

This letter was written by several activists and supporters in New York City of the journal *Theoretical Review*. * A response to the issues raised herein will be forthcoming from the editors of ATC. Readers are invited to participate in this exchange.

ON POLAND: A REPLY

The editors of *Against the Current* have presented their perspective on the struggle in Poland in two statements, "Poland 1980" (ATC 3), and "Reform and Repression in Poland" (ATC 4). Some important points are made in the earlier piece, but we would like to focus our criticisms on the latter, lengthier analysis. We offer them as part of an ongoing struggle over the question "What is Socialism?"

In "Reform, Revolution and Repression in Poland" the editors state their strong support for the Polish workers and their organization, Solidarity. We too support Solidarity in its struggle towards socialist democracy in Poland. It is important to emphasize that we do not echo the exhortations of the Communist Party, *Line of March* and others to uncritically defend socialism where it actually exists (that is, in the Polish State and Party). We believe, with the editors of *Theoretical Review*, that socialism and the struggle for workers democracy are inseparable, and that an attack on one is simultaneously an attack on the other.

The editors begin the article with a description of Solidarity as "revolutionary" without laying the basis for this estimate. The central thesis of "Reform, Revolution, and Repression" is that the seizure of state power by Solidarity was a historical possibility and political imperative during the period preceding the December 1981 takeover by the military. We strongly disagree with this assessment, and we locate three assumptions underlying the editors' thesis:

1. A mass movement of the working people under "existing socialism" for a greater share of political power leads directly, in the short run, to the seizure of state power, rather than signalling the beginning of a protracted struggle among the masses in and against political and economic institutions, for a genuine turn to a more democratic and open struggle over the general direction of development of the society.

2. Strategies which seek to "limit the revolution" are essentially counterrevolutionary, and the leaders who advance them are misleaders. A "leadership vs rank-and-file" model explains the internal dynamics of Solidarity.

3. Poland is not socialist, so the struggles of the Polish working classes may be compared with those of revolutionary or militant working classes in historical situations where they are pitted against a capitalist state of one type or another: Allende's Chile, Portugal of 1974, the October Revolution, etc. Concomitantly, there is no need to take up the problem of revisionism and its effects in power either in its Stalinian or post-1956 forms in the world communist movement.

**Theoretical Review* is a revolutionary Marxist journal published in Tucson, Arizona, since 1977. Its origins are in the New Communist Movement, particularly its anti-revisionist/anti-dogmatist wing. Placing a high priority on new theoretical work in directions associated with the names of Louis Althusser, Charles Bettelheim, and Nicos Poulantzas, the *Theoretical Review* is hopeful that its effort will contribute to the formation of a non-economist and non-reductionist Marxism to serve greater left unity and activity in the '80s.

Readers interested in a fuller treatment of the issues surrounding the Polish situation from the TR's point of view are urged to examine the article by Paul Costello in *Theoretical Review* #19, and recent editorials in TR 26 and 28, as well as articles on the Soviet Union in TR 25 and 27.

Within the first assumption is the premise that the popular support for the demand for workers self-management was tantamount to support for "seizing state power," a phenomenon that the leaders of Solidarity could not recognize, except for the "radicals," who themselves could not agree on a program. The issue of the "Strategy for taking power" (ATC 4, p. 5) is treated in a strikingly superficial manner.

According to the editors, confronting the question of state power had not been thoroughly "thought through" by anyone. For them, it is yet another example of leadership's blindness and the rank-and-file's militancy. Confronting the question of state power becomes a logistical question, rather than a question of the correct assessment of the political conjuncture:

... However, to our limited knowledge, these radical elements (or others) never made clear how power was actually to be transferred to such governing bodies [a new government of the working class to a restructured parliament or to a newly founded lower house of the Sejm, or to some type of worker assemblies (or to some combination of these)] from the bureaucracy, that is, they never developed a strategy for taking power.—ATC 4, p. 13.

