The revolutionary activity of Polish women

WOMAN AS REASON

Editor's Note: We are proud to devote "Woman as Reason" for International Women's Day, 1982, to the following essay by Urszula Wislanka, a young Polish feminist activist and Marxist-Humanist, and editor of **Today's Polish Fight for Freedom.**

by Urszula Wislanka

The celebration of International Women's Day this year may not, on the surface, appear to be directly related to the momentous events in Poland, on which the eyes of the entire world are focused. Yet it is precisely the revolutionary activity of the Polish women that both illuminates the depth and power of Solidarnosc as a movement striving to achieve a whole new society of "Bread and Freedom"—and, at the same time, reveals contradictions that need to be faced, by calling into question whether these women have been recognized as the great revolutionary force they are.

Indeed, none have focused on the women. Yet they have been crucial to the struggle from the very beginning, and remain so in the unyielding resistance to the counter-revolution that began the moment martial law was declared. The general strike in the Lenin Steelworks Plant in Cracow at the end of December was led by Andrzej Chudaszek and Halina Bortnowska—and that it was carried through to the end was attributed mainly to her. At the Wujek mine in Silesia, where one of the bloodiest confrontations occurred, the miners had been given an ultimatum to vacate the mine in one hour. Women immediately blocked the way, some lying down in front of the advancing army tanks. When they were swept away by a water cannon, other women picked up tear-gas grenades and threw them back at the police. In Gdansk, 3,000 women armed with flowers and Solidarity bulletins faced the tanks ready to crush the Lenin Shipyard gates. In Katowice, women blocked the way outside the occupied steel mill. And in the underground, Alina Pienkowska and Joanna Duda-Gwiazda remain among the leading activists, calling for continued resistance and describing events in the detention camps—such as the hunger strike of Anna Walentynowicz.[1]

If we follow the dialectic of the events, we will see that, from the beginning of the movement, it is not only as sparkplug or as leader, but as masses in motion that the women have been integral to this revolution—both as workers and intellectuals, and both as Force and as Reason.

FROM SPARK TO MASSES IN MOTION

The birth of Solidarity in 1980 was sparked by a strike at the Gdansk shipyards over the firing of Anna Walentynowicz, a crane operator who, each year, had placed a wreath at the gates where the workers were killed in the 1970 revolt. Throughout the course of the Gdansk strike which created Solidarity, women took part in all the activities.

Alina Pienkowska "thought of everything. She got the rubber stamp, issued passes, collected food from people, opened a place to accept gifts, made sure the Strike Committee had access to the broadcasting center. In a word, she took care of the administration of the strike."[2]

Joanna Duda-Gwiazda immediately started organizing support for strikers from people around the city: financial help, food, blankets, distribution of information.[3] In a textile town, the first act of solidarity was organizing help for the many single mothers, taking care of children while the women were striking, recognizing financial difficulties of single mothers and organizing material help, establishing co-operatives of women taking turns standing in store lines.

In the universal demands formulated in Gdansk, not only did the workers demand the right to organize free trade unions, the right to strike, the end of censorship and freeing political prisoners, but also included better working conditions for health personnel (almost all women) as a way of assuring full medical care for everyone, adequate space in day-care centers and kindergartens, and the institution of three years paid maternity leave. These demands echoed across the country, and often were expanded upon. In Swidnik women demanded that the water pressure be increased so that water would reach up to the fourth floor (it currently stopped at the third floor). In another small town they demanded that the railroad schedule be changed to accommodate shift changes in the factory so they wouldn't have to wait more than an hour for the train. Outraged women not only exposed corrupt party officials and demanded their punishment, but also took over their villas for day-care centers. They challenged the spread of pollution in the cities, and questioned why day-care centers and schools were placed next to the factories producing toxic wastes.

1. **The Washington Post**, Jan. 17, 1982, has an eyewitness report of the events at the Wujek mine. For a description of the most recent events in Poland, which also brings out the new forms of resistance, see "Counter-revolution drives the revolution underground; the resistance continues" by Raya Dunayevskaya, **News & Letters**, Jan.-Feb., 1982.
2. Quoted from "Glos Anny" (Anna's Voice) in **Gwiazda Polarna** (Northern Star), Nov. 10, 1981. This weekly paper is published in Stevens Point, Wisc. For more of Walentynowicz's own description of the beginning of that strike, see the "Woman as Reason" column by Terry Moon, **News & Letters**, Jan.-Feb. 1982.
3. See the eyewitness account reported by Ewa Milewicz, a member of KOR and NOWA, in **Biuletyn Informacyjny**, Aug.-Sept. 1980. This paper was published by KOR outside the censored press.

