

Gdansk workers confront Mazowiecki, attack Balcerowicz Plan

by Jacques Cheminade

The crowned eagle of Poland, a crucifix, and the symbol of the Gdansk shipyards decorate this hall where the Solidarnosc wave began in 1980, where the strikers' passionate speeches mingled with poems of Slovacki, Mickiewicz, and Norwid, where today, Aug. 30, Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki has come to confront the anger of these workers of the Baltic Sea. Regardless of what one may think of his policy, one cannot help but admire a prime minister who came with his Labor and Industry Ministers to submit himself to questioning from working men; nor can one help but love a country where it is possible to do so with neither violence nor personal attacks.

The assault is very rough, the more so for the high degree of political consciousness that guides it. Wieslaw Wodyk, representing the Gdynia shipyards, is the first to attack. "Your program, the Balcerowicz program, claims to fight inflation. That may be, but to the detriment of the workers. This is the Nomenklatura's program, not that of the workers who brought about the changes in Poland. Stability? Yes, but at a level of very little supply, and an even less demand. Therefore, in such conditions, it is easy to say that inflation is disappearing. . . . Don't be surprised if the country is apathetic: austerity against those who made the Revolution and privileges for the Nomenklatura cannot engender enthusiasm with anyone! Of course there is apathy in society at large, but it's the result of the government's apathy. You claim to be cleaning up the economy, but did it ever occur to you to clean out the ministries in Warsaw? You are fighting inflation, but have you thought about production? You worry about finances, but what about growth? A competent economy is like a train, you have to begin by choosing which locomotive to pull it. But I don't see one. Do you have an employment strategy? Do you plan to protect budding industries like every successful industrial economy has done?"

The charge is relayed from one speaker to the next, all of whom represent regional enterprises. "Prime Minister, you are doing nothing to promote investments. The substance of a ship is the equipment to produce it and the high skill of labor. What are you doing to ensure the survival of both?" demands one. "You are not telling us anything about the financial agreements with the U.S.S.R., or with Comecon.

We want to go on selling our goods, but not to be robbed. Is federal Germany going to indemnify us for the canceled contracts of the former East Germany? Do you know that you are in the process of creating an army of unemployed? Your policy has no effect; it controls inflation by ruining us and ruining what we produce. Your policy has no effect; it risks bringing to nought what we've fought for for 10 years, 20 years," says another.

Another worker then raises the fundamental question: "Are you for or against production? Things are going very well for shipyards in the world today, making lots of profits, except for us, here in Poland. Why are you letting us founder by imposing impossible conditions? Personally, we consider you as a friend, we were comrades in battle and in prison, but I can no longer support your austerity policy for the workers and pork-barrels for the Nomenklatura, who are not only surviving but getting prosperous. I like you a lot, but not enough to die for you. I would rather live with Lech Walesa."

Embarrassed and not hiding it, Mazowiecki responds that Poland is the first country to go from communism to capitalism, from a centralized economy to a market economy. It has the chance to occupy an important place in a nascent Europe, but it has to be an example. It depends on a difficult worldwide conjuncture. We can't go too quickly, we have to keep the most competent people in their positions, we don't want any witchhunts. . . .

Industry Minister Tadeusz Syryjczyk, who intervenes next, himself shows an absolute ignorance of economics. He simply repeats the buzzwords of various American and British institutes and goes so far as to say, "People complain that they have to leave a qualified job in order to sell things on the streets. But that's normal; that's a proof of vitality. We should develop business and services much more. . . . Business is the basis of capitalism and it begins with a little stand in the street. Our role is simply to ensure health standards for those who sell." Only the invisible hand is missing.

Labor Minister Jacek Kuron is obviously of a different caliber. He defends himself like a skillful devil, admitting that prices in Poland look more and more like those of Western Europe and the wages like those of East Germany. But "we can only eat what we produce. Our system of production

has been destroyed or left to abandon by the communists. Our profit capacities are seven times less than the principal Western European countries. We could keep prices artificially low, but that would lead to ruin. . . . The state can no longer do everything. We must get rid of the welfare mentality. We cannot be constantly protecting the weak, and maintaining a facade of equality. Elsewhere in Europe, they had tried to have equal wages. Then the socialists themselves realized they were mistaken. They created unemployment, by preventing firings. Now, they have given up. Everyone should be paid according to his skills. We, in Poland, cannot do things differently than in Bonn or Paris.” Mazowiecki then takes the floor again to add, “After the wonderful hour of liberation, people are coming back to reality. People are having a difficult time and are closing themselves up in private affairs. It is not the fault of the government, but of the whole society.”

