European Review, Vol. 16, No. 1, 65–73 © 2008 Academia Europæa
doi:10.1017/S1062798708000070 Printed in the United Kingdom

French Enthusiasm for Solidarność

MARCIN FRYBES

CADIS-EHESS, 54 Bld Raspail 75006 Paris, France, and Instytut Adama Mickiewicza, ul. Mokotowska 25, 00-560 Warszawa, Poland.
Email: m.frybes@gazeta.pl

France was one of the main supporters of Solidarność. The events in August and September 1980 immediately gained the interest of the French media. Trade unionists started to collaborate with their Polish colleagues, for instance by setting up exchange programs or by introducing Solidarność to international trade unions. Organisations of solidarity were founded and started to collect food, clothes and drugs. After the proclamation of Martial Law in Poland, this grew into a mass movement, involving many layers of the French population. Both workers and intellectuals were drawn to the idea of a 'second left': an alternative to the old and radical socialism.

There were many Frenchmen in attendance on 31 August 2005 at the celebration of the 25th anniversary of the signing of the Gdańsk Agreements. Leaders of trade unions, militants of social associations, representatives of the Church, and political figures were there to remember the extraordinary atmosphere in the weeks during which Solidarność was founded. Indeed, France had been closely involved in the events in Poland in 1980–81. French society's solidarity with the Polish opposition was much greater than that of other countries.

French sympathy for Poland during the events of 1980–81 was yet another episode in the long history of the close relationship between the two countries, involving fascination, friendship, inflamed declarations and acts of solidarity.[1] However, when compared to previous periods, the Solidarność era was marked by a difference. It was not to be yet another failed insurrection like so many earlier ones, even though everything pointed in this direction in 1981. For the first time, a Polish movement dear to many Frenchmen was ultimately victorious. Its struggle against the Communist system, until then seen as a lost cause, ended in the fall of the Berlin Wall. Solidarność had won. From then on, tears for the 'poor Poles' belonged in the past. Poland now fully belongs to the family of European countries, having been a

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798708000070 Published online by Cambridge University Press

member of the European Union since 2004, and this is partly due to the friendship and the solidarity of many Frenchmen.

The French solidarity with Solidarność is not only a part of the history of the relationship between France and Poland, it also concerns the socio-political history of France.[2] The movement mobilised the energy and hope of thousands of people and contributed to the crystallisation of a particular political sensibility: an open, democratic, and alternative left, often referred to as *la deuxième gauche*.[3] After the revelations by Solzhenitsyn in the 1970s, this solidarity movement in the 1980s was a crucial phase in the collective French dissociation from the 'Communist illusion', as it was called by François Furet. France was relatively late to take this step, but Solidarność helped her in doing so.

Genesis of a sincere fascination

Several militants and journalists from France were in Gdańsk on 31 August 1980. Bernard Guetta, the correspondent of the daily *Le Monde*, wrote:

> The text has arrived. Everybody signs it, registered by the cameras of Polish television. The delegates applaud enthusiastically. Everybody in the room stands and starts to sing the national anthem. The looks in the eyes shout: 'Pinch my arm. Tell me I am not dreaming'. At the other side of the shipyard's gates, buried under bouquets of flowers, the masses yell: 'Lechek, Lechek'. Lech Walesa arrives and answers the questions everybody is throwing at him. They cry, they laugh, they jump, they hold each other: young and old people, children and couples, whole families: a collective trance. The longest strike (eighteen days) in the history of the Polish People's Republic, and undoubtedly of the whole Communist bloc, has ended in a victory without a drop of blood being shed or even a window broken. Maybe a miracle, certainly a historical turning point, and in the first place striking proof of the political intelligence and maturity of these people and their leaders, of those who were able to answer the gun with reason. This country, ruled by a single party for thirty-five years and not prepared to negotiate or to open into dialogue, having gone through a deep economic catastrophe and an unseen political crisis, proved it was able to innovate and to go forward, to avoid a bloodbath and to throw itself into an uncertain, but promising future.[4]

The French media interest in Polish events was quickly followed by that of the trade unions and other organisations. Already, by August 1980, the most important trade unions were sending many letters to the Polish embassy and to the Polish authorities. Other organisations were also very active during these first few months. New associations were soon created, such as *Solidarité France–Pologne*, *Solidarité avec Solidarność*. There were many local initiatives as well and very early on they began to think of organising humanitarian aid to Poland.

