WARSAW STUDIES IN POLITICS AND SOCIETY 4

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Labour Protest in Poland

Trade Unions and Employee Interest Articulation After Socialism

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Introduction

Why study labour protest in Poland? Because it was the driving force of political change throughout the post-war period. This was quite clearly true in the communist time (1944–89). The frequency and magnitude of spontaneous social mobilisation was the defining characteristic of Poland as compared with the other eastern bloc states. During that period, all major changes in political elites followed and were a consequence of massive unrests. There was no exception to this rule: the governing party elites changed in the years 1956, 1970, 1980 and 1981, which also happened to be the years in which mass workers' protests occurred. Transformation, which started in 1989, followed a wave of strikes in 1988.

The picture is less obvious, but also true, in the beginning of the transformation period. The reforms introduced in 1990 were accompanied by a large-scale protests encompassing many sectors of the economy and involving different social groups. The 1990s were marked by a particularly high mobilisation which culminated in 1998, during the period of a second wave of systemic reform. Protests calmed down in early 2000s, but returned at the end of the first decade of the XXI century. Through such activities the society was an active participant of the reforms.

Social protest in the post-war Poland was primarily a working-class phenomenon. Again, this is quite obvious in case of the communist period, but also true under the conditions of the new system. The unrest that led to political change in the communist years was located primarily in large industrial plants: in 1956 in Cegielski enterprise in Poznań, in 1970 in the shipyards in the coastal cities of Gdańsk, Gdynia and Szczecin. The protests that started the Solidarity movement in 1980 were dispersed throughout the country, but by far the greatest impact was from the strikes in major industrial centres: shipyards and coal mines, where agreements between protesters and the authorities were signed. Likewise, the strike wave that led to systemic transformation was located in major industrial plants.

After transformation, under conditions of freedom to protest, mobilisation is more dispersed. Nevertheless, trade unions are consistently the most common organizers of protest activities, and industrial workers are the most common group of participants. They frequently use symbolic elements inherited from the former regime. Trade unions that organise these protests were often formed before transformation, and their leaders learned the protest know-how under the former system.

The central thesis of this study is about the significance of labour protest for determining the power structure and policy both under communism and in the new system. Unlike in other Soviet-dominated states, the society in Poland were able to exert some effective influence on the communist regime, which resulted in a set of internal policies designed to accommodate workers' demands or dissipate their discontent. The patterns of mobilization inherited from that period proved to be instrumental in shaping the transformation path in the early years of the new system, when the key institutions and policies were created. This concerns, inter alia, economic changes introduced during transformation. Employees organized in unions were able to influence transformation processes in many ways: directly in enterprises, politically via their representatives in parties and indirectly, by creating a public opinion climate sympathetic with their goals.

Labour and Transition

Workers in large industrial plants in heavy industry were, in the official discourse of state socialism, the leading class. This symbolic appreciation was coupled with the reality of restricted professional mobility, hard and dangerous work, authoritarian management style and political control over the enterprise. On the one hand, workers were told by authorities, on everyday basis, that they constituted the backbone of the country. On the other hand, they had to endure excruciating and unrewarding labour whose fruits were often seen to be expropriated by the rulers. This led to a combustible state of collective consciousness: a sense of self-importance coupled with frustration. Being a leading class in name only created conditions for unrest.

The roots of labour unrest in state socialism can also be traced to generational changes. During the post-World War II years, mass migration from villages to cities occurred. By the 1960s most Poles lived in urban areas. Many of the new urban dwellers saw this change as upward social mobility. However, in time the system stabilized. The post-war generation occupied positions of influence and blocked mobility channels for new generations of workers. The tensions were exacerbated by the rising educational standards of workers. Young, ambitious, fairly well educated men in industry found themselves without career prospects, in deteriorating material living conditions. This generation gave rise to the Solidarity trade union (NSZZ "Solidarność") in 1980.

Activity in the Solidarity movement was a life-defining experience for a generation of people. This concerns leaders, activists and sympathizers. They emerged as a distinct group with its own identity, mythology and shared interests. It became an institution in the sociological sense. Due to the fact that, as institution,

it contained both cultural and economic component, it proved to be durable beyond circumstances that led to its origin. Solidarity formation was a learning experience for activists. They acquired a set of skills related to protest organization and interest articulation and successfully used them under former system. After transformation, a lot of this know-how was preserved. They repeated the same methods of actions and rhetoric even long after state socialism was gone.

