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DETERMINANTS OF THE POLITICAL ACTIVITY
OF THE WORKING CLASS IN THE POLISH TERRITORIES
ON THE TURN OF THE 19TH CENTURY

When discussing the question of the political activity of the working class, one can take into consideration at least the following two aspects: the development of political organizations operating among workers (the development of their programmes, organizational effectiveness and changes in the range of influence, etc.) and progress in the activity of this class as a whole (changes in the forms of its mass manifestations, the degree of organization, progress in the maturation of consciousness and the formation of political culture, etc.). The latter group of problems was in the background of the former in to-date investigations.

I. The relationship of socio-economic and general-political with national liberation aspects of mass manifestations of the working class under the circumstances existing in the Polish territories towards the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century, is obvious for the historian today, although it was not always so obvious for observers and politicians towards the end of the 19th century. In spite of the opinions of some pioneers of the socialist movements in formation of workers' class consciousness in isolation from the other elements of their social consciousness, the 1905 revolution testified

to the unity of the process of social and national maturation. In all the sectors of partitioned Poland, despite the existing differences in the political form of government, we could observe that the two elements of this process supported one another in a spontaneous way, unless they were made oppose one another in an artificial way by wilful political activity. It was most distinct within the territories of the Prussian (particularly in Silesia) and Russian sectors, where even mere local interventions of workers aimed at improving their working and living conditions met with repression on the part of the invaders' police and administration. It included actions of denationalization such as, for instance, in the Upper Silesia after the well-known strike at the "Król" colliery in 1871. Severe repressive measures were a reply to a great number of strikes even in Galicia, though they were lawful formally, particularly in the early 20th century when strikes assumed a more mass character.

These repressive measures rapidly roused in workers not only a sense of social wrong and the feeling of class bonds and solidarity, but also the hatred of the invader. They also consolidated their national consciousness. A closer analysis of workers' attitudes during mass demonstration, e.g. during strikes, offers evidence of the existence of a very complex relationship between class and national consciousness. A great number of examples point to the fact that national consciousness in workers made them realize their own (separate) class interests. Let us recall, for instance, numerous cases of the membership of workers in the "Polish" (Polish Trade Union—ZYP) and class trade unions in Great Poland, and also in Great Poland and Silesia not infrequent examples of the participation of the Polish Trade Union and Christian trade unions, in contravention of their programme assumptions, in the organization of strikes whose number grew rapidly with a view to maintain their influence among the Polish workers affiliated with them.¹

¹ See e.g. A. Próchnik, *Bunt łódzki w roku 1892* [The Łódź Rebellion in 1892], Warszawa 1932; P. Korzec, *Pół wieku dziejów ruchu rewolucyjnego Białostocki* (1864 - 1914) [Half of a Century of the History of the Revolutionary Movement in the Białystok Region (1864 - 1914)], Warszawa 1963; F. Ty ch, *Związek Robotników Polskich (1889 - 1892)* [The Polish Workers' Union (1889 - 1892)], Warszawa 1974;

The growing concentration of political tones in mass demonstrations of workers towards the end of the 19th century was conditioned by accumulated experience in economic struggles. This experience testified to the fact that the participants in those demonstrations reached a certain stage in the maturation of their political and social consciousness. Towards the end of the 19th century it did not necessarily mean yet that they were under the influence of or sympathized with socialist organizations. At initial stages, the political circumstances in the Russian sector of partitioned Poland were in a way favourable to the spontaneous formation of the national and social consciousness of workers. The situation was similar in Silesia and in the other regions of the Prussian sector both before and after anti-socialist laws came into force.

For example, in 1883, during the first mass strike in the Polish territories in Żyrardów, workers did not formulate any political issue, but actively opposed the Russian authorities by attacking the troops gathered to intimidate the strikers and by launching an assault on the local prison to free their arrested comrades. In 1892, during the well-known "Łódź rebellion" the striking workers put forward primitively and awkwardly formulated political and national issues in addition to those concerning the improvement of working conditions. Likewise, the first mass strike of the Upper-Silesian miners in 1889, initiated to shorten the working day, etc., assumed the character of political struggles with emergency laws in the face of a severe counter-action of the police and army. In Galicia, the first tide of economic strikes in the early 1890's combined with the mass participation of workers in the celebrations of the 100th anniversary of the 3rd of May Constitution (1791).

