

# Reviews

## SOLIDARITY: POLAND'S INDEPENDENT TRADE UNION

Denis MacShane  
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## POLAND: THE STATE OF THE REPUBLIC

Reports by the 'Experience and the Future' Discussion Group (DiP) Warsaw, ed M Vale  
Pluto Press 1981. Pbk £4.95  
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Denis MacShane is particularly well qualified to present to the Western public the development and the achievements of Poland's independent trade union Solidarity. He is an official of the International Metalworkers' Federation and is well acquainted with problems of trade unionism in many countries. He also views these problems in a broad international perspective and is aware that no clear line of division can (or should) be drawn between politics and 'pure' trade unionism.

His book is based mostly on Polish sources, on conversations and discussions with Polish activists — by luck or instinct he found competent and congenial interpreters during his travels. He pays a handsome and deserved tribute to D Singer, whose *Road to Gdansk* provided him with much topical information.

MacShane briefly recapitulates the relevant events which preceded the 'hot summer' of 1980: the Poznan rising and the 'liberalisation' of 1956; the upheaval of 1968 and the tragic end of the Gomulka reign in the winter of 1970; the ferment of the Gierek decade; the formation of KOR which brought about the fruitful cooperation of workers and intellectuals. Then he recalls the dramatic days of the August strike which led to the signing of the historic Gdansk agreements and, after a great deal of bargaining with the government, to the *de jure* registration of the new union; the conflict and confrontation of the Bydgoszcz affair in March 1981; the emergence, in May 1981, of the peculiar 'trade union' of individual farmers — the Rural Solidarity. This all followed months of tension, conflict, confrontation, and compromise with the authorities who tried unsuccessfully to stem the irresistible growth of Solidarity into a force embracing nearly ten million people.

By perceptively sketching the profile of the populist leader Lech Walesa, MacShane shows how this astonishing champion of workers' rights, with the badge of the Holy Virgin in his lapel, the portrait of the Pope, and admiration for Marshal Pilsudski, expressed the social and national aspirations of the workers with whom he so effectively acted in unison. He became the truly 'indispensable' leader created by the movement which he successfully led during the most crucial months of the struggle.

MacShane carries his story up to June 1981, that is to the period preceding the Extraordinary Congress of the Polish United Workers Party, in July, and the first Congress of Solidarity in September-October.

Within the limits which the author conscientiously imposed on himself, he fulfils his task admirably. Writing as an active trade unionist, his object was to 'widen understanding about the work of Solidarity as a trade union of workers'. He achieves exemplary lucidity in explaining the structure of Solidarity, its organisational basis, its procedures, its statutes, its finances, its everyday functions and preoccupations. Because MacShane treats all these intricate questions with reference to Western trade unions, they become more easily comprehensible to Western activists for whom his little volume is an indispensable handbook. At the outset he decided to deal only with industrial Solidarity, that is the industrial working class, leaving aside the peasants and other layers of Polish society. Only very briefly

does he mention the great and intractable economic problems.

However, it is obvious that Solidarity which, in a formal or informal way, embraced — until the military takeover — about 80% of the country's population, could no longer be viewed as a trade union only. Whenever MacShane ventures beyond his self-imposed limits, he is less satisfactory. He is clearly bewildered by the relations between Solidarity and the Church and in the chapter devoted to this subject makes a number of vague, contradictory and highly debatable points. Of course, it is one thing to explain the history of a one-year-old trade union, and quite another to understand the politics of an institution which a few years ago celebrated its millennium.

The title of the chapter on 'Economic Reform — is Self-Management an Answer?' is quite properly formulated as a question. MacShane can do no more than report on the discussions he had on this subject with the leaders and advisers of Solidarity. Although it is generally accepted that self-management in industry is the key to a major socio-political reform, the actual method of self-management, its structure and scope, was not elaborated. Nor was any comprehensive project for economic reform put forward either by the government or by Solidarity, although various tentative versions were discussed at length by both sides.

The fact that Solidarity was not able to work out its own agreed plan of self-management may, in part, be due to the origin and character of the organisation. MacShane remarks, in his final chapter, that Solidarity is 'the first mass workers' movement to develop without a theoretical base', and he adds that 'Some might say that this is the union's greatest strength — it has not had to carry loads of ideological luggage...'. It might also be said — and perhaps more correctly — that this was Solidarity's greatest weakness, that its lack of 'theoretical base' hampered it in producing a theoretical blueprint for a major reform which could not be introduced spontaneously and haphazardly. It is quite possible that a trade union may come into being 'without a load of ideological luggage', but perhaps some of this 'luggage' is needed to introduce the essence of genuine socialism into a country which so far has only had the first premise of it.

The second book consists of an English version of documents prepared in Poland by the discussion group 'Experience and the Future' (DiP) prior to August 1980. Initially the group was sponsored by a state-run educational forum but lost that sponsorship when it became clear that its general approach



deviated considerably from party orthodoxy.

*Poland: the State of the Republic* is based on a survey of Polish public opinion gathered by means of a questionnaire. The chief purpose of the survey was to find out to what the respondents ascribed the wide-spread malaise and dissatisfaction rending Polish society, and how they proposed to remedy it. What, in fact, the survey produced was an indictment of the postwar regime, and not very bold or even positive methods to improve it. Of marxist or socialist ideology there is hardly any evidence.

The great 'trade union revolution' of August 1980 brought the dissatisfaction and popular anger to the surface thus overtaking in a sense the considerations of the contributors to the volume. However, the documents still remain of interest to those who try to go to the roots of the disintegration of the Polish regime. What detracts from their value is the fact that there is no way of establishing how representative are the opinions expressed in the book, or their relative weight and importance. The editors preserve an absolute anonymity and we are only told that the questions were addressed to about a hundred people 'of various philosophical outlooks, in various scholarly fields and the arts, journalists and public figures' both in the party and outside it. H Ticktin and

G Schopflin do manage to introduce the rather wordy and sprawling documents concisely on a few informative pages.

Tamara Deutscher

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
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