

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article949>



Poland

Where Does the Left Come From?

- IV Online magazine - 2006 - IV374 - January 2006 -

Publication date: Saturday 14 January 2006

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Magdalena Ostrowska interviews Boguslaw Zietek president of the Confederation of Free Trade Unions "Sierpien 80" and the Polish Party of Labour.

MO: Although Sierpien 80 ("August 80") is not the biggest trade union federation in Poland, since its foundation it has become famous as an organizer of serious strikes and workers' protests. Some characterise it as an extremist union, seeking confrontation. Where does this radicalism come from?

BZ: It's not only radicalism, it's also honesty and consistency. Sierpien 80 was founded by people who had experience of the 1980s. We remember that in August 1980 on the Baltic coast the striking workers raised the slogan: "Socialism - yes, deviations - no!". We have not replaced this slogan by that of "Capitalism - yes, deviations - no!" as the Solidarnosc union has.

We have not forgotten why the striking workers struggled in 1980 and those who joined the first Solidarnosc union, which then had ten million members. Our critical attitude towards the new Solidarnosc led us at the time to participate in the foundation of Solidarnosc 80, which in 1992 organized the first serious strikes in Poland.

These strikes, co-organized with the OPZZ (the official trade union under the old regime - ed.), were aimed at the so-called reforms of the first "Balcerowicz plan" (an IMF-dictated programme of capitalist restoration - ed.). The attitude adopted then by the union leader, Marian Jurczyk, his support for the government of Jan Olszewski - responsible, among other things, for the botched privatisation of the FSM car factory - and the compromises made by Solidarnosc 80 with the employers, led to a split and the birth of Sierpien 80.

[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/logo_sierpien80.jpg]

Daniel Podrzycki (see article in this issue) was the founder and president of Sierpien 80. After his tragic death in the course of the presidential campaign, the union congress conferred the leadership on me. Sierpien 80 can boast notably of having organized the biggest and longest victorious strike in the Huta Katowice steel plant.

It is on this basis that the union experienced a dynamic development. Sierpien 80 is currently the third biggest trade union federation in Silesia, the region where our confederation was born. Our most recent success has been an effective struggle in defence of Polish coalmines and miners' pensions.

Is this orientation the fruit of your experiences?

From the beginning our goal was a firm, effective and consistent defence of workers' interests. We don't wish, like some unions, to be sitting astride the barricades and doing deals with the employers. And we have succeeded. We don't want to be a "transmission belt" between the employer and the employee. The role of a union is to defend the fundamental workers' interests and not to legitimate neoliberal reforms.

As trades unionists we are "at the service" of the representation and the defence of workers' interests. It is them we must serve, not their opposites. Such an attitude does not arouse sympathy from the employers, or those unions who, often at the price of the abandonment of the interests of the workers, seek an agreement at any price with the employer. That underpins our disappointment first with Solidarnosc, then Solidarnosc 80.

Such an attitude must not have been enough, since you took the decision to set up your own political party.

As Sierpien 80 we believe that the realisation of the workers' interests cannot be founded on the trade union struggle alone, but that we should develop a political tool. The union experience convinced us that an effective struggle is not limited to protests against bad decisions and bad laws.

To represent the workers effectively, trades unionists must have an influence on the creation of the law, so that it is in agreement with the interests of workers. Other trades unionists, although they have had such a possibility, have not wished to defend the interests of the workers in parliament.

The Constitution does not envisage the possibility of unions presenting their own lists in parliamentary elections. So instead of relying on other parties, Sierpien 80 has created its own political representation for workers. Capitalism is exploitation, the crushing of workers' rights, unemployment, poverty and exclusion. Our trade union experiences authorise us to make such a judgement. The attitude and effect of the activity of Sierpien 80 give a picture of what the party created by us will be like.

The Polish Party of Labour (PPP) will defend the rights of workers and their interests. We have heard such affirmations several times from various groups, but when it comes to the crunch, they disappear among other questions.

The PPP was created by authentic workers' representatives and not by frauds that have little in common with this social group and use it for short-term gains. There are no corrupt and ephemeral bureaucrats among us. It is perhaps for that reason that we are attacked as a union. For some years in Poland we have had violations of the Labour Code and laws, which concern the workers. Exploitation doesn't just take place in the supermarkets [1] !

The non-respect of trade union rights is general. For some years we observe a fall in the rate of unionisation, which has a number of sources, but the same effect the lack of effective defenders of workers' interests. That is already beginning to rebound against employers who apply the "divide and rule" principle, buy off the trades unionists and scare the workers.

