



Twenty-one Demands: Danzig 1980

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In August 1980, workers at the Gdańsk Shipyard occupied their workplace and forced through something that was not permitted in the Eastern Bloc: a workers union independent of the state. The first of their twenty-one demands was not wages, but the right to organise — the first wage-related demand was in seventh place. Sixteen months later, the government imposed martial law.

In the summer of 1980, something happened in Poland that, according to the logic of the system, could not have happened. In a state that saw itself as the rule of the working class, workers went on strike against the government — and succeeded in securing the right to organise independently of it. The order of the demands they put forward at that time deserves attention: wages were not at the top of the list.

Background

The cycles of strikes

August 1980 was not the first attempt. In 1956 in Poznań, in 1970 on the coast, and in 1976 in Radom and Ursus, there had been uprisings, triggered by conflicts over wages, work quotas or food prices, all of which were crushed.

In Poznań in 1956, the issues were excessive tax deductions on bonuses, excessively high quotas and wages; the immediate trigger was the failure of a negotiating delegation in Warsaw. In December 1970, it was a price rise of 23 per cent on average. During the suppression of the December 1970 unrest, 45 people lost their lives, most of them shot by the military and the militia, including shipyard workers and uninvolved passers-by.

Those involved drew a tactical lesson from 1970 that proved decisive in 1980: do not take to the streets. Anyone who leaves the workplace to demonstrate becomes a target. Anyone who stays at the workplace forces the other side either to negotiate or to open fire inside a production facility.

What the earlier strikes taught

The experience was mixed, and it explains the subsequent sequence of demands.

After 1970, following further strikes in February 1971, the price rises were in fact withdrawn; the general promises of reform, however, remained unfulfilled. In 1976, the announced price rises were withdrawn within a day — those involved in Radom and Ursus got their way and paid for it with dismissals, imprisonment and ill-treatment.

The lesson, then, was not that concessions are withdrawn, but something worse: that promises remain unfulfilled and those who fought for them are subsequently persecuted. Without an organisation of their own, there is no one who can later demand that a concession be honoured — and no one to protect those who are persecuted.

The committees

After 1976, groups emerged that supported persecuted workers and their families, organised legal aid and disseminated information — the best known of these being the Committee for the Defence of Workers (KOR). Added to this were the formation of independent coastal trade unions in 1978 and a growing underground press.

These structures explain why August 1980 unfolded differently from 1970. There was experience, networks and people who knew how to formulate demands.

The strike

The trigger

On 7 August 1980, crane operator Anna Walentynowicz was sacked, five months before her retirement. She had been active in the independent workers unions. On 14 August, workers at the Lenin Shipyard in Gdańsk went on strike, demanding her reinstatement and that of Lech Wałęsa, a pay rise, a memorial to the victims of 1970, and safety guarantees for the strikers.

The turning point

After a few days, the shipyard management offered a concession that would have been sufficient for the shipyard workforce. The strike was drawing to a close, and workers began to leave the shipyard.

At this point, four women ran to the gates and held them back: Anna Walentynowicz, Alina Pienkowska, a nurse at the shipyard infirmary, Ewa Ossowska, also from the shipyard, and Henryka Krzywonos, a tram driver. Their argument was that the workplaces which had joined the strike would be left empty-handed if the shipyard were to stop now.

This account is based on eyewitness accounts, not on contemporary documents; it is largely undisputed in Polish scholarship. According to the prevailing view, it is the linchpin of the entire event: what had been a successful company-wide strike turned into an inter-company conflict. An inter-works strike committee was formed, which hundreds of workplaces joined within days.

The twenty-one demands

During the night of 16–17 August, the strike committee drew up twenty-one points and wrote them on two plywood boards. On 18 August, these were displayed at Gate No. 2. The order was not random.

First on the list was the authorisation of free workers unions, independent of the state and the companies, with explicit reference to Convention No. 87 of the International Labour Organisation. Second was the right to strike and the security of strikers and their supporters. Third was freedom of expression, of the press and of publication. This was followed by the reinstatement of those dismissed after 1970 and 1976 and the release of political prisoners, access for the strike committee to the mass media, and the involvement of society in resolving the crisis.

It was not until seventh place that the first financial demand — strike pay — appeared, and in eighth place the wage increase of 2.000 zlotys. These were followed by food supplies, pensions, healthcare, childcare and working hours.

The strikers thus prioritised procedural issues over distributional ones. The reason for this stems from their own experience, as described above: promises made without organisation are not enforceable.

The Agreement

On 31 August 1980, the strike committee and a government commission signed the Gdańsk Agreement. It was not the only one: Szczecin had signed on 30 August, Jastrzębie-Zdrój followed on 3 September, and Dąbrowa Górnicza on 11 September.

The government recognised independent, self-governing workers unions — in return for a concession set out in the same clause: the strike committee recognised the leading role of the party in the state and the existing system of alliances, and the new workers unions undertook not to assume the role of a political party .

In September, the regional committees merged to form a nationwide organisation: Solidarność. At its peak in the autumn of 1981, it had, according to its own figures, between nine and ten million members, roughly a third of the working population.

What happened next

Martial law

On 13 December 1981, the government under Wojciech Jaruzelski imposed martial law. The workers union's activities were suspended; it was not formally dissolved until the Workers Union Act of 8 October 1982 came into force. During the period of martial law, around ten thousand people were interned.

On 16 December 1981, special forces shot and killed nine miners whilst suppressing the strike at the Wujek colliery in Katowice; a further 21 were injured.

