SOLIDARITY WITH THE GLOVES OFF: LABOR AND POLITICS IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

Introduction

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In 1980, Poles were the first to jump the communist ship and organize outside of the Communist Party, forming a ten-million strong alternative labor union, Solidarity. When the Communist government banned the Union in 1981, Poles refused to dissolve it. They went underground forming Solidarity-sponsored schools, theaters, newspapers, and political groups. In so doing, Solidarity activists created an alternative civil society that emerged nearly intact in 1989 when Poles were the first to throw off Soviet-backed communism. Yet now, in this land of self-liberation and freedom, the highly conservative Law and Justice party, led by Lech and Jaroslaw Kaczyński, won the 2005 elections on a pro-Catholic, antigay, antiabortion, anticommunist, and xenophobic platform. Now the Kaczyński government is hounding government officials, professors, lawyers, doctors, managers, journalists, judges, and bank managers out of jobs for refusing to declare whether or not they collaborated with the communist security forces. Poles, who during the Solidarność era reached out in solidarity to activists around the world, are now redefining Polish citizenship as singularly Polish and Catholic. Founded as a worker's movement, Solidarity has overseen the diminution of the Polish working class, the emasculation of unions, the downward spiral of purchasing power, and one of the highest unemployment rates in Europe.

What happened? How come we can no longer recognize the heroic, justice-loving, freedom-fighting Poles in this contemporary snapshot? How did it come to pass that Poland's leaders, founding members of the broadly-inclusive and libratory Solidarity movement, are presently hunting down "enemies" of the Polish nation? How did a democratic mass-movement ideologically rooted in socialist democracy remake itself into an elite party representing neoclassical liberalism?

The articles in this section link the transformation of Solidarity from a mass workers' movement into a political party as the pivotal moment in the rise of an illiberal political state in Poland, a trend that has been repeated in other former communist countries. In Christopher Phelps's interview with former Solidarity

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activist Zbigniew Kowalewski, Kowalewski argues that workers who backed Solidarity, when it was a mass movement based out of factory shop floors, had in mind a very different economic future. They did not envision a neoliberal economic order brought on by union-busting, factory-closing shock therapy, but rather they backed worker-managed factories and more, not less, worker control over their economic and political fortunes. Kowalewski describes how Solidarity leaders rapidly left its workers in the postindustrial dust. In the mid-eighties they embraced capitalism, privatization, and markets. From September 1989 onward, Lech Walesa repeatedly declared, "We will not catch up to Europe if we build a strong trade union," and he staked his political credentials on telling workers they could expect no charity or favors from his presidency. Pieter Vanhuysse, in his review essay, argues that the emerging Polish political elite, many of them former Solidarity activists such as the Kaczyński twins, consciously brushed aside the social costs of this transition and then channeled the resulting public anger into illiberal attacks on communists, foreigners, nonbelievers, and so-called sexual deviants. Vanhuysee dwells on David Ost's insight that in order to build capitalism with a thriving *liberal* democracy, working-class participation, as a class, is critical.

Vanhuysse asks why Poland's postcommunist leaders only had eyes for economic liberalism, which meant running labor and unions into the hard wall of deindustrialization. Why did they not adopt models from Scandinavia and continental Europe that incorporated workers' interests into economic reform and development?

Kowalewski charges that when Solidarity went underground, the mass workers' movement was taken over by way of martial law by Solidarity leaders in exile abroad in 1981. There, he argues, far from the workers they represented, Solidarity activists started getting funds and making deals with western NGOs, the CIA, and the Vatican. These influences, Kowalevski charges, helped steer Solidarity toward a particularly neoliberal vision of capitalism, a vision few rank-and-file Solidarity workers envisioned.

Perhaps the question, then, should not be posed as what has gone *wrong* with Polish democracy, but rather to note how much Polish reformers have accomplished. In less than two decades, the Polish elite have mastered the arts of advanced democratic capitalism, overhauling the Polish economy and political landscape. They have learned how to win popular elections while enacting unpopular economic and social programs. They have convinced Polish majorities to vote to terminate their own job security, economic equality, social welfare networks, and infrastructures for collective bargaining that once powerfully represented their interests. They have figured out how to promote the causes of business interests while deflecting the resulting popular anger about inequitable economic decisions onto the usual easy targets: foreigners, ethnic and religious minorities, women, unions, and the Left. Might we rather applaud the Polish elite as exemplary students of their Western, often American, advisors as the first (but with many others following) in Eastern Europe to shake off communism and embrace gloves-off, advanced democratic capitalism with the ideas and ideals left out?

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