

# Solidarity: the struggle continues

by John Harker

"Finally the history of a cruel betrayal on the part of the West of millions of helpless people is being told and exposed. Over thirty years have passed since that time and exposure can no longer save any of the victims. But it can be a warning for the future."

No, this is not a statement about how we shall in the future look back on the December, 1981, imposition of martial law in Poland. These words were used by Alexander Solzhenitsyn in his review of Nickolai Tolstoy's sombrely magnificent book, *The Victims of Yalta*.

It is doubtless true that there are lessons which must be learned, both from the treatment meted out to Solidarity by Polish and Soviet commissars, and from the emergence and growth of the Polish independent self-governing trade union. However, the chapter in the history of man that opened with the strikes in Gdansk's Lenin Shipyard in the summer of 1980 is not yet closed, and obituaries are premature.

Given the disposition of many political figures in the West to cite the Yalta agreement as the rationale for their inability to act in the defence of Polish trade unionists, it is reasonable to see them as victims of Yalta; but by December 13, 1981, they had built up an organization of 10 million members, they had staged a major series of democratic elections in a communist country, they had held their own policy congress and caused the Polish United Workers Party to stage an extraordinary congress. They had, in fact, toppled the leaders of that party and stripped it of most of its authority and all of its claims to political legitimacy.

Winston Churchill once referred to Poland as the inspiration of nations. In an address I made to the First Congress of Solidarity in October, 1981, I could not resist observing that Solidarity is the inspiration of free trade unionists. Though some trade unionists in the West, those who see trade unionism as necessary only in a capitalist society, have sought to find fatal flaws in Solidarity, the overwhelming majority of people have been inspired by its emergence. This acceptance is not bestowed lightly, and where given by unions rather than their workers, it is given by heirs to some of the major social upheavals and struggles of this century and the last. Lech Walesa has been embraced, literally, by British trade union leader, Lionel Murray, the nemesis of Edward Heath's government, and by

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Brazil's explosive young trade unionist and founder of the Workers' Party, Lula.

## The world watches Walesa

The explanation for this embrace is varied, but vital to any coherent understanding of how the future will unfold. When Walesa and Lula met in Rome in the spring of 1981, there was an immediate meeting of hearts and minds. It must stand as one of the ironies of our times that only days before martial law was imposed, Lula received from his friend Walesa a letter protesting the sentence imposed on the Brazilian for doing no more than leading workers in the exercise of their basic and inalienable rights. We must wonder now whether Walesa recalls what Lula observed while they were together in Rome. It was, simply, that if Brazil were in the same geo-political position as Poland, the focus of world attention would be on the efforts of Brazil's workers to set up free trade unions, and those efforts would be seen in a heroic light and not a subsversive one. During his visit to Ottawa early this year, Lula was very concerned to find out as much as he could about the situation facing Walesa, the other detained leaders, and Solidarity itself. His interest, shared by millions, began to grow in the summer of 1980. The origins of Solidarity have rather deeper roots.

## Solidarity's origins

Choice of a starting point must be somewhat arbitrary, or at least subject to competing claims. For the Canadian Labour Congress, the origins can be traced to the aftermath, not of the bloody confrontations of 1970 which saw the young Lech Walesa as a member of the Gdansk strike committee, but of the 1976 strikes at the huge, modern tractor plant, Ursus. Following the confrontation between the authorities and strikers, mainly at the Ursus plant, but also in the city of Radom, the people of Poland embarked on a new path. Many of the workers in Radom and Ursus were dismissed from their jobs, beaten and even tortured by the security forces. The idea was proposed, said Professor Edward Lipinski, that "we try to defend ourselves and protect those unjustly wronged." He and others like him created the KOR, known variously in English as the Committee of Workers Defence, or the Committee for Social Defence. This body began collecting funds, even from foreign countries, to help the strikers and their families. The KOR stimulated journals which listed the wrongs done to workers, and sought to ensure that workers, totally unassisted by their captive "trade unions," were made