

# Polish strike wave leading to crisis worse than 1981

by Konstantin George

The strike wave now under way in Poland has ignited a crisis more serious than that of 1980-81, when Poland only narrowly escaped Soviet military intervention. The 1988 Polish crisis now in the making is bringing to a head a generalized crisis in the economies of the Eastern European satellites. These economies have been devastated during the 1980s by a pincers of Soviet looting to sustain Moscow's pre-war military-economic build-up, and looting by Western financiers through the collapse in price of Polish agricultural products and raw materials (coal and copper) exported to the West.

The eruption of the Polish crisis now, on the eve of the Soviet Central Committee Plenum in late May and the June 28 Party Conference, could be decisive in effecting dramatic policy shifts in the Soviet capital.

The current Polish strike wave was initiated on April 25, when the bus and tram drivers of the industrial city of Bydgoszcz (Bromberg, pop. 360,000) and the nearby town of Inowroclaw, went on strike, paralyzing the two cities. That same afternoon, the cities agreed to grant the workers a 63% wage increase. The huge raise ended the strike, but, far more important, ensured new strikes.

That happened, and literally overnight. At 6 a.m., April 26, 8,000 steel workers from the huge Lenin Steelworks, the largest in Poland with a workforce of 32,000, in the city of Nowa Huta near Cracow, walked off the job. By the next day, 20,000 workers were involved, and the strike is continuing as *EIR* goes to press. The Nowa Huta strike is *national* in character. The strikers' demands only begin with a 50% wage increase. They have declared they will not return to work until the Polish government grants *all* industrial workers, health workers, and teachers *double* the wage increase granted in February as so-called "compensation" for the huge February food and necessities price increases.

The stage for a confrontation is set. The Polish government declared on April 27 that the strikers' demands cannot be met. This sets the stage not only for a prolonged walkout at the country's largest steel plant, but makes it only a matter of time—a very short time—before a chain of other strikes erupt.

A walkout is imminent at the Stalowa Wola steelworks (25,000 workers) in southeast Poland, the second largest

steel works in the country. The workforce has voted to strike, the only question is on what date the strike will begin. It was the Stalowa Wola workers who initiated the current unrest when 5,000 of them marched in protest against the government's austerity policies on April 21.

## A brutal austerity policy

The strike wave is the direct result of a brutal austerity policy by Warsaw, demanded of it by the Russian Imperium and Western bank creditors. Accepting IMF and bank-dictated austerity "conditions" for debt rescheduling, Poland imposed the steepest price increases of the postwar period in two steps, Feb. 1 and April 1, for fuel and energy, respectively. From January through March, i.e., before the April measures took effect, the Polish inflation rate had already reached an officially admitted 45%.

The demands by the strikers, which may seem high to those in the West ignorant of the abominable living conditions in Poland, are at most, to be blunt, the bare minimum required. They will *not* improve matters, but only prevent a further collapse in dismal living standards. A concrete example: The wage increase won by the Bydgoszcz bus and tram drivers has lifted their hourly wage from a dollar equivalent of about 20¢ an hour to about 33¢ an hour.

## Explosion coming

The situation is rapidly building toward an explosion. The Polish Communist Party has called on the government to undertake "decisive and radical measures" to stop the strike wave. But the government is damned if it does and damned if it doesn't. Should it intervene with force to break the Nowa Huta strike, a national explosion of protest surpassing in magnitude the crisis of 1980-81 is certain. Solidarnosc leader Lech Walesa warned the government on April 27 that if it used force, the Gdansk (Danzig) shipyards would be struck, and workers in enterprises throughout the country would strike and protest in solidarity. Speaking one day earlier to the visiting Norwegian foreign minister, Thorvald Stoltenberg, Walesa declared that "the situation is getting hotter and hotter in the country," a strike wave has begun, and "anything is possible."