The association *Solidarité France–Pologne* was founded in September 1980 and immediately created many dynamic local branches. Twenty-five years

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798708000070 Published online by Cambridge University Press

later, it still exists. It was presided over for many years by Piotr Słonimski, a distinguished biologist, and supported by the historian Jacques Le Goff, the politician Jean-Louis Bianco (who became Secretary-general at the Elysée under Mitterrand, from May 1981 onwards), the actor Andrzej Seweryn (who would later become a member of the *Comédie française*), and many others. The organisation could count on the enthusiasm and involvement of numerous individuals in the whole of France. Initially, *Solidarité France–Pologne* aimed for collaboration between the trade unions of the two countries. During the 16 months of Solidarność's legal existence, it organised more than 100 meetings in France with Polish unionists, started action to create *jumelages* (partnerships) between French cities and Solidarność branches in Polish cities, and took steps to channel the humanitarian aid to Poland that had been set up by French and international governmental funds. This allowed several NGOs to select partners in Poland independently from the Polish authorities.

From the autumn of 1980 onwards, delegates of French trade unions travelled to Poland to become acquainted with the growing independent trade union movement. Some of them even participated in the strikes of August. In December, the leaders of the CFDT (*Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail*) paid a first official visit to Warsaw and Gdansk. This was the beginning of a sincere friendship. In February 1981, René Salanne of the CFDT travelled to Poland to prepare Solidarność for introduction to the world of international trade unionism. A delegation of the free Polish trade union participated in the annual conference of the International Labour Organisation in Geneva. Two months later, *Solidarité France–Pologne* took the initiative of sending French specialists in labour law (among them Etienne Grumbach and Laurent Parleani) to Warsaw, where they met with Polish colleagues and trade unionists.[5]

Still, the economic situation in Poland continued to deteriorate. The shops were empty and hunger marches were organised in cities throughout the country. In June 1981 Solidarność decided to found a Social Fund. It was presided over by Lech Wałęsa and included Poles with a worldwide reputation, such as Andrzej Wajda, Bronisław Geremek, Krzysztof Penderecki, and Marek Edelman. The organisation made a dramatic appeal: 'We call for aid. Our country is going through a deep crisis. Children and old people are particularly lacking in basic products, drugs, and clothing. It is only with your help, with the help of people of good will, that we can survive the tough winter months.'

Many Frenchmen were touched by this appeal, they began to collect money and food and soon the first trucks left for Poland. Assisted by the *Secours Catholique*, Father Eugène Plater succeeded in sending more than 500 tons of food to Poland. After the proclamation of Martial Law, he would play an essential role in the organisation of the relief and send a thousand times more. The coup of 13 December 1981 surprised several Frenchmen who had left for

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798708000070 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Poland with humanitarian transport, such as Serge Haquette, the President of a *Comité d'aide à la Pologne*, who had mobilised organisations such as *Médecins sans frontières* and the *Lion's Club* in Maubeuge. 'Dozens of thousands of Frenchmen fight alongside Serge Haquette. They do not say "one should do something", they do it', *La Croix* wrote in December 1981.

After 13 December 1981 – an unseen mobilisation

The proclamation of Martial Law in Poland, the ban on Solidarność, and the imprisonment of thousands of its members provoked a wave of demonstrations such as post-war France had not seen before. Representatives from all social levels and political groups participated, often joining the same protest demonstrations.