In 1905 the Kingdom and Galicia experienced a great number of mass general strikes of a purely political character—though supported by a tide of economic intervention—with clearly specified (not without the participation of socialist parties) political demands (the abolition of the tsarist system, of the

S. Michałkiewicz, *Śląsk* [Silesia] and K. Wajda, *Wielkopolska i Pomorze Wschodnie* [Great Poland and the Eastern Pomerania] in: *Polska klasa robotnicza, Zarys dziejów*, vol. I, part 3, Warszawa 1978.

foreign rule, as well as the introduction of democracy to the system of government in the Kingdom of Poland ; and a universal right of vote in Galicia). In the Upper Silesia a tide of strikes took place, where economic demands were accompanied by those political and national ones. Naturally, those purely political demands would not have taken place without dozens of years of preparatory stages, when the political activity of the working class was reflected in the form of spontaneous or in part only local impulses of protest against exploitation by factory owners and against the invader's police and administration backing them up. To a considerable extent this refers to the first May Day strikes, too. Protest against capitalist oppression most closely identified itself with the fight against national oppression in Silesia, on account of the existing national bonds between the state system and capitalists.

The working class' consciousness, reflected by the saturation of workers' demonstrations and strikes with elements of political struggle, was considerably determined by the political situation that was different in the three sectors of partitioned Poland. As a rule, the necessity of fighting against alien rule and national oppression speeded up the maturation of national consciousness, thus giving an important additional stimulus to the worker's political activity. Is it not one of the most important factors of the Polish workers' exceptional revolutionary activity during the years 1905 - 1906 in the Kingdom of Poland as compared to the tsarist empire, in Galicia in comparison with the other parts of Austria or in the Upper Silesia against the background of the other parts of the Prussian State ? Is it not the source of the fact that in Pomerania and Great Poland (Posnania) the leading role in mass strikes was played by Polish workers scattered beyond the big industry (in the building industry and dockyards) for whom it was the fight against capitalist exploitation and national oppression, but not by German workers concentrated in the metal and engineering industries ? These phenomena and their determinants are still awaiting thorough studies.

II. Without questioning the crucial role of political circumstances and the system of government in the rate and

course of the formation of the working class' consciousness and, consequently, in the development of its political activity and socialist movement, one should also take into consideration the other determinants of these processes originating from structural changes of society.

1. The first stage of the development of the working class' political activity in the Polish territories (in the afore-mentioned wide sense of the term "political activity") took place in the belonging to Austria Cieszyn Silesia, in the Kingdom of Poland, Galicia and in the Upper Silesia as early as the 1860 - 1870's. This stage embraced the first strikes of workers and their participation in patriotic manifestations in Warsaw and Cracow and in the January Uprising in 1863, and finally the first workers' organizations and periodicals. However, mass political activation of the working class actually began in the Kingdom of Poland and in the Cieszyn and Upper Silesia on the turn of the 1880's, and in Galicia in the early 20th century. In general, this stage in the development of the workers' political activity corresponded to a definite stage of modernization of the social structure of the population as a whole, as a consequence of capitalist industrialization. The most important index of this modernization was progress in the proletarianization of people making their living on industrial production (or on industrial-craftsmen's job), mining and construction. During the last three decades of the 19th century, the participation of workers and their families in all the Polish provinces, exclusive of Galicia, exceeded a half of the total number of people employed in industry, i.e. those professionally active, including their families, reaching almost two-thirds in the Kingdom in 1897, nearly 80 per cent in the Upper Silesia as early as 1895, and over 80 per cent in the Cieszyn Silesia in 1900.

The second not less important index of this stage of modernization were changes in the professional composition of the working class itself, i.e. the decreasing percentage of agricultural workers, especially in the Austrian sector, towards the end of the 19th century and at the early 20th century, and the growing prevalence, in the main Polish provinces, of workers of industry, mining, handicraft and construction in the non-

agricultural working class in general. Far-reaching differences in the rate and range of those changes in the professional composition of the working class in individual provinces (Table 1) had to have a bearing on the uneven development of the socio-political activity of workers in these regions.

