

Poland: the fight for workers' control

The summer of 1981 brought a big change for the movement for workers' self-management.

Up until then it had gone through a phase of primitive accumulation, especially within the big factories. The regional leaderships of Solidarnosc — in the first place, those in the main industrial centres — gradually got drawn into the movement, thus contributing to its advance.

From July the struggle for self-management made a qualitative leap forward, becoming broader more generalised, and a factor in national politics. This tremendous advance was the result of the revival of the mass struggle which was linked to the deepening of the socio-economic and political crisis.

The creation of the Network of pilot workplace organisations, and the initiatives which it took, were a very important contribution in this new phase of struggle. This was a horizontal structure based on 17 big factories in different regions. The Network was set up in mid-April, and launched its draft "Law of Social Enterprise" at the beginning of June, in opposition to the bureaucracy's programmes on workers' self-management and state enterprise...

Basing itself on the aspiration to a real socialisation of the means of production, the Network gave substance to this demand with the slogan of the 'social enterprise', a slogan which immediately gained enormous popularity and became a benchmark for the whole social movement. The Network presented its initiative in the form of a 'social draft law', the very existence of which served to highlight and crystallise the differences between Solidarnosc's position and that of the bureaucratic regime on self-management. One of the strong points of the initiative was that it encouraged workers not to wait for the creation of full-fledged workers' councils, but to organise 'constitutive committees of workers' self-management'. In fact, the process of forming councils often took time because of the size of workplaces or their geographical distribution. The Network's proposal allowed the rapid establishment of a provisional organisation, and an immediate start to the struggle.

The Network saw the social enterprise as an economic unit and as a fundamental form of property in the means of production. In parallel would exist cooperatives and private enterprises, and also state enterprises, which, unlike the social enterprises, would come directly under the central state administration — railways, post

Solidarnosc lives! As *Workers' Liberty* goes to press, a strike at the giant Lenin steelworks in Nowa Huta is spreading to other factories.

One of the most important ideas of Solidarnosc in 1980-1 was 'workers' self-management' — industry being controlled by workers' councils rather than by unelected bureaucrats. The conflict between different perspectives in Solidarnosc was largely focused on different ideas of what 'self-management' meant.

This extract is translated and abridged from the book 'Rendez-vous nos usines' ('Give us our factories') by Zbigniew Kowalewski, a leader of the left wing in Solidarnosc. It describes the debate on 'self-management' in the last months before Solidarnosc was banned under martial law in December 1981.

and telephones, banks, social security, power stations, and workplaces coming under the ministries of justice and of defence. This idea provoked negative reactions among the Solidarnosc leaders on the railways, because they were convinced of the possibility of developing forms of self-management in the repair workshops and the necessity of installing advanced forms of workers' co-management in the national railways.

The negative side of the Network's draft was to do with its excessive inclination to market economics — to enterprise autonomy seen above all in its economic dimension. "The state may only influence the functioning of this type of enterprise through economic instruments such as taxes, custom duties, and credits, and general legal norms, quality norms, or norms concerning the protection of the environment", said an adviser to the Network.

In July, the regime launched a furious ideological campaign against the Network's project, calling it 'anarcho-syndicalist'. Anarcho-syndicalism is the favourite bogeyman of the bureaucratic witch-hunters when it comes to dealing with real workers' self-management. The authorities also accused the Network of wanting to dismantle state property to replace it by group property. Adam Swinarski, one of the leaders of the Network, replied:

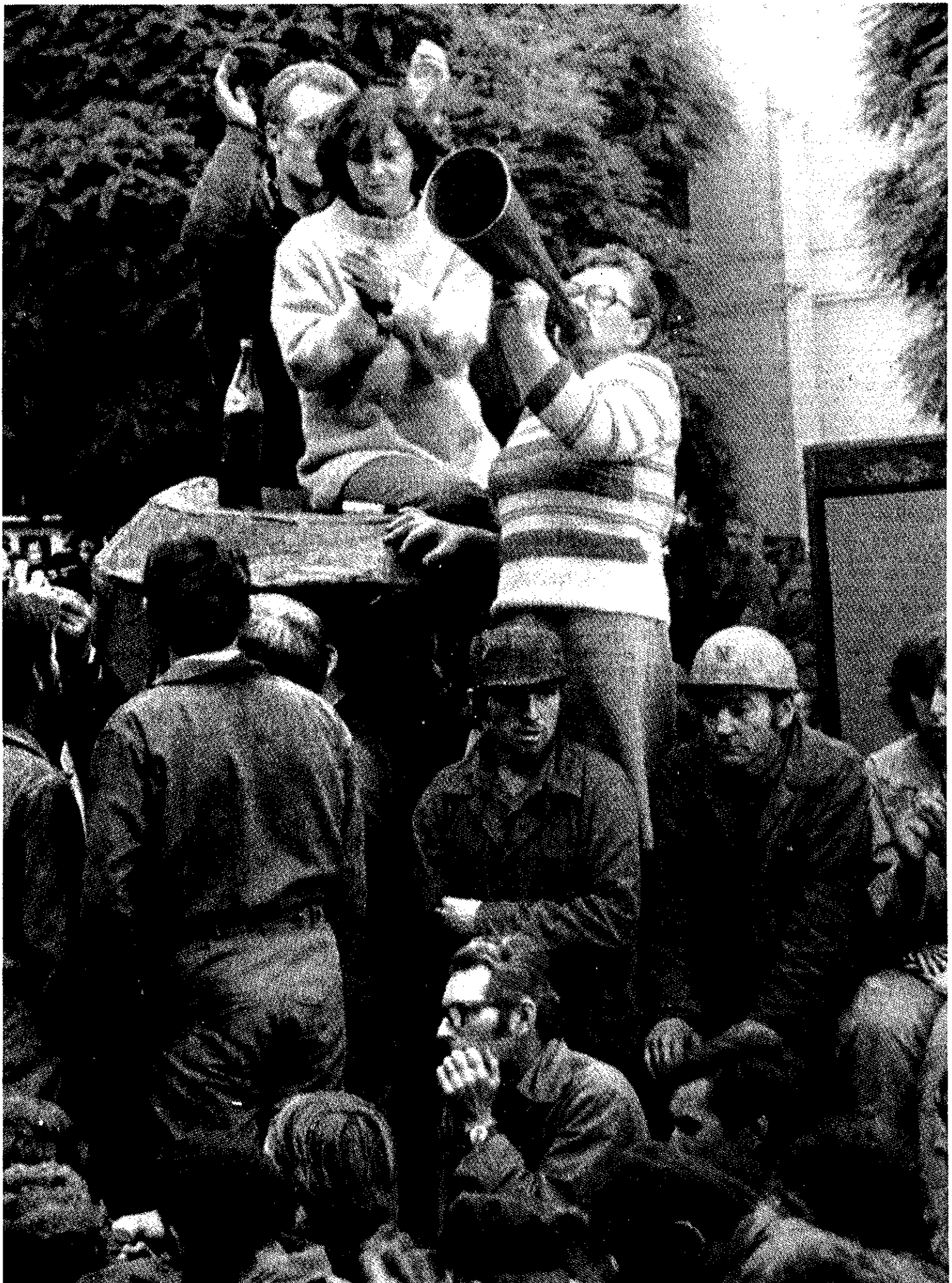
"We are accused of wanting to prevent society from influencing the definition of economic objectives and the means of attaining them, and to deprive the socialist state of any power in the running of the economy and the attainment of social objectives. We are also accused of aligning ourselves with the Yugoslav reforms of the '50s..."

However, our project has nothing to do

with group property or with the idea of transforming Solidarnosc members into shareholders in their workplaces... We do not want to change the system, but we do want to go back to a working-class version of socialism.... How could we accept the idea that the workforce of an enterprise should play a role analogous to that of a capitalist owner? The Network's project declares clearly that the enterprise must meet overall social objectives, because it belongs to the whole people".

The position of the Network was determined by a political logic. It was marked by the absence of any project for a vertical system of workers' self-management, and it was not by chance that one of the main disputes inside the Network was about the powers of a Self-Management Chamber in Parliament, and indeed about whether or not the social movement should seek to establish such a Chamber. The strategy of 'self-limiting revolution' [i.e. of a revolution which would transform society without overthrowing the state power] conditioned the Network's project. Consciously or not, it conformed to a political vision according to which it was certainly possible to overthrow bureaucratic power at the grass roots — in the workplaces and in the municipalities — but not at central level.