At this point, it has become clear that the government representatives are taking refuge behind a deterministic conception of history, by simply replacing the Marxist gospel with the liberal one. “We can’t do anything about it; the conjuncture works this way; the laws of the free market work that way. We have to clean things up, make things pay, cut the fat.”

The problem with Mazowiecki and his government is that they define themselves in terms of initiatives and conceptions foreign to themselves, in terms of a certain fatality or pattern of constraints that dooms any of their own, internal initiatives from the outset. In this way reality is divided into slices of knowledge, each served up independently from the next, deprived of life and vigor. In such a closed, gray universe, no perspective for production, for creation can appear.

Speculators traffic in human flesh

In this atmosphere of impotence raised to a doctrine, it was left to a worker to echo the voice of truth. Hans Seyc, director of the Gdansk Naval Shipyards, does not mince his words and takes all the risk of displeasing some people. “Let’s tell it like it is. My shipyard is functioning without a plan or a program. We are placed in impossible conditions. We are giving away the most profitable parts of the shipyards to Polish-foreigner ‘joint ventures,’ who are exempt from taxes, who come with considerable means of financing and begin with no debts; whereas we have to pay taxes, to repay our debts, and we have no means of financing. We don’t want to destroy these new associations, these ‘joint ventures,’ quite the contrary; but we do want fair competition. There, the elements of the Nomenklatura have become ‘privatized’ while giving themselves all the advantages, and here they are at the head of the ‘joint ventures’! We have been substantially looted, not to profit the investors or the producers, but by the speculators in the Nomenklatura! They have organized a veritable traffic in human flesh. They plunder our best workers with wages twice what we are authorized

to pay out, and not to have them produce, but to occupy profitable niches, especially in services! There is trading in human flesh: I know of cases in which workers have been bought and sold, there is looting of the state-owned enterprises, and total falsification of terms of competition—and all in favor of our former enemies. Is that what we have fought for?”

The director of the Gdansk shipyards continues his attack: “The only real way to fight inflation is to increase production, to satisfy the demand for goods. Is that what are you doing? The answer is, ‘no.’ What you are doing is to reduce demand, to reduce production. That’s how speculative activities are created, the sources of future inflation. You have reduced inflation in the short term by creating the conditions for a tragedy in the medium and long terms. And even that is not true. Because, if there were no inflation today, if you had at least achieved that end, how could the annual interest rates on loans to industry be at 66% since the beginning of the year? Funny way of not having inflation, Mr. Prime Minister. At the same time, here in Gdansk, although we are the only Polish non-military production present in Europe, although we have one of the most highly skilled work forces, although other shipyards are working full capacity, here 65% of our plant is not utilized. You are in the process of dismantling our whole Baltic coast. More than 600 firms linked to ours are being shut down, as well as technical schools the whole world appreciates, although shipyards are doing well throughout the world.

“You know, Mr. Minister, we don’t ask anything of you. We don’t want aid or subsidies or whatever. We want equal terms of competition, the freedom to produce. The ‘joint ventures’ don’t pay taxes. We do. That is unacceptable! The law does not allow us to pay human labor what we would like to. That, too, is unacceptable. Privatize? Yes, I applaud it with both hands. But not if it means removing the substance of the state. Or selling off cheaply the companies that we are prevented from making profitable! People aren’t fighting any more like they used to, they don’t believe in it any more. The question is: How can a worker whose purchasing power is falling continue to believe in it, while his neighbor from the Nomenklatura is prospering?”

This discourse only received a dilatory response from the Industry Minister, who treated it as “demagogic,” all the while announcing, along with the prime minister, a large wage hike for Sept. 1, which was far, far below European norms. This was the one concrete element to come out of the meeting which was notable for the evidence of deep political consciousness of the trade union leaders, but disappointing from the standpoint of the government’s behavior. It is clear in any case, that the social base for an alternative to the Balcerowicz Plan exists in Poland. It remains now to be built up, and for France and Germany to lend the necessary support. The Schiller Institute will certainly help that alternative, so crucial for the future of Europe.