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Poland: the Crisis of State Capitalism

TANKS in the streets, workers jailed and shot, general repression. So much for Eastern European "socialism"! Only rightwingers or die-hard Stalinists could seriously suggest that a regime like that ruling in Warsaw today has anything to do with socialism.

But what kind of society IS Poland -- and what are the lessons of the Polish events?

What Kind of Social System?

In the Eastern bloc states there is no private property-owning ruling class and no market system. Instead there is a ruling bureaucracy and a state plan. But the central feature of capitalism is not private ownership or the free market -- both of these have been partially abolished even in the west. What is central was made clear by Karl Marx in Capital:

"Accumulate, accumulate! That is Moses and the Prophets!...Accumulation for accumulation's sake, production for production's sake."

The compulsion to accumulate capital is the driving force of capitalism and there can be no doubt that it is the driving force of the Eastern bloc economies. In the seventies, 75 percent of Soviet production was devoted to putting out means of production, and only 25 percent to consumer goods. Why is this?

In Marx's original analysis, the drive to accumulate was caused by the lash of competition between firms. In East Europe there is no competition within national economies, but these economies do compete on the world market. Some of them trade a great deal with the west and must compete with western firms. Russia trades comparatively little with the west, but the Russians must compete militarily with their rival superpower, the USA.

The original forms of capitalism have been changed; but the fundamental logic remains in the form of state capitalism. And with it, the tendency to crisis. This is most obvious in Poland where the crisis has reached depression levels, but the trends are present in other countries as well. The Russian economy, which had an annual growth rate of 11 percent in the early fifties, has now seen growth fall to one or two percent a year.

Since the crisis is most advanced in Poland, events there provide a hint of what is to come in other places, and a test of alternatives.

The Polish Crisis

In the early seventies Poland borrowed from western banks, intending to boost production and sell back to the west. But the west went into recession and the Polish products had nowhere to go. The regime borrowed still more to meet costs and fell disastrously into debt. Finally it sought to force the cost of the crisis onto the workers.

But attempts to boost prices brought growing resistance, and finally all-out revolt, leading to the formation of Solidarity. Solidarity was a many-sided movement and was in many ways quite magnificent, but in its fundamentals it was a trade union organisation -- that is, an organisation of the workers to bargain over the price and conditions of labour within the existing system.

Higher wages and better conditions were vitally necessary for the

downtrodden workers of Poland, but they could no more solve the crisis than pay rises can solve the crisis of capitalism in the west. In the East just as here, only the reorganisation of society on the basis of workers' political power can do that. Yet this road -- the road of political struggle for socialism -- was one that the Solidarity leadership refused to take.

Instead they at first pledged to leave politics to the ruling Communist Party, hoping vaguely for some kind of deal with the regime. Then they accepted the need for political protest, and speculated about reform, but at no time did they put forward an alternative political program, let alone look seriously at the question of taking power. Now they are paying the price.

The response of many workers to the State of Emergency has been heroic. Unfortunately, the response of some others has been disappointing, nor is this entirely a surprise. The tape of the Solidarity leadership meeting, which was played on Polish TV, had one union leader saying that 30 percent of the Solidarity membership was wavering. Clearly many of these, when the crunch came, were not willing to risk death at the hands of the army and police. That is not out of cowardice: the past two years have proved the bravery of the Polish workers beyond doubt.

It is because Solidarity does not appear to have an answer to the crisis. And in those circumstances it is possible for the less conscious workers to entertain nagging doubts: perhaps the government has a point, perhaps the unions are somehow to blame for the economic disasters which continue to mount?

We do not wish to detract from the immense achievements of the workers' movement. But we do wish to point to the urgent needs of today and tomorrow. The unions appear to be losing the present battle (though we must not give up hope too quickly) but the crisis of Polish society is far from over, nor will all the gains and organisation be lost even if the government can establish its control. But if the situation is to be saved in the next period, it is absolutely urgent that the most militant and conscious workers begin to organise politically.

The Need For a Revolutionary Party

The situation in Poland has some frightening similarities to Chile. A workers' movement whose leaders breed illusions in the good faith of the ruling class and advocate "moderation"; a brutal military take-over with many thousands arrested; the absence of any revolutionary political alternative. No doubt there will be those today, as there were after the disaster in Chile, who will tell us it is "not the time" to point to mistakes and learn lessons.

We think there is no time like the present. Let's learn once and for all that the Eastern bloc regimes are as capitalist as the society we live in. Let's learn once and for all that attempts to change the system by gradual reform lead only to defeat. And above all let's learn the need for revolutionary organisation.

The unsuccessful revolution of 1905 in Russia became the "dress rehearsal" for victory in 1917 -- because there was a revolutionary Marxist party to draw the lessons and build for the future. If the Polish events of today are to lay the basis for victory tomorrow, revolutionary organisation is essential -- both in Poland and ultimately in Australia too.

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