7473

THREE DECADES OF EAST EUROPEAN REVOLT

Women were also central in working out one of Solidarity's most urgent questions: the form of its own organization. The concept is now known as "horizontal solidarity," and includes all employees from a particular geographic area. The first known instance of horizontal solidarity happened in Swidnik where the women health workers in the local clinic took their demands to the helicopter factory workers saying: Since we're too small to strike—and those who would suffer the most are the patients—include our demands with yours. The workers did, and in the process discovered that there are a lot of issues people raise which affect more than just a particular plant. Thus horizontal solidarity was a way of ensuring that the whole of society was included in the organizational expression of the movement, that was not separted from its political, i.e., democratic character.

The form of organization Solidarity was opposing was the Communist PZPR (Polish United Workers Party), which has tried to rule by enforcing the one "cure" it has for the ailing economy: raising food prices. When the government announced, in July, 1981, that it would need to raise food prices by as much as 400 percent (which they are now trying to enforce again), the women were the *first* to oppose it. Women in Lodz sat in with massive wildcats and dared to hold street demonstrations. Over 10,000 women, including children and grandmothers, with a cordon of men around the outside for protection, demonstrated for a week. Their banners proclaimed "Hungry of the world, unite!" thus both extending and deepening the slogan that has marked the East European revolt ever since the East German workers first demanded both "Bread and Freedom" in 1953.

That revolt has continued for almost 30 years. In 1956 it became actual revolution in Hungary. In 1968 the demand in Czechoslovakia was for "Socialism with a human face." Protests and massive strikes erupted in Poland in 1970 and again in 1976.

It was in the wake of the 1976 Polish revolt in Radom and Ursus that a new link between workers and intellectuals was forged when a new organization arose called KOR—Committee to Defend Workers. After all of the imprisoned workers were freed, KOR continued its activity, publishing its own uncensored bulletins and helping to publish *Robotnik*, a paper where workers spoke for themselves. Again, it was three women—Helena Luczywo, Ludwika Wujec and Irena Woycicka—who took responsibility for systematically writing, editing and producing *Robotnik*.[4] When *Tygodnik Solidarnosc* (Solidarity Weekly) interviewed them, here is what Irena Woycicka had to say about working out that relationship: "To help the Radom and Ursus workers financially and legally was relatively easy. But to understand each other, to get information—that was much more difficult."

By working out, on the basis of workers' own stories, such documents as the Charter of Workers' Rights, the intellectuals who edited *Robotnik* helped lay the ground for the future development of Solidarity.

4. For reprints from *Robotnik* and other articles, see *Today's Polish Fight for Freedom*, a bilingual pamphlet which I edited. It was published by News & Letters in the spring of 1980 before events exploded in Poland.

PEASANT WOMEN AND RURAL SOLIDARITY

The uncensored press proliferated, the ideas of "social self-defense" spread over Poland. When the government in the summer of 1978 introduced a new retirement tax for farmers, the peasant women took social self-defense in their own hands. First they chased off the tax collectors. Listen to this report:

"On 25 June in Gorny and Ostrowek there appeared a tax collector who took property from the boycotting farmers . . . When he came to Kowalski's farm he saw women from the whole village at the doorstep. They didn't look at him all too favorably and there was some talk about some sickles which each household has. What happened is not exactly known, but what is known, is that though the tax collector got there, he never entered . . ."[5]

Then, to make sure the government heard how angry they were, they organized a milk strike—they refused to deliver milk to the state collection points. The strike was entirely successful and only after that did the women go to their local priest asking him for help in organizing the social self-defense. The peasant movement, crowned with the recognition of Rural Solidarity, had its beginning in the activity of those women.

Modeling their activity on KOR's "flying university," where the intellectuals would go and deliver lectures, wherever and whenever it was possible, on subjects frowned on by the government (such as history), the Farmers' Self-Defense Committee decided to set up the People's University in January, 1979. It was accomplished with the cooperation of intellectuals from Warsaw, particularly Marzena Gorszczyk-Kecik, who was a major power behind the initiative and subsequently was charged with organizing the meetings of the university. Rural Solidarity, built on these foundations, has never lost its relation to the workers, so that after the declaration of martial law, they brought food to the workers in occupied factories. That aid to the resistance was given despite the church's repeated calls for "calm."

But then, some opposition to the church has always existed in the workers' and particularly women's activity. In October, 1081, the women textile workers in Zyrardow refused to follow the church's advice to postpone their demands and end their strike. They struck because there was no food—a strike the government declared "political" and therefore illegal. The women refused to recognize any distinction between political and economic despite threats from the government and the church's appeal that they go back to work. They even defied their own leadership, which, fearful of the consequences, had advised them to stop their strike.

