

*Neal Ascherson
looks back at
the roots of
Solidarity, the
Polish movement
that inflicted a
mortal wound on
the whole Soviet
empire in 1980*

THIRTY years ago, ordinary people challenged an armed dictatorship, and won. On August 31, 1980, the strikers in the Lenin Shipyard at Gdansk forced the communist authorities in Poland to sign an agreement. It promised them – among many other lesser things – a free and independent trade union, the liberation of political prisoners, plural and uncensored media and the right to strike.

Within days, other strike committees all over Poland were winning the same sort of terms from their party bosses. Soon all the local agreements ran together into a single movement covering the whole nation, which recruited 9 million members by the end of the year. Its leader was a fast-talking, pious, slightly rascally electrician called Lech Walesa.

The name of the movement was the Independent Self-Managing Trade Union Solidarity.

Everyone who was in that shipyard during the strike came out changed: wiser and perhaps with more faith in humanity. This was an occupation strike, asking strikers to forsake their homes and families for the sake of the common cause. The yard gates, almost hidden behind well-wishers' flowers and pictures of the Pope, were locked, and the workers forbade themselves to come out until they had won.

Inside, thousands of men in grey denim overalls lay on the grass listening to the Tannoy as it broadcast the interminable negotiations in the Health and Safety hall. Outside the gate, women and children waited through long, hot August days. Sometimes they threw bread, salami and apples over the fence to their husbands, fathers and sons.

The stakes were very high. The workers inside and the families outside thought about the Zomo riot police, itching to batter them with clubs. The foreign journalists in the yard thought more about the Soviet armoured divisions that had moved up to the Polish frontier. If they invaded, we assumed that the Poles would fight and there would be what the regime's euphemism called "a national tragedy". But that was a possibility the strikers refused to discuss. It was an extra fear they did not need.

The strikes spread and the government, riven by panicky arguments, finally gave way. On August 31, Walesa - enjoying every moment of it - took a silly monster pen, a souvenir from the pope's visit the year before, and signed the Gdansk Agreement.

Deputy Prime Minister Mieczyslaw Jagielski, clearly hating every moment, signed too.

That was not the end of the story. In the months that followed, the regime tried to block, delay or otherwise cheat on all the main points of the agreements, repeatedly driving Solidarity into confrontation.

Sometimes Poland seemed close to civil war. The disastrous economy fell apart; people slept on the pavements to keep their places in food queues.

Solidarity itself became divided, some blaming Walesa for not using the ultimate weapon of an all-out general strike. Finally, in December 1981, General Wojciech Jaruzelski carried out a military coup, dissolving Solidarity, arresting thousands of its leading members and imposing martial law. But that wasn't the end of the story either. Solidarity became an underground resistance movement.

The communist regime, now discredited and despised by everyone, lay on top of Poland like a dying tyrannosaurus. In 1988, a fresh wave of strikes forced the regime to convene a round table to discuss radical reform with Solidarity and other opposition groups. A compromise arranged for a "free" election in June 1989, gerrymandered to ensure that the communists and their allies kept a parliamentary majority.

But the voters found a loophole - *the requirement that all candidates must gain the backing of 50 percent of the votes cast* - and the regime list was wiped out. Four months later, the first government in "Soviet Europe" led by non-communists took power. In 1990, Walesa was elected president of the free Republic of Poland.



SENSING GLORY ONCE MORE: Lech Walesa makes the peace sign in front of a Solidarity poster during his presidential campaign in 1989.

PICTURE: LESZEK WDOWINSKI / REUTERS



HIGH REGARD: Walesa waves as his Solidarity comrades carry him on their shoulders during the strike at the Gdansk Lenin Shipyard in 1980.

PICTURE: REUTERS



LIKE-MINDED: Walesa, right, sits with FW de Klerk at a news conference in 2008.

PICTURE: AP



REMINISCING: Walesa stands in front of the historical gate of the Gdansk shipyard in 2000, where, 20 years earlier, he had led the challenge to dictatorship.

PICTURE: REUTERS

