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Poland

50 years since the Poznan uprising

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The insurrectional uprising in the Polish town of Poznan in June 1956 shone a searchlight on the crisis of Stalinism. Preceded by a similar event in East Berlin (in 1953) and followed four months later by the Hungarian Revolution (October 1956), the Poznan insurrection opened the great cycle of the Polish workers' struggles against the bureaucratic dictatorship (1970, 1976, 1980-1).

In Poland, the overthrow of the bourgeois regime after the Second World War, and the incorporation of the country in the Soviet Union's 'buffer zone', was followed by a real industrial revolution which the Polish bourgeoisie - in the framework of a backward and dependent capitalism - had been incapable of achieving. In six years, through a gigantic voluntaristic effort and mass mobilisation, the country changed from top to bottom.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/poznanworkersmarch2a.jpg>]

June 24 1956. Workers march out of factories

A new and powerful industrial proletariat became the decisive social force in the nation. The social advancement of wide layers of the labouring masses, generated by the regime of 'popular democracy' and industrialisation, had no precedent in the history of the country. And it gave birth to enhanced aspirations on the part of the proletariat for a better life - economically, culturally and morally; but also for a role in the management of enterprises and the economy in general, society and the state.

The Stalinist regime however entered into crisis. At the end of the 1940s two events had marked the consolidation of the regime. The first concerned the police suppression of a current which wanted to follow a "Polish road to socialism" - "right wing nationalists" in Stalinist terminology, in other words a current which wanted autonomy vis-a-vis the Soviet Union. Wladyslaw Gomułka, the main Communist leader of this current was arrested in 1947.

The second event was the liquidation of the two main currents of the Polish workers movement, the Communist and Socialist parties, into a single bureaucratic party, the Polish United Workers Party (POUP).

The terrorist dictatorship, concentrated in the sinister Department 10 of the Ministry Public Security and in Military Intelligence, which lorded it even above the formal leadership of the POUP, was dismantled after the death of Stalin in 1953. In the subsequent atmosphere of the 'thaw' and of factional struggles inside the leadership, there was a small political opening and a timid liberalisation by the party leadership.

But at the same time, the tensions and contradictions inherent in the bureaucratic management of the economy, the industrial revolution and the state, began to emerge. The promises of a major growth in the standard of living, after the major effort of reconstruction and industrialisation, evaporated.

Armed confrontation

The bureaucracy in power, incapable of raising productivity through technical progress, intensified workplace exploitation and raised output norms, lowered real wages by paying less than the value of labour power, raised income tax, lowered overtime payments etc. It was precisely resistance to this super-exploitation which unleashed the protest movement among the metal workers at the giant 'Stalin' factory in Poznan.

While negotiations between the workers' delegation and government representatives dragged on, mass meetings

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took place, the election of representatives continued, and links were formed between different factories and enterprises. This birth of workers democracy made the situation explosive. The uprising started on 28 June at six o'clock in the morning, with the unleashing of a general strike in the town and a demonstration in front of the Town Hall of 100,000 workers who had walked out of their factories.

At 10am the movement took the form of an insurrection. The local prison was attacked and 257 political and ordinary prisoners were released, as well as all the prison documents destroyed. The courthouse was set on fire and there were successive attacks during the day on the 10 arsenals in the city. Workers' violence hit all the repressive institutions of the state.

About midday, the demonstrators besieged and attacked the core of the repressive system: the central building of the State Security, the most hated criminal institution of the bureaucratic regime. The crowd attacked the building from 20 different directions. The crowds disarmed a party of military cadets sent to help the besieged State Security men and disrupted the advance of a column of 16 tanks. The insurrectionist workers captured two tanks and tried to use them against the State Security building.

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

The first tanks to arrive are stopped by workers

From 4pm onwards the town was besieged, bit by bit, by a force of two armoured divisions and two divisions of infantry - a force totalling 10,000 soldiers and 360 tanks, under the command of the deputy minister of national defence, General Stanislaw Poplawski - a Soviet military officer of Polish origin, seconded to the Polish army. The general strike lasted three days; the armed confrontations lasted for four days, gradually becoming more and more sporadic.

The outcome was 57 dead, including 49 civilians and eight soldiers and state security agents. Between the two sides 600 were wounded. Seven hundred and forty six people, 80% of them workers, were arrested - and many of these were beaten and tortured to make them confess that the uprising was the work of American or West German intelligence agencies and a secret anti-communist organisation, which in reality didn't exist.

However in the course of three trials only 22 people were prosecuted and only 10 found guilty. They were given relatively lenient sentences of between two and six years in jail. The last trial furnished a paradox; 10 people who had formed an armed insurrectional group, finished with none of them being sentenced. They were defended courageously by their lawyers who declared that the guilty people were the bureaucrats in power, who had stopped being an ideological elite to become "an elite in the field of consumption".

The Poznan uprising shook the bureaucratic order and unleashed a major political crisis. Four months later, in October 1956, a huge anti-bureaucratic mass movement swept the country. The workers formed workers councils in the factories and firms and parliament voted for a law which said "The workers council manages the enterprise in the name of the workers". Gomulka, imprisoned since 1947, was brought back to triumphally take the leadership of the POUP with immense popular support. But his role eventually was to put an end to the political revolution and re-establish a reformed bureaucratic order which was, at a formal level at least, de-Stalinised.

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