

Solidarność (or Solidarity) emerged in Poland in 1980 as the first free, independent labor union in the so-called Eastern Bloc, i.e. the Soviet sphere of influence, which included the USSR and much of Central and Eastern Europe. Solidarity, born as a workers' union, soon transformed into one of the largest peaceful resistance movements in world history and became instrumental in toppling the communist government in Poland, inspiring those living behind the Iron Curtain to seek democratic change and paving the way for democracy in much of Central and Eastern Europe.

The following is a brief history of Solidarity that sheds light on its most steadfast and unwavering allies in the United States – American civil society and its robust organizations – without whom the peaceful revolution that began in Poland four decades ago would not have taken place.

In 1945, decisions made at the Yalta Conference forced Poland under Soviet domination. The newly restored country, as a Soviet satellite, was put under mounting ideological pressure by the new communist authorities. The first post-war elections, in January 1947, as well as all subsequent ones, were falsified.

Ostensibly building a more equitable "workers' state," the communists used the idea of escalating class struggle to suppress entire groups of society in favor of others and to crush political opponents. They deliberately pitted workers against the intelligentsia, farmers and small business owners against workers.

Workers repeatedly rebelled against the one party system, falsified elections, the suppression of human rights and individual freedoms, as well as the crippling social policies of the communist state. The protests that took place in the city of Poznań in 1956 were the first of several mass protests against the communist government. Large-scale workers' protests also took place in subsequent decades, particularly in 1970 and 1976, in other industrial centers of Poland: Gdynia, Radom, Ursus, Szczecin, among others. These protests saw thousands of peaceful protesters killed, heavily wounded and imprisoned.

In March 1968, Polish students from all major academic centers in Poland, spearheaded by a group of students from the University of Warsaw, staged a series of strikes demanding freedom of expression. The student protests were brutally crushed by security forces, and accompanied by a virulent anti-Semitic campaign, prison sentences for many protesters, and repressions against the budding Polish dissident movement.

With time, the Polish anti-communist opposition came to realize that a more structured means for Polish society to organize itself was necessary. After the mass workers' protests in 1976 were violently suppressed, the victims came to be supported by the organized efforts of the Polish intelligentsia – the Worker's Defense Committee established in Warsaw in 1976. The Workers Defense Committee (in Polish: KOR) disseminated information about the International Labor Organization's conventions and other international instruments guaranteeing workers' rights. Invoking the 1975 Helsinki Agreements, other dissident organizations were formed as well. The information these organizations gathered and distributed through underground means was being returned back to Poland and other countries behind the Iron Curtain via the u.s.-funded Radio Free Europe.

In 1978, Karol Wojtyła, the archbishop of Kraków, was elected Pope John Paul II. The event became a matter of great political and spiritual significance. John Paul II's first visit to Poland in 1979 was a great revelation to Poles, the first time in decades when people felt like a community and not just alienated individuals. Millions from all walks of life gathered to listen to the Pope encouraging them to transform Poland through their acts. The visit became a direct catalyst for change that manifested itself a year later.

THE BIRTH OF SOLIDARNOŚĆ

In early July 1980, workers in Poland organized a series of strikes, protesting price increases and expressing anger at the regime; unlike earlier protests, these strikes were well-prepared. Workers' organizations had, for several years, functioned clandestinely to promote the idea of workers' rights and the observance of International Labor Organization (ILO) Conventions, especially those guaranteeing freedom of association and the right to strike and collectively bargain – something that the Polish People's Republic consistently disregarded.

The First National Congress of Solidarity, 1981. (Leonard Szmaglik, ecs)



The Yalta Conference. The u.s., the u.k. and the USSR agree that Poland will fall under the Soviet sphere of influence.

The Hungarian Revolution is brutally suppressed by the USSR.

The Prague Spring – Soviet-led Warsaw Pact troops invade Czechoslovakia 2,000 tanks and 200,000 troops strong, they crush the Czechoslovakian attempt at democratization, tightening the Soviet grip on the country.