The question must be posed, Why did the Polish movement never develop that strategy, if indeed it were a possibility? We think the answer is clear: The Solidarity movement did not have designs on assuming the functions of the state in the period immediately behind us. It is true that Solidarity was "not just a trade union." But what that means is that Solidarity wanted a hand in the decisions at the state level affecting the masses, wanted to transform the institutions of the party and unions so that workers, peasants, the intelligentsia, the church, and students and youth could play a role in them, restoring social/mass organizations through initiatives from below.

The editors use the formulation "ruled out in advance making arrangements to seize state power" to describe the dominant view among Solidarity's leaders. Such phrasing is used to indict the misguided reformism of this leadership by tying the stand of "limiting the revolution" to a vacillating objection to violent struggles, and a naive belief that the bureaucracy could be reformed from within. While the gradualist and pacifist ideologies of social democracy can be found in almost any working class movement, we do not think they characterized the beliefs and actions of many of Solidarity's leaders, particularly those, like Kuron, who spoke of limiting the revolution out of a recognition of the real danger of military intervention by the Soviet Union. What most leaders really "ruled out in advance" was the potential disappearance of the Soviet Union as a military power in the foreseeable future, and the possibility of irresponsible political adventurism.

The second assumption, which defines strategies to "limit the revolution" as counterrevolutionary, promotes the idea that confrontation with the Soviet Union should have been risked by the Solidarity leadership in order that they, as leaders, should stay ahead of the rank-and-file. This view reduces the problem of maintaining the cohesion of Solidarity in the latter part of 1981 to the failure to defend itself militarily. The editors repeatedly imply that the rank-and-file were ready for a showdown, yet they do not cite any evidence for this assessment. The potentially bloody outcome of a confrontation, according to this line of thinking, could then inspire workers in other "existing socialist" countries to rise up.(!)

Finally, one certainly could not rule out in advance the possibility of parallel and ultimately linked, workingclass risings elsewhere in Eastern Europe if Solidarity had made efforts in this direction. (One could not rule out such responses in advance any more than one could rule out the Polish upsurge itself in advance.) This possibility would be enhanced, if a large part of the Russian army had been pinned down in Poland.—ATC 4, p. 15.

What follows is an even more chillingly mechanical accounting of the possibilities for a strategic course that invites Soviet intervention, and involves the sacrifice of thousands of Poles, combatants and noncombatants alike.

... Solidarity was certainly well-enough organized to carry out possible resistance in the plants and throughout the society for a very long time. In this way, they could have exacted an enormous price from any occupying Russian force.

In addition, it must be noted that an invasion would have been very costly to the Russians. They were already bogged down in Afghanistan, taking heavy political and economic losses. The price of an intervention in populous, industrial Poland would have been unmeasurably higher.—ATC 4, p. 15.

We ask why this drama hasn't unfolded after martial law in Poland. If Solidarity is indeed well-enough organized to carry out resistance "in the plants and throughout the society for a very long time," we simply wonder why this is not also the case when the force is Polish. The quiet strength of the Polish working class under martial law stands in stark contrast to the reckless speculation of the ATC editors. Implicitly, the above argument suggests that a Soviet or Warsaw Pact occupation of Poland would strengthen socialist ideology. On the contrary, in addition to all the other reasons why such an occupation would be tragic, its potential for strengthening *anti-communist ideology*, reactionary nationalist, and religious ideologies must be faced squarely. If the value of this strategy is seen as by and large military, a means to divert resources from the Soviet Union so as to allow workers movements similar to Solidarity to burgeon in other Eastern European countries (whose latency is supposed to have been due solely to the threat from the Soviet Union), then how is it that the Polish workers movement was not stunted, in fact stillborn, by that same threat? Why should the massacre of Polish workers by an occupying Soviet force set movements in motion in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, or the German Democratic Republic, when the advances made by Solidarity before the Polish military crackdown did not?

We suspect that the answer the editors would give to these questions is that the uneven and combined development of socialism around the world provides that the historical experience of the working class in its many national boundaries constitutes the material, historical basis for the eruption of workingclass movements where

they are sometimes least expected. Thus, events in Russia of 1917, Hungary, Chile, and Portugal are all seen as empowering the present self-activity of the working class in Poland, without any concrete specifications as to the actual influence of these experiences on the Polish movement.