The bureaucracy's monopoly of economic power rests on two linked factors: on one side, the total suppression, by political means, of democratic institutions of self-organisation and representation of the workers and the citizens, and the lack of any control by such institutions over the central authority; and, on the other side, the large-scale administrative suppression of the other factor of control, market mechanisms. The law of value cannot be suppressed in a post-capitalist



Anna Walentynowicz, a leading Solidarnosc activist, addresses workers occupying the Gdansk shipyard in 1980

economy. It has to wither away, in parallel with other market categories, including the buying and selling of labour-power. The re-establishment, to a certain extent, of the operation of the law of value as an element of control over the plan, is one of the indispensable objectives of reform of economic management in the revolution against the bureaucratic regime. But if you consider that, for political reasons, the development of democratic institutions of the working class cannot go beyond a certain threshold (the 'geopolitical factor' [the threat of USSR intervention] determining the relation of forces in the last analysis), then you automatically seek to limit the power of the bureaucracy by the maximum development of the market. If workers' councils cannot exercise real control over the bureaucratic regime, then let the market do it instead: such was the Network's logic. The question was posed in the following manner: if we can only take power in the workplaces, the workers' councils must be able to base themselves on a maximum of enterprise autonomy in relation to the organs of power held by the central bureaucracy.

Many self-management activists disagreed with this position and argued that there could be no workers' power in the workplaces without resolving the question of power at the level of the state. As conscious supporters of real central planning, they approached the problem from a different angle. Even so, for tactical reasons, it was not opportune to demand more power for the workers' councils and for the other democratic institutions at that precise stage of the struggle; so it was necessary to demand of the bureaucracy that it leave as much scope as possible to market mechanisms, and then do all we could to make sure that the space thus liberated was occupied by the workers' councils and by the self-management system in general. It seemed pointless to focus energy on an ideological discussion with the Network activists and debate economic theory. What was decisive, on the contrary, was to emphasise the establishment of the indispensable means to develop a workers' democratic counter-power as soon as a space for it opened up, and the need for the forces which could be mobilised by the Network to take up that task...

Karol Modzelewski, one of the main leaders in Lower Silesia, said at a meeting of the national leadership:

"If the system of self-management is put in place, if we manage to enforce it as we wish, then Solidarnosc must keep its independence from that system in order to avoid the traps they have fallen into in Yugoslavia. Those social dangers are the only rational argument advanced by official propaganda against the self-management solutions proposed by the Network. The argument is that those solutions would introduce new social injustices, since enterprises which are modern, well-equipped, and well-placed in the market or in a monopoly position would be able to take advantage of their

situation for the particularistic interests of their workers, while the weaker enterprises and the economically less developed regions would lose out. That has happened in Yugoslavia, in spite of all the positive sides of its self-management system.

But, unlike in Yugoslavia, we have the great good fortune to be able to create a self-management system at a time when the powerful and authentic trade-union movement of Solidarnosc already exists. That trade union is capable of enforcing principles on institutional solutions, the way self-management is conceived, and the distribution of the national income, which will limit those aspects which we see as negative of the self-management system".

Everything depends, said Modzelewski, on the way in which the power over distribution and utilisation of the surplus product which belongs to society as a whole is exercised, and who exercises control over that distribution. In Yugoslavia, the only force able to claim to exercise such control at the national level is the Communist Party. That is why the growth of social inequalities is inevitable. In Poland, on the contrary, there is a force capable of exercising control in the interests of society as a whole and of enforcing social justice: that force is Solidarnosc.

The vanguard sectors of the social movement who agreed with the Network's project, or with Lodz's or other initiatives, were not immediately concerned with the relation which should exist some day between the plan and the law of value: they seized on these initiatives as instruments allowing them to carry on the struggle and to impose their power where it was possible. The essential thing was to know who in future would decide how to run the economy, and not what the exact content of the decision would be. That is why Jean-Yves Potel is quite right when he says that the self-management projects of Solidarnosc — and among them the social enterprise project worked out by the Network — which aim to suppress the principle of the 'nomenklatura' [the ruling party's right to choose people for all positions of power] and to install real workers' power in the workplaces, had an immediate revolutionary import, because they challenged one of the essential presumptions of 'actually existing socialism'. **"Solidarnosc made social property in the means of production a theme taken up by millions of workers".**

On 8 July, a meeting took place at the Gdansk shipyard, called by the Network, with nearly 1000 representatives of workers' councils and constitutive committees of self-management coming from several regions of the country. It was the first massive public expression of the self-management movement, and its first challenge at the national level.

