

# Workers' Councils in Poland

By Kazimierz Grzybowski

IN CONTRAST TO YUGOSLAVIA where they were planned from above, the workers' councils functioning today in Poland were the result of a spontaneous movement among the factory crews of Polish industrial enterprises. They are the Polish workingman's bid to control his own economic destiny and to create a genuinely representative institution in a land of fictitious "people's democracy." Already, during the Poznan uprising, factory crews pushed forward their demands and organized their action through *ad hoc* elected committees. Later, during the critical days of October-November 1956, all factories in the Warsaw area and some scattered at various places in the provinces were taken over by workers' councils. In Warsaw and elsewhere the councils either replaced the regular factory managements or gained control over their decisions.

The Statute on Workers' Councils adopted on November 19, 1956, was therefore a concession by the government to a popular *fait accompli*. It constitutes a link between the regime of Wladyslaw Gomulka and the achievements of the revolutionary period, and it provides the legal basis for the operation of a new institution and the exercise of newly-won freedoms.<sup>1</sup>

The workers' councils created by this law are the primary units of the economic administration, subordinate in the last instance to the various economic ministries of the government. They provide the basic instrumentality for ironing out conflicts of interest between labor and management and assuring their cooperation in running economic enterprises. The composition of the councils represents a compromise between two opposed principles: The first aims at unitary factory management and is reflected in the provision giving the factory director *ex officio* membership on the council of his plant. The second recognizes, on the other hand, that

there is a conflict of interest between labor and management; it is reflected in the prohibition of the factory director, or his deputy, from holding the position of council chairman. In addition, the law stipulates that not more than one-third of the members of a council shall be persons holding administrative or managerial jobs.

The factory director, as *ex-officio* council member, occupies a very special position. On the one hand, he is obligated to keep the council fully informed of what he is doing and how he is executing its resolutions. On the other, as the council's executive officer, he may act without its prior consent in exceptional circumstances, provided that he later notifies the council and obtains its approval. At the same time the director is bound by the directives of the higher authorities of the state economic administration and must give them precedence over the resolutions of the council. Where a conflict occurs, it is his duty to enforce the will of the authorities. He may also refuse in the first instance to execute a council order if—and only if—he deems it contrary to government laws or the state economic plan. In that case the matter goes to a higher authority, which decides either for the director or for the council.

Factory or enterprise directors continue to be government appointees, but their appointments now require the prior consent of the workers' councils. The councils also have the right to recommend their own choice for the posts of director or deputy-director in their respective plants, as well as the right to demand the dismissal and replacement of government appointees already occupying these positions.

THE BASIC LAW contains several provisions intended to ensure the ability of the councils to resist pressures from the factory managements and effectively protect the interests of the workers. For one thing, it stipulates that the councils' statutes shall be formulated by general meetings of the factory crews, to which the councils are solely responsible. Further, no provision is made for the dissolution of the councils by higher authorities, nor does the law make any reference to "democratic centralism" as a basis for subordinating them to the ad-

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<sup>1</sup> For text of Statute on Workers' Councils, see Dziennik Ustaw, 51/238/1956.

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ministration. Elections of council members are by secret ballot, and those elected cannot be fired from their jobs as long as they are serving on the council.

Council meetings are always open to members of the factory crew, and certain matters—in particular, the disposition of the “enterprise fund” (that part of the profit which is distributed among the crew)—can be dealt with by the councils only in conference with crew representatives or at general workers’ meetings. In special cases the councils have the right to initiate a referendum, which gives them a powerful means of mobilizing the workers’ support in the event of a conflict with the management.

On the other hand, the councils are subject, in the exercise of their authority, to such limitations as are imposed by the laws in force and by the national economic plans. All council decisions affecting production schedules for an individual plant must be based upon the current national plan: in other words, the production tasks which individual factories must perform continue to be assigned from the top and cannot be altered by the workers’ councils.

In the general economic structure, then, the workers’ councils—both in character and in origin—constitute a source of authority distinct from the higher echelons of the economic administration. Their representative character is visible in the method of their election as well as in the way they settle disputes not only with the government-appointed managements but also with the trade union organization.

This leads to the question of the division of authority between the councils, participating in factory management, and the shop committees, which are the organs of the trade unions in individual plants and whose domain is social welfare and insurance, safety and hygiene, etc.<sup>2</sup> While this division is by no means clearly defined, the councils as a general rule must consult the shop committees about all managerial decisions touching matters within the latter’s sphere of responsibility.