The weekly press conference on Tuesday, April 26, by government spokesman Jerzy Urban only served to pour oil on the fire. Urban declared, "Every enterprise is independent. If an enterprise can afford to pay increases, it will pay, and if not, it will not pay and should go bankrupt." In short, a policy of selected wage increases for certain strata of the workforce, combined with instituting mass unemployment, and, as Urban made clear in demanding transit fare increases to pay for the wage increase granted in Bydgoszcz, a new round of huge price increases.

There is another dimension to the present Polish crisis. This time around, the government has already lost control over its own official trade unions. The Bydgoszcz strike was led by the local chairman of the official transport workers union. The Nowa Huta strike has been publicly endorsed by the official steelworkers union.

The first round of the 1988 Polish crisis will come to a head on the weekend of the May Day celebrations. Mass protests by the Solidarnosc opposition and striking workers and supporters are scheduled. Anything can happen.

### **A short fuse for Moscow**

The 1988 Polish crisis will force Moscow to adopt radical policy shifts in the very near future. These will fall in two primary domains. The Soviet leadership will, because they have no other choice, demand that Warsaw take measures to put the brakes on the current Western looting of its economy. Soviet looting will, of course, continue. The Soviets will also accelerate other preparations, including military moves, to intervene if all else fails.

Concerning the shift to a policy of changing the rules by which Western financiers have been able, till now, to loot Poland, the first major signal in this direction was issued by the April 24 *Pravda*. The article, written with the clear knowledge that an explosion was about to occur, attacked both the West German government and the West in general for maintaining a "differentiated policy" toward the countries of Eastern Europe, with the goal of "maneuvering them" in "opposition to the Soviet Union," and "making them bend" to Germany's will. *Pravda* declared that this is pursued especially through "economic levers," "for example, with Poland," where the West had demanded the huge price increases as "necessary" in return for better credit conditions. But, "no sooner was it done," than "with the help of Western radio stations . . . [there was] provoked . . . an explosion of dissatisfaction."

This was one of the most important articles to appear in *Pravda* this year. The implicit conclusion was that to attack the cause of the "explosion of dissatisfaction," the Western "economic levers" must be removed.

### **A military solution?**

This is but one indication of the type of policy changes about to emerge from the Kremlin. A Soviet military "solu-

tion" for Poland cannot be ruled out. The preparations for it are already at an advanced stage.

Throughout March and April, the Soviet military command has devoted priority attention to Poland. Three top level Soviet military visits during this period, all shrouded in secrecy, illustrate the point.

1) On March 10, Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov, commander in chief of all Soviet troops in the Western Theater, paid an unprecedented visit to Warsaw, for lengthy talks with the Polish defense minister and Gen. Lt. Ivan Korbutin, the

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*Moscow is about to change the rules by which Western financiers have, to date, been able to loot the Polish and other Eastern European economies, so that looting of the satellites by Moscow alone can continue to feed the Soviet war buildup.*

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commander of Soviet forces in Poland.

2) The April 7 *Krasnaya Zvezda* (*Red Star*) reported on its sports page a several-day visit by the Soviet first deputy defense minister, General of the Army Pyotr Lushev, to "sports facilities" of the troops of the Group of Soviet Forces in Germany—the cover story for an extremely important visit by the number-two man at the defense ministry, connected to contingency plans for the GSFG should Poland explode.

3) Immediately after Lushev's trip, Marshal Sergei Akhromeyev, Ogarkov's successor as chief of the general staff, paid an unprecedented five-day visit to Warsaw, April 11-15, that featured lengthy sessions with Poland's defense minister and chief of the general staff. No substantive details were ever released on these talks, nor on Akhromeyev's meeting with Polish head of state, General Jaruzelski.

Earlier this year, two additional signals could be adduced from Soviet military publications.

1) The Carpathian Military District in the Western Ukraine, bordering on Poland, was transferred from the Southwest Theater of War command, and placed under Ogarkov's Western Theater of War command, thus placing all Soviet forces within and bordering on Poland under a unified wartime command.

2) Discussions occurred in the Carpathian Military District stressing "limited war."

The only "limited war" possible in the near future for those troops would be on Polish soil.