Such a policy leads to desperate workers beginning to defend themselves and to take their revenge for the indignities they suffer, for example by physically attacking the managers who oppress them at work. That is what happened recently at Indesic in Lodz . [2]. Workers are deprived of the instruments of peaceful and civilised defence, so they resort to more radical and desperate measures, because their backs are against the wall. It would be wrong to believe that the workers will indefinitely shut up and suffer all these humiliations. Revolt is certain.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/walesaatthegates.jpg>]
"Socialism without deformations" - Solidarnosc in its early days

The PPP emerged from the struggle for the workers' interests, has a class social base and is strongly linked to the working class for example through Sierpien 80. Is this why the party has a left orientation?

All trade union activity is of the left, because it involves struggling for the interests of the workers. That is what decides the attitude and the programme of the PPP, which has its social base in the labour movement and takes account of it. For this reason alone the PPP is indispensable, as a left that has no truck with the neoliberals.

A true left, which does not calculate like a banker, but fights like a worker. The workers and the unemployed were not at all represented in the parliamentary arrangements until then, or if they were represented, it was done badly.

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Trades unionists have entered parliament on various lists, but rapidly the interests of the workers were subjected to those of the party.

Many examples witness to this. In 1997 a group of trades unionists entered parliament on the lists of Solidarnosc Electoral Action (a front of right wing parties set up in 1996 under the leadership of Marian Krzaklewsk -ed.), which formed a coalition government with the Union of Liberty (the dominant neoliberal party from 1989 to 1991 -ed.). Their first act was to turn their backs on the interests of the workers.

The period 1997-2001 saw the worst solutions from the point of view of society, among others the four reforms of the government of Jerzy Buzek [3] and the reform of the coalmines, which led to a total collapse in Silesia and the liquidation of 100,000 jobs in this branch alone. One cannot forget that it was the government supported by Solidarnosc that deprived 1.8 million people of the right to an early pension.

During the subsequent legislature, when the SLD came to power, we had a repeat performance. The trades unionists who were on its lists and the government of Leszek Miller enacted a far-reaching liberalisation of the Labour Code, among other things. Will the PPP's strong links with a trade union protect this party from alienation from the milieus it should represent?

This link constitutes the guarantee that the PPP will not alienate itself. The SLD came to power with social slogans, of struggle for the rights of the poorest, a halt to privatisation and so on, but in practice it did the contrary - it enacted the neoliberal programme. For example its first decision in Silesia was the privatisation of the Huta Katowice steel plant, pioneered by the minister Andrzej Szarawarski.

The people no longer want these political representatives who assure them during the electoral campaigns that they will carry out a left programme and once in power continue the neoliberal reforms. Now once more we are witnesses to such a situation. It is enough to compare what Andrzej Lepper and Samoobrona Samoobrona (Self-Defence) said in their electoral campaign and what they say now. Samoobrona Samoobrona (Self-Defence) was originally a peasant union.

In 2005 it won 11.41% of the vote and its leader, Andrzej Lepper, has announced his support for neoliberalism and the hope that his deputies will enter the right wing government before the end of the legislature. After the elections, even Balcerowicz ceased to worry Lepper.

One cannot treat people like this and abuse their confidence in the name of personal games. In the case of the PPP such a danger does not exist, because the dependency is in the opposite direction. Inside the PPP it isn't the trades unionists who are at the service of the party, it is the party which is the tool of the workers. It is the best protection against the distancing of the party from its social base and a guarantee that the left programme will be enacted in a consistent manner.

The PPP emerged from Sierpien 80. Does it limit its programme to the militants of this union?

The PPP has presented a programme that any trades unionists could sign up to. We demand an increase in the minimum wage to the level of 68% of the average wage. We want a 35-hour working week while preserving the current level of wages and increasing it systematically in the future. We are for the maintenance of progressive income taxation and in favour of the introduction of a rate of 50% for the wealthiest and 10% for the poor.

We are also opposed to taxing the social groups on the borders of poverty as well as the retired and those living on

pensions. We have drawn up a draft "Law on the status of the unemployed", guaranteeing benefits to all those who do not find work.

We favour the maintenance of free education and health services, and oppose the privatisation of public services and the strategic branches of the economy. That's what we want to achieve through political means. I cannot imagine a trade union which would not agree with these goals. Sadly practice shows that there are unions who not only do not support the left but also support the programme of the right wing and neoliberal parties. It's a confusion! But the level of consciousness is growing and such unions are losing their *raison d'être*, because people don't want games, they want work and bread.

Yet everything indicates that soon we will only have games.

There is no doubt on what the right wing government will be like in Poland. You can already clearly see it in the crushing of workers' and trade union rights in the KWK Budryk coal mine and in the limitation of the right to demonstrate in the streets of Poznan and other towns in Poland. And that will not be limited to blind political revenge, purges and limitations of democracy.

In 1997-2001 it was virtually the same leadership as those who have just formed a government who exerted power, only under another label. That speaks for itself. The level of unemployment will not fall, there will be no social minimum or unemployment benefits, no serious social problems will be resolved.