Some matters which formerly were the concern of the shop committees, such as wages, have now come under the simultaneous purview of the workers’ councils. During the discussions preceding the enactment of the Statute on Workers’ Councils, the problem of overlapping jurisdictions between the councils and the shop committees

was pointed out. The proponents of the councils argued that these bodies should operate as organs of worker participation in management, and that the shop committees’ administrative functions impinging on this sphere should be restricted so as to enable them to perform effectively their own proper role as organs of social control over management.<sup>3</sup> Controversy on this question, however, is still continuing.

EVEN THIS summary picture makes it clear that many ambiguities remain to be ironed out before the exact place and sphere of authority of the workers’ councils in the economic structure of Poland will be clearly established. But their future is in doubt on still other grounds. Most important, there is the formidable barrier presented by the established Soviet-style administrative machinery, which does not mesh with genuine elective institutions. The press has reported countless instances of the unequal struggle presently being waged between local democratic initiative and the deadweight of administrative routine rooted in the centralized administration of the past. The bureaucracy has by no means abandoned the fight to protect its vested interests: in many places, elections to the councils have been far from freely conducted; in others, the government-controlled factory administrations have been obstructing any real participation by the councils in the actual business of management.

These discouragements have evoked pessimistic predictions that it will prove impossible to “marry democracy to bureaucracy,”<sup>4</sup> and that the democratic experiment which the workers’ councils represent will inevitably fail unless the present centralized system of national economic administration is relaxed, or even abolished. Failing this, it is feared that the councils, instead of becoming effective organs of worker participation in management and, in a broader sense, of working-class self-government, will be reduced to mere debating societies, or at best to protectors of the workers’ welfare, in which case they would do little more than double for the old shop committees. Already many of the councils have become entangled in endless quarrels with the administrative bureaucracy.

On the other hand, the initial success scored in gaining legal recognition of the councils has been enough to stimulate their supporters to put forward various plans and suggestions which, were they to materialize, would

<sup>2</sup> Shop committees were originally created on February 6, 1945, when it was decreed that one member of the shop committee should also be a member of the managerial board of the enterprise. Later, the managerial boards were replaced by single directors with dictatorial powers, on the Soviet model. The shop committees then ceased to have representation or participation in the management of enterprises and became converted into local trade union organs.

<sup>3</sup> K. Kakol, “O reforme roli i metod pracy związków zawodowych,” (On Reforming the Role and Work Methods of the Trade Unions), *Przegląd Zagadnień Socjalnych*, No. 10, 1956, p. 39.

<sup>4</sup> Cz. Chelstowski, “Samorząd robotniczy w niebezpieczeństwie,” (Workers’ Councils in Danger), *Prosto z Mostu*, January 20, 1957.

mean a far-reaching reorientation of the whole Polish economic system. The press has noted, for example, that the councils, in seeking ways to satisfy their common needs, are tending to venture outside the constricting framework of the individual enterprise. Thus, plans are being made to start various types of workers' cooperatives—housing, consumer services, *etc.*—the funds for which would be provided by the councils on a wider basis than a single enterprise, or even than a whole single industry.<sup>5</sup> The end effect of such local initiatives could be to unite the councils in a broader type of activity which would thus be kept outside the realm of direct and exclusive government concern.

Far more serious and disturbing from the regime's standpoint have been suggestions which would make the councils the starting point of a process of change liberating broad areas of the economy from governmental control. At a conference of representatives of workers' councils, held in Warsaw, it was pointed out that the establishment of the councils, involving participation by the factory crews not merely in enterprise management but profits as well, means in fact a fundamental change in the character of the ownership of nationalized enterprises: that is, they now combine elements of both public and cooperative ownership. It was further argued that, in the future, industries should be classed according to their nature and run differently: those of national importance, such as communications, transport and defense, to remain publicly owned and centrally administered; those of mixed character to be organized as cooperatives with government participation; and some small industries, such as luxury goods and food, to be wholly freed from government interference in their operation.<sup>6</sup>

Such plans, however, received little encouragement from Gomulka's speech to the Ninth Plenary Session of the PZPR Central Committee in May 1957.<sup>7</sup> The speech made it plain that Gomulka, while regarding the workers' councils as a natural reaction to the excessive bureaucratization and centralization of the previous regime, does not by any means consider them the sole medium of worker participation in managing the country's economy, and believes that this could be achieved just as well through the shop committees and trade union organization. His remarks also left no doubt of his insistence that the councils conform in their operation to the principle of centralized planning and administration. Pouring cold water on hopes for a basic change in the present economic regime, he declared:

<sup>5</sup> *Przegląd Kulturalny*, January 23, 1957.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Full text published in *Nowe Drogi*, June 1957.