The meeting was extraordinarily militant. **"Give us our factories"** was the slogan put forward by Edward Nowak, a worker leader from the Lenin steelworks at Nowa Huta. This slogan summed up

the tone of the debates well. **"The struggle for the social enterprise is worth a general strike"** said Nowak, in a brilliant speech in which he emphasised the fact that the state machine would not give up of its own accord the control over the means of production which it had usurped and give it to the workers. He aroused enthusiasm when he said that the workers' councils should get national representation through the Self-Management Chamber which should be established in Parliament, and this would guarantee a truly social character for the ownership of the factories. It rang out like a call to arms.

Only four days after the Gdansk meeting, and independent of it, an inter-regional conference was held at Lublin on 12 and 13 July, called by the Lodz and Lublin Solidarnosc leaderships, on the theme 'Solidarnosc and workers' self-management'. Representatives of about 300 structures of the self-management movement and of the union, from 15 regions, participated...

"Conscious of the negative experiences of the self-management movement of 1956-7 and of the power of united workers' action and solidarity, we think it is necessary to take initiatives which will establish agreement and coordination between the organs of workers' self-management in the regions and in the whole country", said the final declaration of the conference, which decided to establish a permanent organ to carry on its work: the Working Group for an inter-regional initiative to coordinate workers' councils, subsequently known as the Lublin Group. The objective of this group was not only to encourage the formation of workers' councils in the workplaces and to contribute to the establishment of regional coordination, but to organise in the short term the calling of a first national congress of delegates from the regional coordinations of workers' councils in order to establish common purpose and set up a permanent organ of coordination at the national level...

A programme of action [was outlined] in 'Ten commandments for the workers' councils', published at the beginning of August by the Lublin Group... In very accessible language, it explained how not to fall into the trap of a supposed co-management of enterprises, it unmasked the fake measures promulgated by the government on economic reform, and it stressed the tasks which the workers' councils could carry out immediately. These included:

- a halt to the flow of funds from the enterprise to the [official] associations and central bodies of industry (on condition that the workers had the support of other workers' councils in the region or sector of industry, and that the enterprise would not be paralysed by cutting necessary economic links),
- taking control over the make-up of production by demanding changes which would, in particular, take account of the needs of agriculture,
- exercising control over the allocation of what was produced in the workplace and

over wastage.

"If you observe wastage of raw materials, of machines, or of other means of production, act immediately without demanding authorisation. Do not fear to break regulations if they are leading to wastage and losses". No less characteristic of these commandments was their way of defining the relation which should exist between the struggle and the law. **"Remember that, in order to get out of the crisis and to carry out a successful economic reform based on self-management, it is not enough to have good laws, for which we are struggling today, but it depends on your ability to win over all the workers of your workplace to the cause of self-management... Remember that by your practical activity you are establishing a law which will not be adopted as such by the legislative power of the People's Republic of Poland unless you struggle relentlessly to impose it"**.

The Lublin Group thus became a second national centre of the self-management movement, outside the Network while wanting to collaborate with it. Contacts were immediately established, with declarations of mutual support on both sides. The Lublin Group served especially as a platform for the positions of the Lodz Solidarnosc leadership. However, problems arose quite quickly. **"Although apparently complementary, the Network and the Lublin Group were going to have difficulty working together. Their different origins and experiences led to a series of differences of opinion which became, bit by bit, two competing political poles. This came out very clearly at the Solidarnosc congress and in the months which followed"**. (Jean-Yves Potel)...

On 26 July, the national Solidarnosc leadership adopted a resolution which can be called historic: it declared its **"full support for the social movement for workers' self-management"** and called on **"the union at all levels to give all support and assistance necessary to the establishment of workers' councils as the essential force for the struggle for economic reform"**...

During the first part of the Solidarnosc congress, which ended on 10 September, the extreme political tension which prevailed in the country was reinforced by the adoption of three resolutions each of which was a challenge to the regime of 'actually existing socialism': They were seen as such by the bureaucratic authorities, in Poland and in the USSR and the other countries of the 'Soviet bloc'.

The first was a message to the workers of Eastern Europe and of all the nations of the USSR in which the Solidarnosc congress, convinced of the common character of the destiny of the working class in all these countries, expressed its support to all those who **"have taken the difficult path of struggle for a free trade union movement"**. The second was a general declaration. It stated the main aspirations of the Polish people: an improvement in provision of food through

the establishment of social control over the production, distribution and prices of necessities; an economic reform through the establishment of real workers' self-management and the abolition of the 'nomenklatura'; true information, through social control over the mass media; and democracy, through the introduction of free elections for Parliament and the people's councils.