September 1981, the First National Congress of Solidarity opens in Gdańsk.
 November 1981, student strikes spread throughout Poland, involving over 55,000 students who demand greater academic freedom.
 At 6:00 AM on December 13, Polish television and radio broadcast Jaruzelski's speech declaring the imposition of a state of war (martial law). Security forces round up Solidarity leaders.
 Strikes break out throughout Poland, demanding the end of martial law. Armed with tanks, machine guns, water cannons and gas canisters, army and special militarized police forces break up the strikes.

Polish Cardinal Karol Wojtyła elected Pope John Paul II.

The beginning of the Soviet-Afghan War.

Ronald Reagan becomes the 40th President of the United States.

Lech Wałęsa, the leader of Solidarity, is awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

The Perestroika ("restructuring") era begins in the USSR.

The Berlin Wall falls on November 9, 1989.



Gdańsk Shipyard Strike in 1980. (Zenon Mirota, Ecs)

The scale of these protests surprised the regime – by the end of August, over 2 million workers all across Poland were striking. Despite the government's campaign of intimidation, the workers remained united in their demands, organizing a joint strike committee and proposing the so-called 21 Demands, including the right to form independent trade unions, freedom of association and expression, the right to strike, improved working conditions, a commemoration of workers killed by the authorities in 1970, wage improvements and the right to influence basic state economic decisions. Facing the ever-growing resistance, the communist government agreed to the demands.

The August Agreements were signed on August 31, 1980 in the Gdańsk Shipyard. *Solidarność*, the first free trade union in a communist country, was born.

The total population of Poland in 1980 was just over 35 million people. Soon, Solidarity had 10 million members. 2 million farmers joined Rural Solidarity. Students, writers, artists, and members of other free professions created new organizations and transformed old ones.

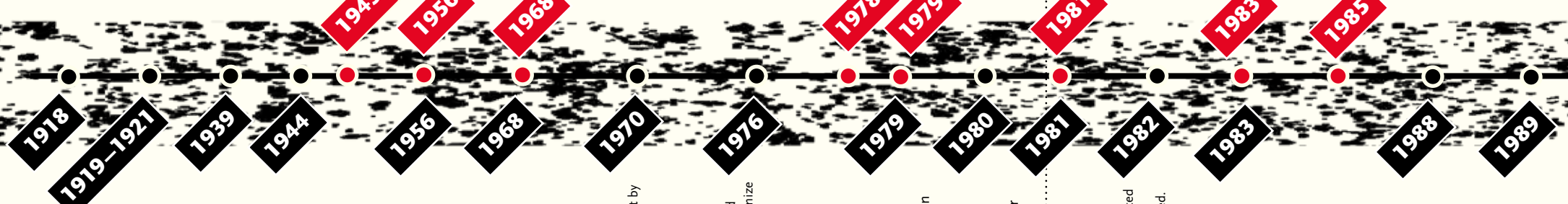
Never before in the area dominated by the USSR were authorities challenged by such a large scale, well-organized action of workers. In 1980-81, Solidarity was second in number only to the AFL-CIO (the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations) among the world's international trade unions, and on the other side of the pond from Poland, the AFL-CIO and U.S. civil society were, indeed, paying close attention to Solidarity.

At the time, the perception of the USSR was changing. The Soviet-Afghan War that began in 1979 and reports of the Soviet war crimes committed on civilians galvanized the international public. It was also a time marked by growing Soviet repressions against the increasingly visible and vocal dissident movement. This radical change of atmosphere had a direct effect on the understanding of events taking place behind the Iron Curtain, including the emergence of Solidarity in Poland.

In the United States, the shift in policy towards the USSR came with the election of Ronald Reagan as the 40th President of the United States in November 1980. The cautious reaction of the Carter administration was replaced by Ronald Reagan's more direct approach to confronting Soviet communism. The Polish bid for freedom found a vocal supporter in President Reagan, who embraced a policy of covert and open assistance to Solidarity throughout his presidency. Even within the Reagan administration, however, many argued for balancing intersecting interests of various groups, including investment banks that had given loans to Poland.



Pope John Paul II and President Ronald Reagan



Poland reborn at the end of WWI.

The Polish-Bolshevik War: Poland stops the attempted invasion of its territory by the Soviet Army.

The Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union is signed, in September 1939. Both attack and invade Poland. The territory remains under Nazi German occupation until the end of WWII.

The creation of the Polish Committee in the USSR, under Soviet tutelage, to act as the new government of Poland.

Workers' uprising in Poznań, Poland, many killed and wounded.

Student protests at major Polish universities are suppressed, participants arrested; as a result of an anti-Semitic campaign launched by the communist government, many leave the country.

Workers peacefully protesting against price increases in major industrial centers, including Gdańsk, Szczecin, Gdynia, are met by army units; many are killed, arrested and fired.

Workers protesting against price increases in Ursus, Radom and Plock are attacked by the police. Students and intellectuals organize to provide aid for the victims.

Pope John Paul II visits Poland.

Strikes begin all over Poland; over 200 factories join in. On August 31, an agreement between the Interfactory Strike Committee and the communist government is signed, allowing for the creation of free and independent trade unions.
 General Wojciech Jaruzelski becomes the Prime Minister of Poland in October, and is elected the first Secretary of the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR).

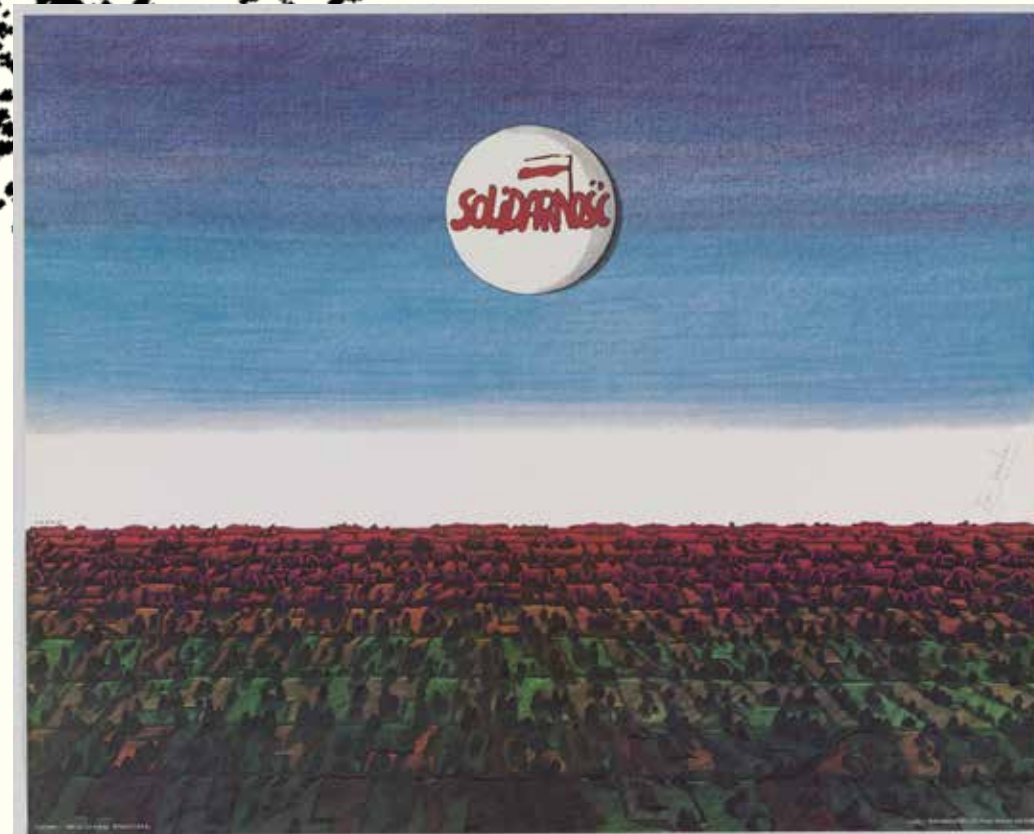
The arrested Solidarity members are handed sentences of up to 8 years; over 3,000 people are sentenced to prison, over 10,000 are detained; over 100,000 fired from work. Hundreds are arrested and wounded in attacks by the police. Solidarity supporters demonstrate in defiance of the government; Solidarity is legalized.

Martial law lifted.