If every factory became a kind of cooperative enterprise of the workers, all the laws governing capitalist enterprise would immediately come into effect and produce all the usual results. Central planning and administration . . . would have to disappear. . . . Prices of goods . . . would be determined by the market . . . Every factory would determine its production independently of other factories. Investments would be dictated by the market, only with a worse result than under capitalism, because a capitalist is himself the owner of the factory and can thus devote an overwhelming part of the profits to investments . . . [while] workers as collective owners of a factory . . . would always have a tendency to raise their earnings as much as possible, without giving thought to investment.

GOMULKA'S PREOCCUPATION with industrial efficiency led him to reject the broader potentialities of the workers' councils as democratic institutions. He insisted that their role be confined to raising the efficiency of factory management and ridiculed the idea that the principle of elective workers' self-government should be extended upward to the level of industrial branch administration. Nothing would be gained by this, he argued, since elective councils would find it necessary to employ staffs of bureaucrats with expert knowledge.

Although admitting that the failure of the trade unions under the old regime made the workers' councils necessary, Gomulka insisted that the trade unions should remain the more important of the two and should control the workers' councils. Specifically, he proposed two measures which would tie the councils to the trade unions: (1) disputes between workers' councils and factory managements should be settled by arbitration boards composed of representatives of the trade unions and of the higher echelons of the state economic administration; (2) the trade unions should be entrusted with general guidance of the councils with respect to their activities and role in the national economy.

Gomulka delivered another blow to the councils in the matter of elections. Factory workers must have the right of free choice of their representatives on the councils, he acknowledged, but local committees of the United Polish Workers' Party should "point out . . . the candidates . . . whose election would be the best guarantee of the successful work of the councils." This gives added confirmation to the impression that the pattern of elections is one of the features of Polish public life least affected by the October revolution.

Gomulka's program undoubtedly reflects the line which the regime will endeavor to implement in the immediate future. In essence it appears to signify an intention not to depart from the basic principle of bureaucratic management, but rather to mend the fences of the old order without significantly changing its nature

or mode of operation. However, the implementation of the program will not proceed in an atmosphere of total public acquiescence. One thing is certain: the workers' councils are the only national institution which has not been discredited in the public eye as one of the "Stalinist fictions of democracy." The public has placed its hopes in them for the re-establishment of some kind of liberal and democratic government. The press is keeping a watchful eye on developments affecting the councils, and any tendency on the regime's part to check

their development and restore the old order is noted with alarm and anger.

While Gomulka's personal appeal cannot be doubted, the party as a whole is not enjoying a season of popularity in Poland. The public still retains its autonomy of ideas and views, and it wishes to control the means of expressing them. It considers the councils one of the important channels of such expression, quite apart from their significance as a major innovation in the administrative machinery of the Polish state.

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## THE WORKERS COUNCILS CORNER

**QUERY:** *An Amusing Incident.* Something rather amusing has happened on our workers council: out of sixteen members not a single one is a worker. This strange turn of events has aroused discontent in the plant, and one hears complaints that this isn't really a workers council, but a fraud.

**REPLY:** There are always malcontents, but don't be concerned about such petty matters. Just to be on the safe side, however, do get yourselves one worker. At least for representational purposes. It never hurts.

**QUERY:** *Disenchanted.* It's been three months since we've had a workers council in our plant. The council meets incessantly, enacts all sorts of reorganizations, shifts people around, pays attention to labor discipline, keeps an eye on goods and resources; but when I asked the chairman, Engineer Banach, when they'll distribute the money, he said: "What's the matter with you, can't you keep your shirt on—am I magician or something?"

**REPLY:** A good lesson for the future. Instead of an engineer, you should have elected a magician. Don't you have one on hand?