2. An important factor promoting, although not mechanically,

Table 1 Professional Composition of the Working Class in the Polish Territories on the Turn of the 19th Century

Province	<i>Number of workers and domestic servants in thousands</i>						
	Total	i n c l u d i n g					
		Agri- culture	Beyond agriculture				
			Total	Industry and crafts, etc.	Communi- cation and transport	Dome- stic service	
Kingdom of Poland	1897	1248.5	462.0	786.5	[442.3]	[54.1]	215.4
		100.0	37.0	63.0	35.4	4.3	17.3
Poznań Region	1895	480.0	308.6	171.4	85.7	8.9	48.8
		100.0	64.3	35.7	19.9	1.9	10.2
Gdańsk Pomerania	1907	428.5	230.2	198.3	114.0	15.4	40.7
		100.0	53.7	46.3	26.6	3.6	9.5
Upper Silesia	1895	381.0	219.0	162.0	77.4	7.7	46.3
		100.0	57.5	42.5	20.3	2.0	12.2
Galicia	1907	362.9	169.6	193.3	108.9	13.5	39.0
		100.0	46.7	53.3	30.0	3.7	10.7
Galicia	1895	460.1	190.2	269.9	198.1	10.0	38.3
		100.0	41.3	48.7	4.30	2.2	8.3
Galicia	1907	630.2	241.1	389.1	298.7	19.7	42.3
		100.0	38.3	61.7	47.4	3.1	6.7
Galicia	1900	809.5	496.3	313.2	121.1	17.9	99.3
		100.0	61.3	38.7	15.0	2.2	12.3
Galicia	1910	868.8	416.1	452.7	188.7	31.0	147.9
		100.0	47.9	52.1	21.1	3.6	17.0

Note: estimated values are in square brackets

Source: The author's own calculations on the basis of: Statistik des Deutschen Reiches, Neue Folge, vol. CIV, Berlin 1897; vol. CCIV, Berlin 1909; Österreichische Statistik, vol. LXVI, No. 11, Wien 1906; *ibidem*, Neue Folge, vol. III, No. 10, Wien 1916; Pervaja vseobščaja perepis naselenija Rossijsko Imperii. Raspredeleńije naselenija po vidam glavnyh zanjatij, vol. III, Peterburg 1904.

the socio-political activation of workers on a large scale towards the end of the 19th century seemed to be not so much the decreasing percentage of agricultural workers in the working class in general (since agricultural workers, too, became active socio-politically, though later) as an advanced division into agricultural and non-agricultural jobs and contraction of contacts and bonds between industrial, transport and construction workers, even miners, and agriculture and countryside. It can be illustrated by a great number of examples from the Kingdom, Upper Silesia, Galicia, Poznań region and other territories. The possibility of returning to one's village in case of unemployment or disaster in an urban or industrial centre, and the dual character of the economic, social and cultural status of an industrial, construction or transport worker in contact with the village he came from, could not be favourable to rapid stimulation of political activity.²

This conclusion can also be supported by difficulties in the integration of the workers' milieu composed of former countryside-dwellers and partly of urban population, e.g. the workers' environment in Łódź in the latter half of the 19th century. The specific character of the way of living, attitude to work, and language of workers coming from the countryside turned to be extremely durable and added to the existing difficulties in the adjustment of newcomers to the urban living conditions and to those resulting from regional or provincial differences in traditions and customs. A striking example was the continuation of the specific cultural character of the Upper-Silesian workers coming from Galicia or the Kingdom of Poland.

