument of 'heads rolling', beginning with his (until then, we had never threatened him personally, preferring to go for his subordinates so as not to close off any possibility of negotiation), so that he would end up by accepting all our demands. It was a great victory.

We had to begin right away by taking a census of the precise needs of the town's population and of the resources available, especially as regards meat and related products. We had to make sure that the whole of production, without except, should go towards the people's consumption, that the distribution of meat and of all scarce items should be exclusively by the general network of commerce, and thus that any privileged distribution should be stopped by tracking down hoards and putting them on the market.

The teams of trade-unionists, equipped with the authorisations signed by the mayor, got to work immediately in the wholesale centres in the countryside, in the abattoirs, the depots, the wholesale and retail establishments. They checked on where foodstuffs came from, how they were transported, and where they went to.

It was soon discovered that large amounts of meat left the central town abattoir for unknown destinations, on the basis of secret orders transmitted by no-one knew whom in the form of coded messages. As soon as this business became known, the authorities were forced to stop it.

From doing this work, the regional leadership began to have a precise picture of production and of the state of stocks in the food industry, not just from the teams of checkers but also from the trade-union militants working there. The union had not been authorised to keep a check on the depots where the secret reserves of the state were kept, but that did not stop us from knowing exactly what type of commodity was there, and in what quantity. Thus it was possible to present to the mayor data that, as he said himself, he was unaware of, and to force him to make representations to the central state authorities about those stocks being directed to consumption. Solidarnosc was everywhere, and the authorities had more and more difficulty stopping the union getting information on production and the state of food stocks.

Meanwhile, relations between town and country continued to get worse. Partly the peasants were hoarding their food products, but they were also using them to speculate on the free market. The representatives of the rich peasants in the Solidarnosc leaderships pressed for big increases in the prices of their products.

The checking on the free markets by the Solidarnosc regional leadership's teams did not allow speculation to be combatted effectively. The workers of some factories wanted Solidarnosc to organise workers' brigades to go into the countryside and confiscate the peasants' reserves by force. But that was an unacceptable position which would have broken the alliance between peasants and workers, thus weakening the social front of the opposition against the bureaucratic authorities.

For its part, the authorities were doing all they could to break that alliance by instigating worker Solidarnosc and peasant Solidarnosc against each other. Relations had deteriorated so much between town and countryside above all because for a very long time industry had not concerned itself at all with the needs of agriculture. Not only tractors and machines were in short supply in the countryside, but also tools, forks, nails, everything made of iron.

On 15 October, the regional leadership of Solidarnosc adopted a very important resolution on the measures to be taken to combat the food shortage in the town, measures complemented by the social control over distribution which had already been started. This resolution demanded that artisans producing agricultural machines and tools be authorised to buy the materials they needed from the factories which had stocks, and that a number of factories modify their pattern of production so as to produce tools for agriculture on the basis of their produc-

tion capacities. **"If the authorities reject this, the union will conduct an active strike [work-in] in the workplaces so as to guarantee such production. The distribution of the goods thus produced will be organised in association with the Solidarnosc union of individual farmers and the Solidarnosc union of artisans"**.

The reestablishment of economic links between the town of Lodz and the countryside was difficult, given the existing administrative demarcations. The old macro-region, covering five present-day provinces, was in fact capable of making the population self-sufficient, given the potential equilibrium between the industrial sector and the agricultural sector. But Solidarnosc's gains in the domain of control over food production were limited to the territory administered by the Lodz municipality, stopping almost at the gates of the city.

Faced with Solidarnosc's threat to call an active strike [work-in] in some factories in the town, and to take over control there so as to reorient production to respond to the needs of the peasantry, the mayor of Lodz called meetings with the represen-

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tatives of the union and of the administrations of the neighbouring agricultural provinces to set up an overall plan for food supplies to the city and supplies of industrial products for the countryside.

The most important decision taken by the regional leadership on 15 October was **"to get control over the issuing, distribution, and accounting for ration tickets"**. The issuing of ration tickets was the exclusive monopoly of the central state power. Consequently this demand appeared as audacious as it was preposterous: it implied demanding of the bureaucracy — this time at the central level — that it cede to Solidarnosc a bit of the power that it guarded so jealously.

For all that, the central authorities conceded. The mayor of Lodz informed the presidium by telephone that the state, in conformity with the request transmitted to it, was authorising Solidarnosc to print the ration cards, starting with those for the month of November.

Now we were within a week of 1 November, the date on which the new ration tickets had to be distributed to the population. The presidium understood immediately that the government was setting a trap. To print ration tickets for a city of over a million inhabitants and

distribute them within a week represented a giant task for a union which had no experience in this field and did not have the means of the state to do it.

Obviously the government hoped that the Solidarnosc regional leadership would abandon its demands, or that it would accept the task without being able to carry it out. In either case it would discredit itself, and at the same time discredit the masses' aspiration to self-organisation and self-management. But the presidium took up the challenge. A rapid survey of the means available and the measures to be taken allowed us to establish that the job could be done in the time set by the government.

Thanks to the efforts of a team of printers who were trade union militants, the ration cards were printed in three days; not on newsprint, as the government printshops did them, but for the first time on watermarked paper which made fraud impossible. The printing was done under the control of a joint committee composed, on Solidarnosc's insistence, of representatives of the union and of the town hall.

This committee accounted for the tickets and signed a protocol which constituted a guarantee against any later attempt by the bureaucracy to accuse the leaders of Solidarnosc of having printed too many tickets or having diverted some. The number of tickets distributed at last corresponded to needs, established in a precise way. A system of checking on their distribution in the workplaces and institutions allowed not only the elimination of the surplus, but an end to injustices.

There were eight different types of ticket corresponding to different needs: manual workers with particularly hard jobs who needed more meat, children needing a particular quantity of milk and sugar, etc. Solidarnosc thus saw to it that the distribution of the ration tickets corresponded properly to the criteria established and, at the same time, verified the real number of members of each family who should have tickets. The exact number was now known of those who had a right to privileged status because of the work they did or their social situation, including the invalids and pensioners who had to be saved from having to queue interminably.

Solidarnosc decided that henceforth each Wednesday the shops would serve old people, disabled people, and pregnant women first. It goes without saying that food distribution in Lodz improved correspondingly, and that the queues dwindled very rapidly.

The fact that Solidarnosc had established a double control — over the distribution of foodstuffs and over the system of rationing — was an important step in the establishment of a democratic counter-power of the workers and of civil society. This strengthened and extended the struggle for workers' self-management which was developing in the workplaces, opening the way to territorial self-management...