The significance of union mobilization during transition was reinforced by the emergence of the increasingly independent left-wing union, the All-Poland Alliance of Trade Unions (OPZZ). This confederation was initially under full political control of the Communist Party. However, during transition, in the late 1980s, it increasingly gained independence and started to act as a force separate from the authorities. Around the time of the systemic change, it frequently overtook Solidarity in radicalism. Strikes and protest actions served it as a source of legitimation, signalling that it emerged as a true voice of the working class. Competition between these the two large union umbrella organizations was a significant factor both in industrial relations and in politics during and after transition.

On the level of enterprise, unions were able to capitalize on the weakening of political control. During transition, many directors were nominated or approved by Solidarity. The winning strategy of unions when they articulated demands was addressing the grievances as high up as possible. Enterprise-level issues were frequently directed at the national or regional government. Such a strategy was the legacy of the formation period of Solidarity. In 1980–1981 protests were typically resolved by political authorities. Continuing such a strategy under free market economy, while apparently dysfunctional, proved nevertheless effective on numerous occasions. The bargaining power of unions was reinforced by connections of both Solidarity and OPZZ with political parties. This tactic was effective in public sector. With time, jobs were increasingly moved into the private sector due to privatization of some enterprises, collapse of others and the emergence of greenfield enterprises. In private sector the strategy of involving high-level authorities was much less effective and was used to a much smaller extent. Trade unions had the skills and experience to achieve their goals in residuals of the former system, but were not able to adapt to the private economy and, as the public sector shrank, so did the unions.

Complementary to the enterprise-level influence, unions were able to shape state policy on various levels. This was possible due to their influence in parliament in the early years of transition. Solidarity was particularly strong. In the 1990s it entered parliament by itself, as well supporting numerous political groupings. It appointed the Prime Minister in the 1997–2001 parliamentary

term. At that time, the path to political career frequently involved union leadership positions. To a lesser extent, this was also true about the OPZZ. It also had parliamentary representation in the post-communist left-wing party, the Alliance of the Democratic Left (SLD). It was a strong actor in the socio-political milieu composed of groups with origins in state socialism. The mutual balance of power between the two unions and political parties tied to them changed over time. While in the 1990s unions were relatively strong and managed to dictate the conditions under which common causes were advanced, in 2000s the pendulum swung. Unions weakened, while the party system consolidated. Leaders of Solidarity were no longer kingmakers, and leaders of OPZZ ceased being key players in left-wing politics.

Thirdly, unions had significant "soft power" during transition. The myth of Solidarity and the numeric strength of the OPZZ reinforced it. Public opinion was, in general, highly sympathetic to union goals. Union influence on the state was generally viewed as insufficient. Strikes and other union protest actions were usually received with understanding and empathy, even if they caused disturbances to everyday life of citizens. Being in government undermined the position of unions: when Solidarity was in power it became wildly unpopular. It lost trust because it failed to perform its role as a union. In general, employees wanted protection, but failed to see it delivered.

Trade unions used a broad range of methods of interest articulation. As with most labour protests, strike was the ultimate method of exerting pressure. However, it was by no means the only tool at unions' disposal. Frequently, a warning (strike alert, *pogotowie strajkowe*) sufficed in reaching negotiation goals, if it was accompanied by a publicity campaign. Strikes (and threats to undertake them) were, paradoxically, much more effective in public than private enterprises: although state-owned enterprises were to an extent immune to immediate economic threat caused by a strike (they could frequently rely on state help), they were nevertheless a target of strikes far more often than private companies. Moreover, strikes were seldom used as the only tool. Publicizing their goals involved street demonstrations, public declarations (appeals, open letters), and rallies. Some of the most spectacular protests in the early years of transition involved hunger strikes in public institutions (e.g. ministries, regional government offices). Their dramatic portrayal in the media served as powerful symbolic pressure on decision-makers. Some unions (Solidarity more than any other) developed elaborate symbolic systems and corresponding visual identity: flags, signs, songs, religious symbols were used during protest events to boost morale.