3. One of the most important consequences of the observed modernization of the working class' professional structure in the Polish territories was the relative socio-economic stabilization

² Among other things, it can be reflected by the example of Żyrardów, where among those arrested for participation in the 1883 strike no one had as much as a scrap of land or one's own house in the countryside, although some other sources mention that a great number of workers at the Żyrardów factories lived in the surrounding villages (*Strajk żyrardowski w dokumentach carskich* [*The Żyrardów Strike in the Russian Documents*], "Z pola walki", 1958, No. 3, pp. 108 - 117). Cf. also F. Tych's investigations in the social background of the Polish Workers' Union: *Związek Robotników Polskich* [*The Polish Worker's Union*], Warszawa 1974, p. 121 sqq.

of the worker, first of all of the industrial factory worker, as opposed to the day-labourer. This phenomenon became more distinct in the provinces that developed industry towards the end of the 19th century and in the early 20th century: earlier in the Upper Silesia and in the Cieszyn Silesia, and a little later in the Kingdom of Poland and in the Gdańsk Pomerania. This stabilization was determined by such factors as:

1) relative stability of earnings, hence permanent employment, the replacement of hiring by the day by contracts for a longer period of time;

2) the possibility of stabilizing the place of employment, therefore the stabilization of the place of residence and family situation;

3) developing professional specialization of workers entailing important changes on the labour market: decreasing demand for unskilled day-labourers and increasing demand for skilled workers with definite trades and qualification or at least those trained on the job.

All these phenomena entailed gradual growth in the social status of industrial workers, miners and railwaymen. The position of workers trained on the job, even without craftsmen's qualifications but active in definite trades, gradually became a kind of rise and as such it was considered by both the day-labourer doing odd jobs in the building industry, transportation and services, etc., and the proletarianized peasant. This change of the position of industrial or transport workers in the social hierarchy, although gradual and at a different pace in individual Polish provinces, was an indispensable condition of a former peasant or day-labourer's joining in the struggle for better living conditions or at least of their joining in the protest against attempts to worsen them. This kind of social activation concerning the current working and living conditions was often sooner in workers coming from impoverished intelligentsia or lower middle-class families, for whom entrance into the working class was degradation as a rule, at least initially. Hence, urban proletarian centres embracing workers of diversified social origin were more susceptible to slogans exhorting to opposition to and protest against oppression, particularly at the first stages of the

development of a modern working class, when its overwhelming majority were newcomers from the other classes or strata.

4. Particular emphasis should be laid on the impact of a big city that speeded up the socio-political activation of workers, i.e. the effect of urban civilization in general, and the presence of flagrant social contrasts and a diversified system of social hierarchy in comparison with rural or provincial communities.⁸ Particularly striking examples of such an impact throughout the period under discussion were Warsaw, Wrocław, Cracow, Gdańsk, Poznań and Bydgoszcz, etc. (cf. the differences in the range and intensity of the strikes of metal-workers in Warsaw and in smaller industrial centres). Far weaker stimuli in this respect were created by industrial colonies, e.g. Żyrardów, miners' settlements in the Dąbrowa Basin, and Wieliczka, etc., whose impact consisted first of all in the quantitative concentration of workers and contributed to spontaneous development of strikes, if the workers' mass was integrated enough to make a strike solid.

Inconsiderable concentration of workers in urban centres of Silesia and Dąbrowa Basin on the turn of the 19th century, despite the rapid growth of the population of industrial non-urban settlements, seemed greatly to justify certain retardation in arousing political consciousness in the working class of these regions in comparison with the other Polish provinces, especially within the Kingdom of Poland (among other things the lesser influence of socialist parties). This retardation would be even greater were it not for the fact that there existed a core of miners who handed down their trade from father to son for generations and that there was a high growth rate of the concentration of workers in collieries and iron and steel works.

5. The differences—in the extent of workers' concentration in big enterprises from province to province were enormous and lasting. As late as the early 20th century, three-quarters of workers-craftsmen in the Poznań region and two-thirds in the Gdańsk Pomerania and Galicia were employed in the middle and small-scale industries, i.e. in enterprises with the number of

⁸ Cf. G. Duveau, *La vie ouvrière sous le second Empire*, Paris 1946.

workers below 50 persons, whereas in the Kingdom of Poland this group of workers amounted to about a half (50 - 53%) and in the Upper Silesia to about 45 per cent of industrial proletariat.⁴ That is why, the range and intensity of the industrial workers' strike movement were far greater in the Kingdom and the Upper Silesia than in the other provinces, where it had the character of sporadic and "insular" demonstrations as late as the beginning of the 20th century.