A wave of strikes begins; workers, members of free professions and students join forces.

Negotiations between Solidarity and the communist government begin, culminating in the first partially-free elections in over half of a century on June 4, 1989; an overwhelming victory for Solidarity.

The First National Congress of Solidarity in the fall of 1981 was a huge success for union democracy worldwide. Trade unions in the free world supported Solidarity through a variety of means; equally as important, Solidarity inspired the creation of dissident free trade unions in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe as well as beyond, including Chile, South Africa and China. Today, four decades since the inception of Solidarity, we are yet to appreciate fully the impact and transformative role it played in Poland and around the world.



Jan Sawka, a Polish graphic artist, designed this poster, sold in the millions to provide immediate support to *Solidarność*. The button with the Solidarity logo as a sun shining above a landscape of crowd-like trees became an iconic image, immediately recognizable to supporters of the movement around the world.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The design of this brochure was inspired by *War against the Nation* – a publication by the Committee in Support of Solidarity in New York City, designed by Polish artist Andrzej Dudziński, distributed to support the repressed Solidarity movement in Poland.



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NO BREAD
 WITHOUT FREEDOM

Jakub Karpinski – co-founder, Committee in Support of Solidarity.
(© Zygmunt Malinowski)



Lane Kirkland, January 13, 1982. (DCE)

Irena Lasota – co-founder, Committee in Support of Solidarity. (© Zygmunt Malinowski)



Irena Lasota and Eric Chenoweth at the office of the Committee in Support of Solidarity in NYC. (USA)

Lane Kirkland (1922 – 1999), the president of the American Federation of Unions, the AFL-CIO, one of Solidarity's most unwavering supporters. Kirkland helped organize international support of an American-led boycott of Polish shipping to exert pressure on the Polish government to negotiate the Gdańsk Agreements on August 31, 1980. Soon after, Kirkland announced a public fund that raised \$250,000 (more than \$1 million in today's dollars) to help Solidarity. Under Kirkland, the AFL-CIO supplied money, fax machines, radios and computers to Solidarity and other free unions in communist countries. He relied on a small cadre of dedicated assistants who shared his passion for the cause; Tom Kahn coordinated the undertaking.

For reliable information from inside martial-law Poland, Kirkland worked with the Committee in Support of Solidarity, whose principal figures – Irena Lasota, a Polish émigré who came to the United States after facing persecution for her anti-regime involvement as a student, and Eric Chenoweth, a young political activist – had developed a wide range of contacts within the Solidarity structure.

U.S. civil society proved particularly unwavering and generous with its material and moral support for Solidarity at its inception as well as when the communist authorities in Poland sought to crush the movement by declaring a state of war (martial law) on December 13, 1981, resulting in the detention of thousands of activists and repressions against civil society in Poland.

Pro-Solidarity initiatives were championed by the U.S. trade union federation, the AFL-CIO, and many union leaders, who played a key role in rallying the public and mobilizing the U.S. administration in support of Solidarity. Indeed, the unions were largely responsible for a favorable view of the Polish opposition in American society. AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland and the organization remained Solidarity's main champions and defenders in the West throughout both its legal and underground existence.

Public opinion in the U.S. was galvanized when martial law was introduced in Poland and the AFL-CIO, NGOs, media, and ordinary citizens stood with Solidarity in protest demonstrations, raising humanitarian relief funds and supporting resistance to martial law.

With the creation of the Polish Workers Aid Fund on September 1, 1980, AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland made clear that union solidarity was paramount, thus rejecting initial pressure from the Carter administration to stop raising funds for Solidarity. Upon the declaration of martial law in Poland, Kirkland began establishing a secret distribution network linking American unions to the Solidarity underground, helping to meet its principal needs: money to support the families of imprisoned activists and to sustain the underground structure, equipment for an underground press, and financial aid to enable Solidarity to conduct strikes and other nonviolent actions meant to weaken the regime's grip.

