

Handout 12c Solidarnosc: Poland's Solidarity Movement

The sole and basic source of our strength is the Solidarity of workers, peasants and the intelligentsia, the Solidarity of the nation, the Solidarity of people who seek to live in dignity, truth, and in harmony with their conscience. Lech Walesa

'Solidarnosc' or Solidarity was a movement in Poland in the 1980s that centered on the desire of trade unions to be independent from the communist party. Polish Solidarity demonstrates the power of non-violence, organized labour, and global solidarity to confront soviet communism.

After World War 2, Poland was liberated and occupied by the Soviet Union which then installed a soviet style government. While unions were not illegal, workers were not allowed to organize unions independent of the communist party in state businesses. There was a lack of real bargaining power. In the 1970s, as economic conditions and rising food prices hit Poland, there were many strikes characterized by violence and repression.

One of the workers radicalized during that period was Lech Walesa, an electrician in the Lenin (Gdansk) shipyards. Walesa had gone to vocational school as young man and worked later as a mechanic and then electrician in the shipyards. He was fired after several disputes with the managers over working conditions.

Meanwhile, in 1979, Polish born Pope John Paul II visited Poland. It was the first time for officially atheist communist Poland. Workers and citizen groups organized most of the visits. Millions of people for the first time were allowed to gather in large groups for mass. Their success in organization showed many people they had the power to organize. During his speeches, the Pope criticized the lack of human rights in Poland and told Polish citizens not to be afraid.

In 1980, the government announced another increase in food prices. To protest, shipyard workers at the Lenin (Gdansk) shipyards struck and occupied the shipyards in protest. In addition to protesting food prices, they also demanded the right to form free unions. Lech Walesa had just managed to avoid arrest that morning, and led the workers in their nonviolent strike and protest.

Word spread to other factories and shipyards in Gdansk, and to 20 other sites. Delegates from those sites were sent and leaders from the sites formed a committee, drew up demands, and committed themselves to non violent direct action. Walesa was elected leader of the committee, calling itself Solidarnosc, or Solidarity. Sympathetic students and professionals also supported the strikers.

The movement began to spread across the country. Flowers and images of the Pope became the symbols of Solidarity. The movement used leaflets, protests, vigils, Catholic masses, protest painting, parades, marches, slowdowns, strikes, hunger strikes, music, and international support. The communist party was concerned about the growing movement and power of the

workers.

The regime began to crack. Officials agreed to talk to the Solidarity committee and agreed to most of their demands after about two weeks. The government agreed to a raise in wages, limit on censorship, and to allow free independent unions. Solidarity was legal.

Once it was legal, the membership grew to more than ten million people, and the government was nervous. Large membership free of government control represented a threat to the communist party.

Demonstrations continued. In the spring of 1981 some Solidarity members were beaten by security forces. In response, Solidarity organized a four-hour warning strike with over 12 million people, the largest strike in the history of the soviet bloc. The government responded by ruling Solidarity illegal again. There were hundreds of demonstrations, plans for another strike, and martial law was imposed. This time Moscow indicated support for the Polish government.

Solidarity moved underground, but it grew even more. By now it was calling for democratic local governments, independent courts, and equal rights. While underground, Solidarity became a self-help movement. Members developed plans for helping the sick, the elderly, and winter emergency plans.

Walesa and hundreds of other Solidarity leaders were arrested after there was a national day of protest and unofficial referendum on the sitting government. Nevertheless, remaining male activists and women activists took over leadership roles in their absence. Strikes and pressure continued until Walesa and all the other prisoners were released in 1984. By this time, the movement had become a partnership between workers, farmers, churches, students, and intellectuals. The movement was receiving support from international trade unions, the US government, and the Catholic Church.

Then in 1988 the government announced a 40% increase in food prices. A new wave of strikes began, including university students in support of the trade unions. On May Day in Gdansk, there was another shipyard sit in. The strike was broken ten days later, but Solidarity saw massive support. Bus drivers and students struck, and with continuing economic crisis, the strike continued.

By this time, the government reached out to Solidarity to negotiate the basis for free elections in 1989. In that election, Solidarity won the maximum number of seats allowed. This was the first non communist government in the soviet bloc, and later that year the Berlin Wall fell.

Lech Walesa was elected president. As president however he was not as popular and won only 1% of the vote in the next election. Walesa was invited to the Vatican to meet the Pope, and he won the Nobel Peace Prize.

Solidarity was inspiration for Operation Solidarity and the Solidarity Coalition in British Columbia in 1983, a coalition of unions and activist groups opposed to 26 bills introduced by

the BC government that would slash social services and union rights.

During Arab spring, Walesa met with Tunisian and Egyptian protesters and he spoke to demonstrators during Occupy in Chicago.

In 2006 he actually quit the Solidarity party he founded and led because of its support for Poland's conservative leaders.

Resources:

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Kakhoda, Zein. "'Solidarnosc' (Solidarity) Brings down the communist government of Poland, 1988-89. *Global Non Violent Action Database*, 10/09/2011, Accessed 08/06/2013 <http://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/solidarno-Solidarity-brings-down-communist-government-poland-1988-89>

"Poland-we've caught God by the arm". *A Force More Powerful*. Accessed 08/07/2013. <http://www.aforcemorepowerful.org/films/afmp/stories/poland.php>

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1.) Summarize the philosophy and goals of Solidarnosc.
- 2.) How did the concept of solidarity work in this case? What groups were involved?
- 3.) What was the role of labour unions in this story?
- 4.) Assess the success or failure of this movement. What went well, what did not? Why?