The basis for the so-called law of uneven and combined development is a non-materialist a-historical approach to the problem of determination of mass struggles and to the leading of them. Instead of looking for the dynamics of workingclass movements in the social formations from which they originate, this "law" finds them, in purely idealist method, coming from outside. This is not to deny that events outside the experience of a national working class can have an impact on the ideology of that working class, especially in conjunction with its own historical circumstances. But how this takes place and to what extent is never spelled out in this "law."

In response to the third assumption, it seems to us that the editors are so disappointed with the state of mass proletarian democracy under "existing socialism" that they cannot bear to describe Poland as socialist in any respect. Our support of Solidarity and the Polish working people is not conditional upon the designation of their movement as "revolutionary," rather than reforming, because of the difficulties in specifying how Solidarity relates to the tasks of transforming the existing bureaucratic Polish state and economy, and resuming or initiating Poland's direction forward on the socialist road.

The editors seem to support the "third form" analysis put forth by such people as Paul Sweezy, as well as by some Trotskyists, in which the party and state apparatuses become the "ruling bureaucracy," a variant of which is the "bureaucratic class," or bureaucratic collectivism. From here it is not far to the "ruling class," or the thesis of state capitalism. While we cannot express fully formed views on these theories and do not offer partially formed ones because we feel it would be necessary to explain our impressions, apparently the editors do not feel this necessity. They use the term "ruling bureaucracy" as if it were self-explanatory. The term itself substitutes for the necessary analysis of how this complex bureaucracy is constituted, and for the particular nature of the opposition faced by Solidarity. The specificity of the differing lines taken by various forces in struggles within the party, state organs such as planning and enterprise management, the media and educational/cultural institutions, and repressive apparatuses, are overlooked and instead collapsed into one compact entity. Similarly, the working class is never defined.

Other socioeconomic strata besides factory workers are hardly mentioned. Typical of this strain of workerism in the article is the following grudging, almost sarcastic mention of the role of KOR:

It was typical of the evolving movement that it was rank-and-file workers from the North Sea region who originated the idea of independent unions in the later 70s, while the intellectuals around KOR (Workers Self-Defense Organization) to whom they originally presented the notion were initially skeptical. Nonetheless, the intellectuals agreed to help with the project, and together they launched the *North Sea Worker*, the newspaper which became the main organizing vehicle for the movement.—ATC 4, p. 6.

Earlier in the same paragraph the "great mass strike explosions of 1970-71 and 1976" are cited as the historical antecedents of the union, Solidarity, in Poland, but no

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mention is made of student demonstrations of the past two decades, and of the previous failure of workers' and students' movements to support one another. A non-reductionist perspective would place a great deal of emphasis on the alliance between workers and intellectuals that propelled Solidarity into national and international importance. Apparently the editors' view of the KOR has changed, because a distinctly different view was presented in the editors' earlier piece in ATC 3.

... Since '76 the KOR has led an unparalleled, semi-legal existence, published a workers newspaper (RABOTNIK) in editions of 40,000 and helped to defend militants against government repression. The role of K.O.R. in the developing movement in Poland testifies to the potentially critical role of a party which develops the consciousness of the working class, especially by presenting a clear summing up of its history and experience, and setting out alternatives for taking the struggle forward. K.O.R. undoubtedly played a key role in preparing the revolt, ideologically and organizationally.—p. 5 (our emphasis).

Indeed, we are forced to ask what became of party building in the revolutionary situation suggested by the editors. All of our interpretations of Solidarity suffer a great deal from lack of clarity on this question of the party, revolutionary or revisionist. But syndicalism is no substitute for greater efforts to focus on this problem.

Peasants, students, soldiers, and other social groups are never substantively dealt with in the authors' analysis. The worker-peasant alliance was a cornerstone of Lenin's approach to revolution and socialism, but Rural Solidarity never appears in the editors' considerations. This one-dimensional view of Polish society sets the stage for simplistic remarks about organizing the military:

... In view of the depth and breadth of popular support for the 10,000-member Solidarity, there was a real potential for winning over the Polish army. Certainly, many of the conscripts sympathized with the Movement. But this sympathy had to be organized to be effective. Winning over the soldiers is not unprecedented under revolutionary conditions. It was brilliantly accomplished in Portugal in 1974-75, not to mention Russia in 1917... on the other hand, failure to organize the army permitted the unimpeded use of Polish elite troops as a surrogate for the Russian military in the recent coup... (p. 15).