The third resolution was about workers' self-management. Karol Modzelewski said it was the most important resolution of the congress, an assessment shared by the delegates and the mass of trade unionists in general, as well as by the whole of the bureaucracy. Written mostly by Grzegorz Palka, it explicitly took up the positions of the Lodz leadership. Its content was unusual: the trade union threatened to take on the supreme organ of the state, according to the constitution of the Republic — that is, Parliament — and to rebel against it if it continued to submit to the bureaucratic diktat of the PUPW and of the state by adopting scandalous laws on self-management.

[This congress resolution was backed up by referendums in factories. For example, 90% of the 24,000 workers in the Lenin steelworks voted for "the workers' council running the enterprise" and "choosing and recalling the manager".

Parliament — until then a rubber stamp — split under the pressure. But then the Solidarnosc leaders negotiated a compromise on self-management with representatives of Parliament, and Parliament voted that compromise into law on 25 September. It left appointment of the managers in all the country's major enterprises in the hands of the central bureaucracy.]

The second part of Solidarnosc's congress opened on 26 September. The recent shock meant that there was immediately a very agitated and prolonged debate. The decision of the three members of the presidium was subjected to implacable criticism, aimed especially at Walesa and the experts. Jakubowicz was not spared insults calling him an 'impostor'. Some delegates defended the compromise, including the representatives of seven enterprises involved in the Network. But it soon became clear that they represented a minority in the congress.

Walesa tried to explain, but in a confused and fairly desperate way. Solidarnosc's leader had a bad time and his prestige was severely reduced. In the election for president of the union, he won but with only 55% of the vote. The compromise on self-management, and the disregard for union democracy which he had shown, cost him 30 or 40% of the vote...

During the debate, the Lodz leaders were the only people to present a collective position for their regional delegation. As would be shown, the firmness they showed won a big response in the congress. They said, in broad terms, the following: the laws adopted by Parliament do certainly imply some concessions to the social movement, but they aim to preserve

the essential mechanisms of the system of bureaucratic management of the economy and of the 'nomenklatura'. The compromise is not in any way justified and is a flagrant violation of the statutes of Solidarnosc and of the resolution of the first part of the congress. So far no-one had proposed to cancel that resolution: let its opponents dare to do that, if they exist. We must ignore this illegal compromise; to accept it would mean giving up the struggle for workers' self-management and capitulating. The first thing to do is to apply the decisions of the congress resolution, that is, to submit all the points where Solidarnosc is in disagreement with the laws on self-management to a popular referendum in the workplaces, to be organised within six weeks, and to base ourselves on the will thus expressed by the working class to conduct an energetic struggle with the aim of amending those laws.

Given the wide agreement that existed on the need to avoid the affair of the compromise transforming itself into an internal crisis of the union, the congress adopted a moderate declaration emphasising that the presidium had acted in an incorrect manner, violating trade-union democracy, and that it was necessary to redefine the role of the experts so as to put an end to their excessive influence on the decisions taken by the national leadership.

Along the lines of the position which it had defended, the Lodz delegation presented a draft resolution on the laws about self-management and on the referendum to be organised. According to this motion, the congress should clearly express the intention of Solidarnosc to continue the struggle for real self-management and to support the workers' struggle for that aim, even if it led to breaking the laws.

A counter-motion presented by the most moderate elements, favourable to the compromise, advocated that Solidarnosc should content itself with putting pressure on the government to get favourable decrees about the application of the laws. The laws which had been adopted should be tested in practice for six months. The weapon of the referendum should only be used afterwards, if the experience had been negative...

Under the pressure of the moderates, the platform manoeuvred to delay the vote on the motions, hoping that this would give time to amend the Lodz motion and soften it. In a very firm intervention, Grzegorz Palka demanded that the vote be taken with no further delay. An overwhelming majority backed the Lodz motion — four-fifths of the delegates — and celebrated the victory with a prolonged ovation for the Lodz delegates in particular, thanking them for not having given way. This congress decision had an enormous influence: despite the partial defeat it had suffered following the vote in Parliament, the social movement avoided demoralisation and setbacks in its struggle for self-management. In the weeks that followed, indeed, it became more combative and broader.