5. *Glos* (Voice), Aug.-Sept. 1978. *Glos* was one of the uncensored papers published in the aftermath of the 1976 revolt.

FEMINISM VS. THE CHURCH

With the tremendous activity of women there also had arisen the beginnings of a Women's Movement. Sigma was the first of Poland's feminist groups, organized in November, 1980. They intended to publish their own newspaper, telling the history of women and their ideas. Their demands included equal pay, development of social programs for women, and increase in men's responsibility for their children. As for abortion, Krystyna Kowalewska, one of the founders of Sigma, puts it clearly: "Many of our demands conflict with the position of the Church. For example, abortion. The Church has clearly spoken against it. We can't accept that."[6]

Abortion has been used as a political weapon between the church and the state with complete disregard for women's freedom. The Church opposes abortion, while the state does not allow any other forms of birth control, forcing women to go through an endless series of abortions. The Russian feminists' description of abortion clinics as "mince-meat machines" is also true in Poland. The feminists made the question revolutionary by making it a question of human choice, opposed to both church and state manipulations.

Although the appearance of so fledgling a group as Sigma is by no means a pivotal point in the Polish events today, it is another sign of the new revolutionary force women represent, and appears "minor" only if we forget history so completely that each time something arises, it appears to be for the first time. The truth is that women in Poland have been both revolutionary force and Reason throughout their whole history. That is seen not only in the fact that the 1863 war against Russia was known as the "Women's War,"[7] but in the life and work of such magnificent Polish women as Rosa Luxemburg—one of the greatest of all revolutionary internationalists. It was she who so appreciated Mass Strike that she made a category out of it after the 1905 Revolution. And it is her dimension as feminist which has first now been disclosed.[8]

The same kind of blinders that keep some from seeing the importance of Luxemburg's feminist dimension, are also worn by those who do not see what women's participation in today's Polish fight for freedom means. We have to confront what it means that the 18-man Presidium of Solidarity was just that—all men.

CONTRADICTIONS AND CONFRONTATIONS

The women of Poland, as everywhere, know reality in a way that men don't. Listen to a woman from Lodz, interviewed July 30, 1981: "Take my husband: he's always worked on the first shift. He never waits in line. He knows there is nothing (in the shops), I told him. But he isn't really informed. He can only say the refrigerator is empty. Men don't like to wait in line . . . It's like with the salaries. Lodz receives the least because they give us light industry. Which light industry? We work in clouds of dust, in humidity, under an infernal noise! . . . They think that because we're women, they can pay us less! . . . Lodz and the light industry of Silesia have the lowest salaries in the country."[9]

Or listen to Alina Pienkowska: "In August, 1980 the women in Gdansk were very active in building Solidarity and in the strike . . . They fought for the rights of all human beings. Naturally an improvement of the position of women depends on the improvement of the general economic situation. But we have not been able to win our concrete demands that are important to us women . . . Taken all in all, I have come to the conclusion that we must struggle more for the women's cause."

• • •

In the course of the Polish revolution, women have certainly been the most active, most militant, most critical, most revolutionary of forces. The present discussion merely scratches the surface of the wealth and depth of women's participation in and contribution to that movement. Yet something is surely missing when women's activity and thinking has remained almost invisible for so long. The shortsightedness to women as force and as Reason shows a shortsightedness to revolution, to seeing precisely who is reaching for completely new relations. That is what must be confronted if we are to capture all the new forms of revolt that are sure to come from Solidarity's underground activities, and that are critical to creating that truly new world.

---

6. **Connexions**, May 1, 1981.
7. "In the (1863) insurrection . . . women proved to be skilled consolrators and comrades-in-arms. . . . For two decades the vestals had been turning into warriors; they demanded recognition not only of their womanly virtues but also their ability to think and to work . . . one of the first mass strikes in Warsaw erupted after women laborers and prostitutes had been ordered by the czarist police to undergo identical hygienic checkups." See Elzbieta Ettinger, **Comrade and Lover: Rosa Luxemburg's Letters to Leo Jogiches** (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1979).
8. A new work by Raya Dunayevskaya, available now only in manuscript form, explores the integrality of Luxemburg's dimensions, as revolutionary, as feminist, as thinker, and its significance for our movement. **Rosa Luxemburg, Women's Liberation, and Marx's Philosophy of Revolution** will be published in Fall, 1982 simultaneously by Humanities Press in the U.S. and Harvester in Britain.
9. **L'Alternative**, Nov.-Dec. 1981.

7475