On the morning of 13 December 1981, *Solidarité France–Pologne* launched a call to gather in Paris in front of the statue of Adam Mickiewicz, the great Polish romantic poet who had spent 25 years of his life in exile in France. Hundreds of people answered this call. Others marched upon the Polish embassy. In the afternoon, the General-secretaries of the main French trade unions sat at the same table for the first time in 15 years. Only two months before they had hosted Lech Wałęsa, who was now in prison. The Polish events inspired them to declare their unity. In the evening, the Prime Minister Pierre Mauroy explained in front of the cameras of the main television stations 'There is no man of free will in Europe, and particularly in France, who does not have sympathy and concern with the efforts of the Polish people to find, in complete independence, an original way to liberty, justice, and prosperity.'

In the following days, hundreds of thousands of people participated in demonstrations in Paris and other cities in France. It was one of the most important waves of demonstrations in France in the 1980s. The media played a key role in raising public awareness and gathering support for Poland. Radio, television, and newspapers dedicated a great deal of time and space to the crisis, giving information on the situation in Poland, running documentaries on the demonstrations of sympathy in France and other countries, and airing debates and discussions with experts. Henri Tincqu wrote in *La Croix*: 'The shock effect in France that had been created by the coup of the Polish government against Solidarność is a sign of both the traditional sympathy with this nation and of the contradictions within French politics today. The cohesion of the government of left-wing unity is confronted with a first serious test on foreign policy.'

All social groups expressed their solidarity. Meetings were organised and Mass was celebrated throughout the country. In Marseille, Cardinal Roger Etchegary declared during his sermon: 'We are not at a meeting or a demonstration. If we

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798708000070 Published online by Cambridge University Press

pray today especially for Poland, it is because the intensity of suffering within this country is as big as the hope that had arisen there for more than a year.' In Paris, a *messe pour la Pologne* was celebrated in Notre-Dame cathedral by Monseigneur Jean-Marie Lustiger, the Paris archbishop, on 19 December.

These developments continued for several weeks. Proclamations, demonstrations, messages of solidarity, all shared the same spirit: condemning the Communist power and demanding the release of prisoners and the restoration of their rights. After Christmas, *Le Monde* published its *Manifeste de 5000 scientifiques pour la Pologne*; it had started on 17 December and obtained the signature of 5228 scientists within less than a month.

Very quickly, a large network of support developed in France.[6] The denunciation of the Polish military repression promoted unity between all supporting groups, in spite of the various ideological streams to which they belonged, and notwithstanding existing sensibilities between the different political parties. From the very beginning, united action was perceived as necessary. In an appeal of 14 December 1981, the Paris committee of *Solidarność France–Pologne* invited all organisations that dealt with the events in Poland to participate in a coordinating meeting on 21 December. Solidarność members who had, by chance, been abroad at the time Martial Law was proclaimed, founded a *Comité de coordination Solidarność en France*, backed by the main French trade unions. An internal note of the CFDT explains: 'This group of about twenty members was characterised by their refusal to apply for political asylum and their profile as a foreign appendix of Solidarność. Alongside the numerous associations that are being found to help Poland, this committee presents itself as the representative of Solidarność's interests.' Finally, an umbrella organisation for trade unions was created and presided over by René Salane of the CFDT. It included five trade unions: CFDT (*Confédération française démocratique du travail*), CFTC (*Confédération française des travailleurs chrétiens*), CGC (*Confédération générale des cadres*), FEN (*Fédération de l'Education Nationale*) and FO (*Force ouvrière*).

The trade unions to the front

The French trade unions were among the first organisations to support Solidarność.[7] In the following years, they developed regular aid mechanisms, financing the action of the coordinating committee in Paris and sending material aid to the Polish underground. Thanks to them the support for Poland spread throughout France. As Solidarność was itself a trade union, it is not surprising that it was precisely the trade unions that gave priority to the Polish opposition and led the support in France. The fact that trade unions defended violated workers' liberties and rights was nothing out of the ordinary; what was new were

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798708000070 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the unity and solidarity. Poland and Solidarność provided a unique occasion for the French trade unions to overcome their internal divisions and to look at what could unite trade unionism. It was a new and inspiring experience for many unionists. The same thing happened in Japan, as the result of a visit that Lech Wałęsa had paid there in the spring of 1981. The new insight of Japanese trade unionists led to the unification of their organisations.