For Poland, this will be a bad government. But it can constitute a chance for the left, if the latter can unite to present a credible programmatic alternative. We must show that it is possible to implement an economic programme that serves the workers and not the capitalists. Sadly, the past experiences with the SLD and SdPI show that if these parties put forward a left programme, their leaders have implemented a generally neoliberal programme after the elections. That's what we've seen up until now.

Can it change? We will see. The errors that the right will make in government will be a chance for the rebirth of a credible left. In the same way a reflection on the errors made by the left groupings constitutes such a chance. But when I read that the SLD and SdPI envisage fusing with the former Union of Liberty, now called the Democrat Party, then I have the greatest doubts that it is a suitable partner for the left. Such conceptions clearly place these parties on the neoliberal side.

Does the PPP's electoral score indicate that a clearly left programme does not convince a lot of people?

The success of the PPP which has just been set up was to succeed in getting on the list in all the electoral constituencies. In the parliamentary elections we won 0.77% of votes across the country. There is no reason to rejoice, but we didn't expect anything else. The elections were decided before anyone voted - by the media and the pre-election polls. But the PPP has all the same succeeded in reaching the voters. If we relate our expenditure for the campaign and the number of votes we obtained, it emerges that our party spent the least to reach the voters. It isn't enough. The airtime in the context of the electoral campaign is not enough for a party that is "outside the loop" and for the voters to become aware of our programme and convinced of it. The PPP hopes to participate in the next local elections and I believe our results will be better.

Who will the PPP collaborate with if it is not to be limited to the activists of Sierpien 80?

The electoral committee of the PPP has invited onto its lists other organisations of the extra-parliamentary left,

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including the Communist Party of Poland (KPP), the Polish Socialist Party (PPS) and the Anticlerical Party of Progress, "Reason". We want to collaborate with these groupings as partners and create with them a credible left, integrating these milieus around a common programme.

We reject the artificial historic divisions, founded on what people did before 1989. If someone wants to do some good for Poland today, it isn't important that they belonged in the past to the governing party or the opposition.

Until 1989 I was in the opposition, but I understand perfectly those who say that in the time of People's Poland the country developed, people had work, there was no unemployment and poverty was not on a scale comparable with today and that after 1989 we saw the selling off of all that had been built by generations of Poles.

I understand the bitterness and disenchantment of those who equate the 16 years of reforms with the liquidation of the social gains of labour and I understand, because I see how many enterprises have been liquidated in Silesia and that in this department alone there are 400,000 unemployed. And the situation is worse in the rest of the country.

We have three million unemployed and only 10% of them have the right to benefits, the others are left to themselves. 40% of the unemployed are under 25. They have never had access to employment. It is this which underlies the real criteria of division and not the historic divergences over who was right in 1956 or 1989. One cannot accept the disdain for the achievements of preceding generations, nor reject them solely because they lived and worked in People's Poland.

In the programme of the PPP, beyond the social questions, there are also fairly unilateral ideological choices. In our reality they even sound very radical.

The PPP was founded on the basis of a trade union, but we do not limit our demands to the social sphere alone. Nobody reasonable can have any doubt that we need a secular state, neutral from the ideological viewpoint, and the separation of religion from questions of state and politics.

It is important that in Poland civilised standards concerning women's rights are applied and that the state actively fights against manifestations of discrimination and tries to equalise women's rights in the various areas of life, in particular on the labour market.

There are numerous groups who are discriminated against and excluded. We want to defend their rights as a political party. Since the beginning we were clearly against Poland's participation in the Iraq war and against the occupation of this country, demanding the immediate withdrawal of Polish troops. Unlike many parties who use the left's colours, we have not hesitated to present a clear viewpoint on this subject and we have taken part in anti-war demonstrations.

Does the PPP identify with the left groupings who participate in the global justice movement and reject the conception of the "third way" formulated in 1999 by Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder and by social democracy?

We are also critical of the phenomenon of the left's retreat before the interests of big capital, which should be clearly seen as betraying the interests of the labour movement. That is why we look with interest on the processes underway on the western European political scene, where the consistent left is gaining in popularity. In Poland we can see the beginning of similar transformations.

In our country also the movement for global justice has emerged and argues that "another world is possible" We

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oppose the negative effects of neoliberal globalisation, which we also suffer in Poland. We take part in various initiatives of the Polish global justice movement and we collaborate with these milieus. In particular we want to take part in the international social forums, as a trade union and as a party. In these Forums there are various social and political currents. What unites us are the demands for social justice, a real democracy and the primacy of labour over capital.

[1] Since 1989 Western supermarket chains have enjoyed unlimited rights to establish themselves in Poland, pushing small traders into bankruptcy.

[2] At the Indesit refrigerator factory in Lodz, the directors abolished safety systems on the presses, leading to the death of a young worker and a subsequent assault on one of the directors. There are no unions at Indesit and those who have tried to set them up have been sacked.

[3] The government of Jerzy Buzek (1997-2001) carried out four main counter-reforms: education, administration, health and pensions