The latest investigations in the strike movement in the Kingdom of Poland (Stanisław Kalabiński), the Upper Silesia (Stanisław Michalkiewicz) and Galicia (Walentyna Najdus) on the turn of the 19th century, fully confirm the opinion about the crucial role of the personnel of big factories and mines at the successive stages of the development of workers' mass strikes.⁵ Nota bene, these changes show far-reaching synchronization in the three sectors of partitioned Poland: starting with the turn of the 1880's, through the close of the 1890's and the years 1905 - 1906 - 1907, and ending with the high tide of strikes in the pre-war period.

6. Considerable weakening of inner divisions within the working class that were determined by the workers' territorial and social origin was accompanied not only by the process of inner integration, but also by new differentiation: within this class new strata and groups were gradually separated that differed from each other in respect of trade, skills, earnings, culture and social prestige. A gradual formation of a hierarchy of various groups was the opposite of the process of stabilization of workers' socio-economic position in the consolidating structure of capitalist society, and had to have an impact on the forms of the socio-political activity of the working class as a whole. At the same time, as a rule, it was not an influence hampering that activity. These processes could be observed on a larger or smaller

⁴ See more on this subject: A. Żarnowska, *Klasa robotnicza Królestwa Polskiego 1870 - 1914* [*The Working Class of the Kingdom of Poland 1870 - 1914*], Warszawa 1974, p. 37 sqq.

⁵ The results of these investigations are presented in the collective work: *Polska klasa robotnicza. Zarys dziejów* [*The Polish Working Class: An Outline of History*], vol. I, parts 2 and 3, Warszawa 1978. Cf. Note 1.

scale in every Polish province towards the end of the 19th century. Unfortunately, investigations in the internal structure of the working class, in its changes and bearing on the socio-political activity of workers have only just started in Polish historiography, and their to-date results are not a sufficient basis for making a comparison of the situation in the three sectors of partitioned Poland yet.

Particular attention is due to the differentiation of the ways and progress of the adjustment of immigratory population, so different from the local people in respect of nationality, to the living conditions existing in communities of the modern working class. This process had to have a bearing on and contribute to the differentiation of the pace of the working class' political activation in various places and provinces. The example of the Kingdom of Poland makes it possible to separate at least two kinds of the social status of alien immigratory workers that directly shaped their susceptibility to revolutionary slogans: 1) the position, privileged in most cases, of skilled workers "imported" from Western Europe, mainly from Germany, with experience in production work under the conditions of advanced technology, in the development of capitalist social relations and, sometimes, in political struggles; 2) the position of the Jewish proletariat without permanent employment, usually poor, mainly originating from the lower middle class, subsequently with the feeling of social degradation in general.

7. The relatively stable socio-economic position of the modern worker of industry, transport and the building industry, etc., and the ever more widespread aspiration of those employed in these branches for stabilizing their status were an indispensable preliminary condition of the working class' socio-political activation on a mass scale. An analysis of the composition of the participants and developmental mechanism of some mass strikes of workers at the end of the 19th century, e.g. the Żyrardów strike of 1883, seem to testify to the fact that more susceptible to strikes and demonstrations, to say nothing of participation in political organizations, were the employees of those enterprises or centres (Żyrardów and Zawiercie, etc.) in which a considerable role was already played by workers coming from workers'

families for two or more generations.⁶ This was probably one of the causes of the avant-garde role of metal-workers employed by factories and railway repair shops in the first political demonstrations in the Polish territories, e.g. in the May Day strike in Warsaw in 1890. Let us also observe that in the territory of the Russian sector of partitioned Poland (the Kingdom of Poland and the Białystok region) the development of the strike movement on a mass scale was determined by waking the revolutionary activity of textile-workers in the years 1888 - 1892, i.e. when a fairly large group of workers related to the working class for two generations had already formed there.

According to the first tentative investigations in the mobility of the working class in some industrial centres in the Kingdom of Poland towards the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century,⁷ hereditary workers as a group were not characteristic for the greatest territorial mobility and distinct aspirations for advancement beyond the working class at that time. A closer analysis of these phenomena by historians has only just started and their conclusions necessitate verification on the basis of detailed research in the workers of the other Polish territories, first of all of the Upper Silesia.