A peculiar feature of labour protests during transition was the wide-ranging spectrum of goals. Commonly, unions combined narrow economic demands

(usually pay rise) with broad goals related to the economy, politics or ideology. Solidarity in particular did not feel comfortable restricted to pure unionism. It self-defined as a social or national movement and advanced a number of non-economic causes, such as state reform, and even religious issues. In the mid-1990s, at the height of its political power, it helped prepare and advance an alternative proposal for the Constitution. While non-economic activities became less frequent in 2000s, Solidarity still supported symbolic actions such as commemorations of the Smolensk air crash. Other big unions were less engaged in non-economic activities, but they also acted outside of the purely economic sphere. For instance, during the government of Law and Justice (PiS) in 2005–2007 teachers' and nurses' unions were strong voices of opposition on ideological grounds related to thwarting of free speech and political control of education.

From a long-term perspective, organized labour is on a declining trajectory. While unions developed a set of strategies and tactics of advancing their interests in state sector under transformation, they were not able to adapt to the changing economy dominated by private enterprises, many of them extremely small in size. During transformation, they were able to influence the outcomes of both national-level policies and individual disputes on sector and enterprise level. However, starting in 2000s the major structural reforms were over. Unions remained strong where they always had a solid footing: in the remaining state-controlled enterprises and in public sector. They continued their mode of activity, but lost in importance due to their shrinking base.

The decline in trade union membership and influence is a global phenomenon, related to decomposition of Fordist methods of industrial production. However, it is also a post-communist trend related to the increase in size of the private sector, where unions are not strongly rooted. Thirdly, it is a national-level process. In Poland, politicization and overstretch in terms of functions contributed to two above mentioned causes of decline of union strength.

Work Plan

The study has eight parts. I start with a discussion of theoretical assumptions regarding social protest as research problem. In the second part, I outline the history of employee protest in the communist Poland. Thirdly, I track the dynamics of trade union membership before and after systemic change and attitudes to organized labour. Next, I describe in detail the protest activities after systemic change in 1989. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 are empirical analyses of different types of labour protests. Finally, a comparison between protest dynamics in Poland in Hungary serves as illustration of divergent legacies of negotiated transition on social mobilization.

In chapter I discuss the methodological issues facing the work. The basic challenge in describing the labour protest in the post-war Poland is the context: the nature of the political system under which social actors operate. It is both a theoretical and empirical problem. Theoretically, the concepts acquire different meanings when they are used in the context of the communist system, and in the market democracy. The main organizers of protest activities both before and after transformation were industrial workers grouped in trade unions. However, the role of trade unions changed dramatically during transformation: they were a transmission belt for party policy in early to mid- socialism, a mass movement in late socialism, and have become an interest group. It is also an empirical problem: while finding sources to describe the democratic Poland is relatively straightforward, coverage of social protest under socialism was subjected to strict information control.

Chapter II is a description of the major waves of protest in Poland under state socialism and their consequence. During this period, Poland was rocked by major waves of discontent with increasing frequency. Starting with the late 1970s, labour unrest became a genuine threat to the authorities. It was increasingly a factor in their decision-making; opposition leaders emerged and became a target of observation and persecution. Moreover, numerous mid-level organizers appeared on the enterprise level. These developments were relevant for the protest after transformation, as the skills gained during the late socialism were used in the new socio-economic context. In this analysis I try to link the events and developments from the former system to the new reality.

Chapter III is devoted to the changes in the structure of trade unions during systemic transformation. Political and economic reforms overhauled the society and its institutions. Changes affected the unions to a great extent. Membership declined, but coverage rate fell differently depending on the sector. Service sector employees were the most affected. I use comparative survey data to show these trends. I also present data on public opinion attitudes to union activities, documenting the extent of acceptance of different forms of protests and expectations regarding union influence.

In chapter IV, labour activities after systemic change in 1989 are described in detail. The objective is to provide a broad picture of protest actions organized by trade unions in the years 1989–2011. Protest event analysis is used to cover all events occurring during that period, i.e. every protest in public records. Trade unions were the most active organizer of such events before, during and after transition. They used multiple methods. They frequently acted in cooperation with other social and institutional actors. These events are described regarding

the social composition of participants, their number, their demands, tactics and goals.