It is true that some trade unions, especially the CFDT, also undertook separate action. But the united character of the French trade unions' defence of Poland lasted for more or less the whole decade in common declarations, acts of solidarity and intervention against the authorities.

In the second half of the 1980s, the character of the trade unions' action changed. In March 1986, Polish trade unionists asked Albert Mercier (the CFDT national secretary in charge of foreign affairs) that aid should no longer be limited to material support and information directed towards public opinion, as had been the case until then. Mercier understood that he had to look for practical solutions, which increasingly answered the needs of the trade union's ideology, more particularly in respect of security conditions, work hygiene, protection of the environment, and a reflection on the role and the future of trade union movements.

In this way, the CFDT, followed by the other unions, tried to develop regular links and contacts between their own regional organisations and the local underground structures of Solidarność. This led to collaboration agreements and, by 28 October 1986, six such agreements had been signed. At the same time, the French trade unions profited from the gradual liberalisation of the situation in Poland and started to invite more and more Polish colleagues to participate in traineeships and study periods in France. They also organised travel for children of Polish trade unionists.

An experience of dialogue: trade unions and intellectuals

French intellectuals and artists also took the side of Solidarność, not only did they defend human rights and openly condemn the military coup, they also stressed the universal meaning of the Solidarność movement and the hope it evoked in the world at large. This pushed some of them into starting up a dialogue and engaging in common action with CFDT trade unions, a thing never seen before.[8]

A proclamation of European intellectuals, published in *La Libération* of 13 December 1981 and signed in France by Pierre Bourdieu, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, François Furet, François Jacob, Jacques Le Goff, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, René Thom, Alain Touraine, and Paul Veyne read: 'dark clouds are hanging above Poland and, by consequence, above Europe. Fear and uncertainty

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798708000070 Published online by Cambridge University Press

weigh down on the country. This situation cannot leave Europe unmoved.' Artists living in France soon joined the movement. Figures with a worldwide reputation expressed their sympathy with Poland, including Samuel Beckett, Pierre Boulez, Peter Brook, Marguerite Duras, Yves Montand, Arianne Mnouchkine and Simone Signoret.

On 22 December, a first common declaration of intellectuals and CFDT leaders was published. It was the beginning of a unique dynamic process that led to reflection, extraordinary meetings, and common conferences and manifestos. A few months later, a new declaration read as follows:

> In order to express their solidarity with the Polish people, the CFDT and a group of intellectuals have decided to take a common position. In this, they follow the spirit of Solidarność, where trade unionists and intellectuals worked and fought together in order to free themselves from totalitarianism. […] It is not sufficient to condemn the coup in Poland. […] No, this evolution is not fatal. No, this is not a lesser evil. No, Solidarność had not gone too far. No, this is not an internal Polish affair. The principle of non-intervention does not have to lead to non-assistance. It is clear that Jaruzelski's putsch was done under pressure from the Soviet Union. We cannot accept a permanent partition of Europe that would exclude Poland and other countries under Soviet domination from a democratic future. The struggle of the Poles is our struggle.

The philosopher Michel Foucault wrote that many people did not accept calling Martial Law an internal affair.