The AFL-CIO and Lane Kirkland also organized a public campaign for a stronger Reagan administration response and for exerting greater pressure on the communist government of Poland – this eventually led to more serious sanctions and the formulation of a series of conditions under which the sanctions against the Polish government could be lifted. The communists in Poland found themselves in a bind. The AFL-CIO put continuous pressure on the U.S. administration throughout the 1980s not to lift sanctions until the main condition, the relegalization of Solidarity and the release of political prisoners, was met. The toughest sanctions stayed in effect until the Polish government agreed to negotiations to relegalize Solidarity after renewed strikes in 1988.

A robust and broad civic network of support for Solidarity was established in the U.S.; their activities were centered on protests, information campaigns and political pressure – keeping American public opinion abreast of the developments in Poland, propagating the ideas of the Polish democratic opposition, fundraising to sustain its structures and offering aid to those persecuted and political refugees.



Tom Kahn. (DCE)

Tom Kahn (1938 – 1992), an assistant to Lane Kirkland and former aide to civil rights leader Bayard Rustin. In 1980, Lane Kirkland appointed Kahn to organize the AFL-CIO's support for Solidarity. Kahn focused on winning financial and political support for the Polish workers through information dissemination, demonstrations and activities in the United States, purchasing and smuggling in materials needed by Solidarity – printing presses, typewriters, computers – and ensuring that the U.S. administration (first Carter's, then Reagan's) did not undermine the workers by lifting sanctions against Poland. Kahn was so successful in organizing aid for Solidarity that by 1984, both Democrats and Republicans agreed that the movement deserved to be supported openly, despite the administration's earlier resistance. The AFL-CIO's public support was deemed exemplary and appropriate for a democracy – much more suitable than the clandestine CIA funding that had previously been funneled to Solidarity.



Albert Shanker

Albert Shanker (1928 – 1997), an early activist in the civil rights movement, lifelong social democrat, and president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). Shanker was engaged in the central struggles of his time for human and civil rights, worker rights, and freedom. A staunch anti-communist, Shanker was Ronald Reagan's opponent on domestic issues, but supported his opposition to communism. Under Shanker's leadership, the AFT supported a range of projects and actions aimed at strengthening trade unions and democracy movements, including *Solidarność*. In 1988, Shanker was the first American trade union leader to meet in Poland with underground Solidarity leaders after the imposition of martial law.



Bayard Rustin at a pro-Solidarity rally. (© Zygmunt Malinowski)

Bayard Rustin (1912 – 1987), a legend of the civil rights movement in the United States, one of Martin Luther King's closest collaborators, and the organizer of the 1963 March on Washington. Rustin worked to strengthen the labor movement, which he saw as the champion of empowerment for the African-American community. He was the Director of the A. Philip Randolph Institute, which coordinated the AFL-CIO's work on civil rights and economic justice. Rustin was instrumental in organizing early support for Solidarity, particularly in New York. He traveled to Poland several times, including as a member of the U.S. Holocaust Commission, most notably in April 1981, when he met with leaders of a number of regional branches of Solidarity and with Lech Wałęsa, the leader of *Solidarność*.



The protests against repressions in Poland attracted top representatives of municipal authorities, defenders of human rights, and galvanized large and committed groups of political refugees from other communist countries, including Czechoslovakia, Ukraine, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Afghanistan and Cuba.



Artists and public intellectuals joined in to support Solidarity, as well. At a pro-Solidarity rally in Manhattan, Susan Sontag – an icon of the intellectual left – declared communism to be morally and politically bankrupt, chastising intellectuals who refused to take a public position against the persecution of oppositionists and the bloodletting that had gone on from Poland to Cambodia. Joan Baez – a legendary folk singer and an icon of civil rights and peace movements – visited Poland to express her support for Solidarity.

The AFL-CIO maintained steady financial, political, and moral support for Solidarity's existence as an underground trade union, as well as after Solidarity's relegalization, helping to deliver greater public financial support for Solidarity through the Free Trade Union Committee and other organizations, such as the Committee in Support of Solidarity.

A pro-Solidarity march on Madison Ave., NYC, January 30, 1982. Police cars clearing the way for demonstrators. (© Zygmunt Malinowski)

A pro-Solidarity demonstration in NYC. (© Zygmunt Malinowski)

One of the largest demonstrations organized by the AFL-CIO, December 19, 1981. (© Zygmunt Malinowski)