Transformation essentially preserved the mode of operation of trade unions when it comes to organizing strikes and demonstrations. Unions remain strong in public sector, and this is where their activities are concentrated. In private sector, on the other hand, they are far weaker, organize fewer protest events and tend to be focus on the enterprise-level issues. I compare protests in public and private sector in chapter V. I identify the industries in which unions were most active in organizing protest events and develop a typology of protests.

Public activities of Polish trade unions are not restricted to articulating economic interests. Their leaders, at various points in recent history, became politicians and lawmakers. Unions have also had institutionalized influence over political parties, both on the right and left wing. As a consequence, they sometimes organized strikes and demonstrations together with political parties. Such events articulated non-economic goals, sometimes in addition to economic demands, and sometimes exclusively. I describe the dynamics of non-economic union protests in chapter VI.

I argue in this book that unions had significant influence on state reform. Measuring the effect of protest on decision makers is an extremely difficult task empirically: the link between a demand and a decision by the authorities may be indirect, and there may be considerable time lag. Moreover, the link may not be explicit: the authorities may introduce or change a policy under pressure while denying this, or on the contrary: they may be meeting the demands only apparently. Therefore, in-depth analysis of individual protest cases is required. Chapter VII is an empirical test of effectiveness of protest activities during transformation. I compare mobilization during two periods. First is the initial stage (14 months, Nov. 1997–Dec. 1998) of the government of Jerzy Buzek. During that period, protest activity reached the highest level ever recorded. In that time, the government introduced significant reforms which upset many interest groups and caused controversy. By examining the demands and the authority response I establish a link between the two. As a reference point, I compare this period to the initial stage of the government of Leszek Miller (Nov. 2001–Dec. 2002), during which such reforms were not implemented.

Chapter VIII offers comparative perspective. It shows the trajectory of social mobilization in Poland and Hungary, two countries with a similar transformation path: former communist states where transition was initiated by a consensus between *ancien regime* and oppositional elites. While initially after the introduction of the new system the Polish society was much more mobilised, later on the

trends reversed, and the level of protest in Hungary rose to degree far higher than the levels recorded in Poland. To some extent, this can be attributed to economic factors: gradual improvement in the Polish economy eased tensions, while the crisis in Hungary aggravated them. However, other causes can be identified as well. I argue that the elite composition during round table agreements in both Hungary and Poland was a key factor in development of collective actors. In Poland the dominance of working-class trade unions in staging protests can be explained by their role before and during transition. In Hungary, on the other hand, political groupings formed by primarily middle-class actors dominated the oppositional elites. Hungarian protests were more political and were relatively often staged by professionals.

Axiological Dimension

In this book, I make conscious attempt to preserve value neutrality in analysing trade union activities. Specifically, I do not evaluate the influence of unions on economic reform. It can be argued that unions contributed to reducing income inequality and institutionalized tensions which otherwise could have derailed the transformation. On the other hand, unions were at times obstacles to successful implementation of transformation and some enterprises (e.g. Gdańsk Shipyard) collapsed because of union lock on power in them. Specific protest events may have had better or worse consequences, but this could only be evaluated ex post, from a long-term perspective. Moreover, the effects of many protest events may be different if evaluated from the perspective of the enterprise or the economy as a whole. The perspective of citizens affected by protests is different from the point of view of participants. Bearing this in mind, I treat unions as collective actors with their own goals and define success as achieving them.

I also refrain from evaluating particular protest methods and strategies. Strikes, demonstrations, road blockades were characterized by varying degree of disruptiveness. Most were legal and peaceful, but some involved violence and criminality. There is a grey area here and categorizing disruptiveness is problematic. Moreover, the level of acceptance of violence in union actions may have changed in the quarter century that elapsed from systemic change, in line with a general change in attitudes. In some ways, unions were treated specially during transition due to their role in opposition. Later on, this privileged position diminished. Again, I describe tactics and establish effects, but do not attempt to evaluate the ethical dimension.