8. Did the fact that workers had lived in the same place and worked in the same establishment or in the local workers' centre (e.g. Żyrardów, Czeladź and Zawiercie) for generations, contribute, too, to socio-political activation ?

The above-mentioned example of the Żyrardów strike seems to prove it, but at the same time shows that the effects of close relationship with the factory were neutralized in factory settlements by the impact of the employers' paternalism.⁸ It is difficult, however, to formulate firm conclusions at the current stage of investigations. It will be

⁶ Cf. Soviet historical investigations in the sources of the avant-garde role of the successive groups and centres of workers in Russia in the 1917 revolution, e.g. L. M. Ivanov, *Preemstvennost' fabrično-zavodskogo truda i formirovanie proletariata v Rossii in : Rabočij klass i raboče dviženie v Rossii*, Moskva 1966 ; B. N. Vasileva, *Social'naja harakteristika fabričnih rabočih*, *ibidem* ; cf. also French investigations, e.g. M. Perrot, *Les ouvriers en grève (France 1871 - 1890)*, vol. II, Paris 1974.

⁷ A. Żarnowska, *Klasa robotnicza...*, Chapter IV.

⁸ *Strajk żyrardowski...*; see also: D. Dąbrowska, *Górnicy*

possible not before a greater number of collective biographies of the workers of individual factories or centres are compiled. Official sources such as reports of local authorities or memorials of the managements of factories and enterprises exaggerate, when characterizing the workers' moods, the role of newcomers in stirring the workers to revolt. After all, they usually deal with the leaders and organizers of workers' strikes and demonstrations, rarely with individual participants in them.

There is no doubt, however, that the territorial mobility of workers was an important stimulus to their political activation. This opinion can be confirmed by the investigations carried out in France in the participation of workers' towns and centres in political life in the 19th century, making use, among other sources of records of registry offices and of records of retaliatory measures.

III. Therefore, it seems incontrovertible that waking the socio-political activity of the working class was conditioned by a definite stage of this class 'internal integration, determined social groups and strata, and on the other hand, by a definite level of its social self-knowledge. Patent is the relationship between the level of this self-knowledge and the cultural advancement of the working class. A minimum knowledge of the surrounding world and the elementary ability to read among the workers of the end of the 19th century were an unquestionable condition of the development of class and national consciousness to an extent making it possible to at least momentarily join in political life. It was of particular importance in case of greater involvement, i.e. membership in a political organization or at least sympathizing with it.¹⁰ Hence the particular role of workers' educational circles as the first stage

salinarni Wieliczki w latach 1880 - 1939 [The Wieliczka Salt-Miners During the Years 1880 - 1939], Wrocław 1965, p. 310.

⁹ E.g. R. Trémpe's investigations in miners in Carmaux (*Les mineurs de Carmaux 1848 - 1914*, Paris 1970) or those carried out by W. R. Sewell in the workers of Marseille in 1848 (*La classe ouvrière de Marseille en 1848*, "Le Mouvement social", 1971, No. 76).

¹⁰ Cf. a portrait of the worker of an average political activity in Russia on the eve of the February Revolution in 1917 (P. V. Volobuev, *Proletariat i burżuazija v 1917 godu*, Moskva 1964, p. 34).

of waking the socio-political activity of workers. Hence the organization of workers' education and self-teaching became an important form of the activity of not only socialist parties, but also other political organizations striving for influence among workers.

This phenomenon was particularly marked in those provinces, where, as in the Kingdom of Poland, a considerable part of the working class were illiterates (two-thirds of the total number of workers were illiterates as late as the end of the 19th century), and also wherever education was used as a tool of denationalization and the educational policy of the alien government prevented the worker from acquiring an elementary knowledge in his native language at a regular school. At the same time, in general, the only exception were schools of religious and clerical character. They had a particular impact on the formation of the political attitudes and culture of workers in the Upper Silesia as well as in the Kingdom of Poland. That is why the differentiation of the range of education in individual trade groups, workers' communities, provinces and sectors of partitioned Poland had an effect to bear on uneven development of the working class' political activity in the Polish territories, especially in the latter part of the 19th century .

(Translated by Marek Cegiela)