A few comments on party and state bureaucracy. The editors make the point that Solidarity as a movement should not be blamed for what happened to it (especially for its call for a referendum on confidence in the party) because the authorities were preparing its suppression for some time, possibly even from the beginnings of the union movement. While we agree that it was not a provocation on the part of Solidarity's leadership that brought down repression where it would not otherwise have come, we do think it significant that repression came after a party congress in which opposition to the hardline approach toward Solidarity was purged from the PUWP, and after a certain faltering on the part of Solidarity in its efforts to develop a clear program to unite its ranks and consolidate its hegemonic role in Polish society. This is never a simple process, and perhaps it was not possible for this to take place in the short time Solidarity had before certain forces within the state and party were able to regain the momentum. Just the same, negotiations stalled and there was no clear path forward.

The strategy of the mainstream of Solidarity's leadership was one of "sharing power" with the Polish state. This idea was doomed from the start, according to the

editors, because the state never had any intention of sharing or conceding power to the workers. This view presents the state as monolithic, and downplays the importance of struggles that occurred within the party before the democratic and pro-Solidarity tendency was defeated, since it sees that defeat as pre-determined. However, as Paul Costello, a *Theoretical Review* editor, wrote soon after the birth of Solidarity:

The party bureaucracy is no less guilty (than the factory union bureaucracy) of having abandoned the workers. As it has all too often admitted, the party has lost the confidence of the working masses. In both cases, however, we should recognize that we are not dealing with monolithic organizations. In every struggle, 1956, 1970-71, 1976, and now in 1980, events have demonstrated that when the workers go on strike the rank and file of the party and labor unions will frequently side with the masses against the official leadership. The politburo of the Communist Party admitted as much in 1971 when it remarked that a "crisis of confidence" pervaded the party which divided the "basic mass of party members" from leading authorities...

"It is in this context that we must evaluate the criticism raised by the workers against the Party and the labor unions. They are not against these organizations as such, but against the bureaucratic structures and practices which make it impossible for the mass of honest cadre to defend workingclass interests. This, in turn, makes it impossible for these organizations to be organic proletarian bodies. What the workers are demanding are real workingclass organizations, because Poland's economic and political crisis flows in no small measure from the lack of workingclass leadership in decision making—not just in the factories, but in the State system as well.—TR 19 (p. 15).

The editors of ATC cite the development of the Horizontal Movement as a genuine rank-and-file movement (p. 9, ATC 4) but do not see the movement as significant. Unfortunately, they take the look-what-happened-to-it approach, which closes the door to an examination that goes further than the "monolithic-party" view.

The flipside of these views on the party is a highly romantic view of the rank-and-file. The rank-and-file is seen as immanently revolutionary, and immanently intent on its own interest and goals which differ sharply from the leadership's. What we get is a denial of the actual complexity of a rank-and-file, in this picture of the rank-and-file as a monolith.

In place of a conclusion, let us simply say that the struggles of Solidarity, both in relatively open conditions and underground, provide rich lessons for revolutionary Marxists in the workingclass movement. However, these lessons cannot be identified and understood if we see only what we want to see in them or use them merely as proofs for traditional Leninist or Trotskyist laws and principles. We don't pretend to have the answers about the vicissitudes of the socialist transition as it is actually unfolding today. We are extremely critical of revisionist practices and repressive conditions in the socialist countries and are committed to supporting struggles such as Solidarity's for genuine socialist and democratic advances. We offer our criticisms as part of the process of theoretical elaboration by Marxists in both imperialist and socialist countries that has been accompanying these struggles.

Finally, we join with ATC once again in calling upon all left and progressive forces in the U.S. to redouble our solidarity with Solidarity until martial law is lifted and socialist renewal can begin again.