The dispute over the justification

Jaruzelski justified the move on the grounds of averting a Soviet intervention.

Opponents regard this as a retrospective justification and point to Soviet documents that make an intervention seem unlikely — in particular the minutes of the Politburo meeting of 10 December 1981 and the notebook of a Soviet aide, which suggests that Jaruzelski himself sought military assistance. The availability of sources has improved since the 1990s, though this has not settled the matter.

The return

Solidarność continued to operate underground for seven years. In 1988, new waves of strikes led to talks that began on 31 August 1988; these gave rise to the Round Table, which met from 6 February to 5 April 1989. On 17 April 1989, the workers union was re-registered. The ruling party lost the subsequent, partly free, elections.

Conclusions

Legal: Freedom of association as a fundamental right

The core of the Gdańsk Agreement is freedom of association — the right to form organisations to safeguard working conditions without the permission of the state or the employer.

This right is enshrined in international law under Convention No. 87 of the International Labour Organisation of 9 July 1948, which has been in force since 4 July 1950 and was ratified by Poland on 25 February 1957. The state-controlled workers unions did not comply with it. The strikers were therefore not demanding a new right, but rather the fulfilment of an existing one — and explicitly referred to this in their first demand.

This leads to a general observation: the gap between a legally enshrined right and its reality is not a legal problem, but a problem of enforcement. Treaties do not enforce themselves. In Gdańsk, this gap was bridged by a strike.

Strategy: Procedure before distribution

The sequence of the twenty-one demands is the most important strategic lesson to be learnt from this conflict.

The argument in favour of this

wage demands can be met and subsequently devalued. A right to self-organisation cannot simply be revoked, because it means the opposing side is permanently faced with a negotiating partner.

The objection

Procedural rights are abstract to people in need. Those who lack the bare necessities are hard to win over to the cause of the right to organise; the demand for strike pay in seventh place shows that the Gdańsk strikers knew this too.

Their response was not theoretical, but based on experience: they had seen twice what happens to promises when there is no organisation.

Politically: The self-limiting revolution

Solidarność did not claim governmental power in 1980. The sociologist Jadwiga Staniszkis gave the concept of the self-limiting revolution its best-known formulation; the strategy itself had been developed within the dissident movement around Jacek Kuroń and Adam Michnik since the 1970s.

The rationale was foreign policy-related — the Soviet reaction — and domestic: a workers union that governs is no longer a workers union, because it then has no one left to stand against whom it could make demands.

In 1981, however, this self-limitation applied only to a limited extent. The programme of the first congress in the autumn of 1981 and the demand for free elections to the Sejm went beyond merely acting as a countervailing force.

Self-restraint as a strength

According to this interpretation, the movement survived martial law precisely for this reason and was in a position to negotiate in 1989.

Self-restraint as a missed opportunity

According to the other view, the government was weak enough in 1981, and this restraint bought the movement time. Whether Solidarność would actually have been strong enough is a matter of assessment, not fact, and cannot be definitively determined.

The debate touches on a question that every strong workers union faces. Those who confine themselves to the role of a countervailing force remain capable of action, but do not fundamentally change the circumstances. Those who assume governmental responsibility can shape events but lose the ability to contradict themselves. The Polish development after 1989 — in which governments emerging from the movement pursued economic policies whose social costs were high for sections of their own membership — serves as a case study for this question; just how high these costs were and whether they could have been avoided remains a matter of debate in economic history.

Socially: Whose name is mentioned

The decision not to end the strike once the shipyard workforce had achieved its goal was taken by four women. In the public memory of Gdańsk, one man takes centre stage.

This is not a special case in Poland, nor is it merely a question of fairness towards individuals. Anyone who reduces a movement to its spokespeople loses sight of what sustained it — and draws the wrong conclusions about what would be necessary next time.

Philosophically: Solidarity as a decision

The name of the movement describes precisely the process that gave rise to it. Solidarity here was neither a feeling nor a sense of belonging, but an action with a cost: continuing the strike even though one's own goal had been achieved, in support of the demands of others, at the risk of ultimately losing everything.

Herein lies an answer to an old objection to the idea of solidarity. The objection is that solidarity is merely self-interest in disguise. In Gdańsk, self-interest had already been satisfied by the time the decision was made. What followed was something else entirely — and it lasted sixteen months, a state of emergency and seven years in the underground.

What remains

Gdańsk is the rare case in which a labour dispute has changed a political order. But the lesson that is most readily applicable does not lie there.

It lies in the sequence of demands. The Gdańsk strikers knew that any concession won through struggle lasts only as long as there is someone who can demand it. That is why they first fought to secure that 'someone'.

Sources

- The twenty-one demands of the Inter-Enterprise Strike Committee, Gdańsk, 17 August 1980. The two plywood panels were inscribed on the UNESCO Memory of the World Register in 2003 under the title 'Twenty-One Demands, Gdańsk, August 1980'; they are housed at the European Solidarność Centre.
- The Gdańsk Agreement of 31 August 1980; the Szczecin Agreement of 30 August, the Jastrzębie-Zdrój Agreement of 3 September and the Dąbrowa Górnicza Agreement of 11 September 1980.
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- Shana Penn: Solidarity's Secret. The Women Who Defeated Communism in Poland, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005. (Focuses primarily on the underground movement after December 1981.)
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- Trade Union Act of the People's Republic of Poland of 8 October 1982.

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