

# Polish unrest is no joke

**T**hose troublesome Poles are at it again. Last week workers at Poland's largest steel mill went out on strike. This week, it was the turn of workers at the Lenin shipyards in the grimy seaport of Gdansk. Out came the Solidarity banners and up popped that irksome jack-in-the-box, Lech Walesa.

Poland was suddenly plunged into the worst labor unrest since 1980-81 when angry workers almost overthrew the communist regime and were only quelled by martial law. And, once again, labor problems quickly turned into political trouble—the type of trouble that could blow up into something nasty, both for Poland and the nervously watching Mikhail Gorbachev in Moscow.

The problem in a nutshell: Like other communist nations, Poland sell goods to its people for less than it costs to produce them. To pay for these huge subsidies, the government taxes away most of what workers earn. The result of this cockeyed system is shortages of goods, shoddy products, endless waiting lines and a sort of chronic economic depression.

To correct the mess, Gen. Wojciech Jaruzelski's government has followed Gorbachev's lead by trying to restructure the Polish economy. The first major step was raising prices for basic goods to a realistic level. Up went prices over recent months, often by as much as 50%. Polish workers have now responded by demanding pay raises of 50%. This, of course, would put Poland right back in its former economic muddle. But try explaining such fine points of economics to angry workers who have just seen their grocery bills skyrocket.

Worse for Jaruzelski, labor unrest has rekindled demands for recognition of Solidarity as a legal opposition party and for sweeping changes in Poland's economic and political system. Lech Walesa calls these demands "Polish perestroika." The nervous Soviets call them perestroika run amok. Everyone is waiting to see what comes next.

Another blowup in Poland could shake all of Eastern Europe and backfire right back to the Kremlin. Gorbachev and his supporters are clearly

**ERIC  
MARGOLIS**



identified with Gen. Jaruzelski, who is regarded in Eastern Europe as a more or less liberal communist. Gorbachev has made clear his policy of allowing the communist states of East Europe to "go their own ways," which means a good deal of latitude in economics and politics.

Jaruzelski, who is a good Pole and no cat's paw of the Russians, personifies this new policy. Unfortunately for him, he was stuck in 1981 with the nasty choice of allowing popular revolution by Solidarity—which would have brought in the Red Army—or putting down the uprising himself. Better Polish riot clubs than Russian bullets.

Of course, Jaruzelski ended up being branded a Polish Petain. This was probably unavoidable. Like Petain, who spared France occupation by Germany, Jaruzelski had to pay a terrible personal price.

Another go at the government by Solidarity will embolden Gorbachev's conservative rivals in Moscow.

The rest of Eastern Europe's nations also suffer from exactly the same chronic economic aches and pains as Poland. A triumphant Solidarity in Poland could spark uprisings in Hungary, Czechoslovakia or even threadbare Romania.

All this comes at a time when East Europe's communist parties are seething with discontent and unrest. A new generation of communists is trying hard to oust the old guard while non-communist forces are near to forming genuine opposition parties. The hoary skin of communism is cracking everywhere.

Gorbachev's challenge is to somehow control this moulting process so that the new face of communism emerges. Too little change and the East Bloc sinks back into economic decay. Too much change and the top could blow off Eastern Europe.

Soviet experts believe the most serious challenge to Gorbachev's continued rule will come from trouble in East Europe. A blowup in Poland or Czechoslovakia could provide Gorbachev's foes within the bureaucracy, military and party with the means to unseat him. Gorbachev's economic and social reforms inside the Soviet Union are already causing widespread unhappiness and ethnic tensions. More trouble in Warsaw coming on top of these internal stresses could propel Gorbachev out of his job.

That is why few East Europeans—other than Polish workers—want to see Solidarity triumph. Its success in either cowering or even overthrowing Gen. Jaruzelski would be, ironically and sadly, a disaster for East Europe's other communist reformers—and for Gorbachev. The more success Solidarity has, the louder will grow the rumble of Soviet tank engines.