**QUERY:** *Ingratitude.* Our workers council is extremely active. We get together every week, and sometimes even more frequently. We discuss the national economic plan, we plan the further consolidation of individual ministries, we establish their spheres of competence, etc. Recently we worked out detailed projects regarding the liquidation of central administrative bodies. We're hurt by the fact that there are comrades who don't appreciate our contribution and bluntly imply that we should occupy ourselves with plant matters.

**REPLY:** Don't pay any attention to that. It is their envy which speaks. The devil with plant matters! There'll be time for that, once you've settled the national economic policy.

**QUERY:** *Conflict.* A sharp conflict developed between our council and the management. We're convinced that we are right, and they're convinced that they are right. We would like to get an impartial source to look into this quarrel, but in the meantime the central agency takes the side of the management, and the ministry takes the side of the central agency. Whom shall we turn to for arbitration?

**REPLY:** For the time being, the only choice is the good Lord, dear comrades. Lord help you!

By Mariusz Kwiatkowski in Szpilki (Warsaw), May 5, 1957.



# Soviet Prospects in the Middle East

By Walter Z. Laqueur

AMONG THE MOST CRITICAL factors affecting world politics today is Moscow's concerted effort to expand its influence in the Middle Eastern countries. Some political analysts trace current Soviet strategy in this area to the classics of Marxism-Leninism, referring variously to an article by Lenin in 1912, to essays by Stalin in the early 1920's, to the Baku Congress of 1920, etc. Quotations from these sources, however, are no more relevant than certain kinds of Soviet "statistics"; they can prove anything. The fact is that Soviet preoccupation with the Middle East is a phenomenon of recent date. The tacit assumption under Stalin was that a rapprochement with the new national governments which had emerged in the Middle East (and in Asia in general) after World War II was out of the question, for the simple reason that these countries had not really become independent but remained colonies or semi-colonies. It may be recalled that one of the main charges against the famous Soviet economist Eugene Varga in 1947 was his contention that some importance should after all be attributed to the new status of certain Asian countries. Whether Stalin might have modified his attitude had he lived longer may be of speculative interest. But he showed no inclination to do so up until his death in 1953; the decisive change in Soviet policy came only in the spring or summer of 1955, undoubtedly preceded by a serious review of Kremlin strategy in influential quarters.

## The Party Line Somersaults

A measure of the change in Soviet outlook is provided by Moscow's about-face toward Egypt. When the Naguib-Nasser regime came to power in July 1952, it was at first denounced as madly reactionary, cruel, anti-

democratic, terrorist.<sup>1</sup> A book on Egypt published in 1953 defined the policy of the new government as "demagogic" and "anti-working-class," and argued that the "progressive" military leaders who had originally belonged to the junta had been excluded.<sup>2</sup> In 1954 the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty was condemned by a Soviet Academy of Sciences publication as "contrary to the national interests of Egypt and the other Arab countries." Rather ominously it was stated that "the Egyptian toilers would have to fight many a battle before the victory of real democracy."<sup>3</sup>

By early 1955, however, these criticisms had been toned down. A volume printed in May 1955 still criticized the Cairo government for its "anti-popular measures" such as "restricting the rights of the workers, defending the big feudal landowners against revolutionary measures," and so on.<sup>4</sup> But such unfriendly remarks had virtually ceased, and soon thereafter the leading theme in Soviet publications (and, more important, in Soviet policy) became friendship and support for Egypt. By June the Cairo leaders were winning praise from Moscow radio for their stand against Western defense pacts and for their neutralism. After the Bandung conference, Nasser was commended for having contributed a "great deal to the success of Bandung, supporting the principle of peaceful co-existence."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> L. Vatolina, *Imperialisticheskaia Borba za Afriku* (Imperialist Struggle for Africa), Moscow, Soviet Academy of Sciences, 1953, pp. 123-27.

<sup>2</sup> S. S. Gordonov, *Egipet* (Egypt), Moscow, Gosizdat Geograficheskoi Literatury, 1953, p. 120.

<sup>3</sup> *Narody Afriki* (The People of Africa), D. Z. Olderogee and I. I. Potekhin, eds., Moscow Soviet Academy of Sciences, 1954, p. 213.

<sup>4</sup> K. Ode-Vassileva, in her postscript to *Rasskazy arabskikh pisatelei*, (Tales of Arabic Writers) Moscow, Izdatelstvo inostranoi literatury, 1955, p. 182.

<sup>5</sup> *Mezhdunarodnaia Zhizn*, Vol. 7, 1955, p. 84.

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