> This did not mean that Poland served as an example. Fortunately, the time in which one looked for models elsewhere had gone. Poland participated in its way in a common experience, a historical effort in which contemporary society tried to define other forms of existence, both very individual and collective, instead of those that we inherited from nineteenth-century realities and dreams. One does not need to listen to those who complain about today's emptiness or immobility, they have only their bitterness in order to make their future. On the contrary, one has to be attentive to this movement, which draws the shape of those we could be. Poland has experienced these movements more vividly, more visibly, and more richly than anywhere else.[9]

The sociologist Alain Touraine explained why this movement was so popular in France: it was an alternative to President Mitterrand's concept of socialism. 'The most general sense of this protest was the refusal to make use of rhetorical radicalism and measures derived from an archaic concept of the ''left'' wing. The demands that went with such criticism seemed to express the hope that an equivalent of Solidarność would develop in France, which would result in the disappearance of forms that had excluded public interventionism, the development of new social demands, and most especially the re-appearance of a close link between all components of French society, workers and intellectuals, and the left-wing government. The latter's first measures had created great

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798708000070 Published online by Cambridge University Press

enthusiasm among some, but condemnation and concern for the future among others, in particular among CFDT unionists. The way of thinking that soon developed became the foundation of what became known in rather vague terms as the Second Left (*deuxième gauche*) or – by some people – as the American Left. This ideology changed over the following years and lost a certain amount of its initial support, but supported the candidacy of Michel Rocard. After his retreat from the Presidential campaign he was appointed Prime Minister in the second term of office of President François Mitterrand. The conflict between his supporters, and many of those who gave priority to the President, shows the unity and disharmony that had taken place in the shadow of Solidarność.'[10]

And what about the support for Solidarność? It continued, though to a lesser extent, until the end of the 1980s. Four years after the proclamation of Martial Law, the same people gathered and signed a new text. They fiercely condemned the normalisation of Jaruzelski and explicitly stated that the struggle in Poland was being carried forward by an underground Solidarność, with which they expressed their full solidarity. They reaffirmed that the struggle of the Poles was their fight too, and that they were not ready to accept a permanent division of Europe. Solidarność indeed raised the question of the re-unification of Europe and the need to end the artificial division of the continent, and in this way it foreshadowed developments after 1989.

References

1. B. Geremek and M. Frybes (eds) (2005) *Kaleidoscope franco-polonais* (Paris: Noir sur Blanc).
2. M. Wieviorka (1987) L'effet Pologne. *L'état des religions dans le monde* (Paris: La Découverte/Le Cerf), pp. 26–28.
3. P. Rotman and R. Hamon (1984) *La deuxième gauche* (Paris: Fayard).
4. M. Frybes (2006) *Merci pour votre solidarité* (Warszawa: IAM), p. 27.
5. J.-M. Charpentier and H. Israel (1981) *Solidarnosc – un an de luttes sociales en Pologne* (Paris: Montholon Services).
6. M. Kula (1995) *Niespodziewani przyjaciele, czyli rzecz o zwyklej ludzkiej solidarności* (Warszawa).
7. *La CFDT en questions*. *La réponse d'Edmond Maire* (Paris: Temoins/ Gallimard) (1984).
8. M. Frybes (1991) Rencontre ou malentendu autour de Solidarnosc. *CFDT – Aujourd'hui*, **100**, 103–110.
9. See the contribution by M. Foucault in *Solidarność and solidarity* (Warszawa: IAM) (2005), pp. 76–77.
10. See the contribution by A. Touraine in B. Geremek and M. Frybes (eds) (2005) *Kaleidoscope franco-polonais* (Paris: Noir sur Blanc), pp. 121–123.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798708000070 Published online by Cambridge University Press

About the Author

Marcin Frybes is a mathematician and social scientist. After an education at Warsaw University he moved to France in 1984 as a fellow at the Centre d'Analyse et d'Intervention Sociologiques and the Centre d'Etudes Interdisciplinaires des Faits Religieux. Since 2001 he has worked in Warsaw at the Instytut Adama Mickiewicza and teaches at the Collegium Civitas. He is the author of *Dziękujemy za Solidarność.* (*Merci pour votre solidarité*) Warsaw 2005.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798708000070 Published online by Cambridge University Press