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STUBBORN NEWCOMERS: POLISH IMMIGRANTS, UNIONS, AND WORKERS' CONTROL IN AMERICA, 1916—1922

SUMMARY

Attempts are made in the paper to throw more light on Polish immigrants' participation in various conflicts in industrial plants, as well as in a struggle for control that took place in America in the early 20th century. Events from 1916—1922 are in the focus of the author's interest .It seems that during the period in question, unlike earlier ones, the immigrants began to see more clearly their position and role in American society. Some statements made by Polish workers themselves in the period concerned corroborate the thesis on significant changes that took place in their consciousness. The thoughts and views they expressed at meetings, as written down in resolutions, demands and letters prove that the workers were fully aware rights they were entitled to.

»The Polish worker is asleep, content with the fact that his master will 'kindly' kick him or give him his hand to be kissed« (24). It makes one wonder (if one takes the above statement literally) how very false was the assesment the Polish language edition of Wobblies paper. For (although the majority of Polish immigrants in the US were not radical) they were not submissive either. In this paper I will try to show not only that the Polish immigrants were stubborn, and were participating in the industrial conflicts, but I would also like to show their role in the struggles for control which had taken place in the US, particularly in the World War I period (15:XIII; 19).

Although I will be speaking about Polish immigrants, it seems to me that many of my comments could also be referred to other immigrant groups. Similarly as the Poles Italians, Lithuanians, Slovaks, Slovenians were not only strikebreakers. Finally, in the towns the immigrants and their children prevailed numerically. In the 20th century especially these people represented usually a unified front in the industrial plants. They jointly elected their leaders and trusted them; they marched in unison through the streets of company towns. The banners carried by them contained the same slogans, recorded in different languages and alphabets. When they spoke or wrote, their statements were often surprisingly similar. Sometimes, one can even come across identical quotations.

In the 19th century Polish immigrants in the US were employed mainly as unskilled workers. Something like 80 % of Poles ended up in towns, un-

dertaking that sort of employment (a bit different in certain respects was the work and the general situation of those employed in the mining industry). These people, the 19th century immigrants did not turn out to be meek and helpless. If there were no other means of attaining their objectives, if they were facing the obvious injustice, they were surprisingly militant and persistent in their claims. These spontaneous, violent, and unprepared activities were a reaction to the change of situation, to oppression. They were the common efforts of entire communities, men, women, children.

Technological changes — mechanization, automation, assembly lines changed the type and character of work of many of these people. The corporations were forcing workers for higher efficiency by so-called managerial reforms. Unskilled workers who up till now had been referred to with contempt, now produced goods. They performed very simple tasks, yet these tasks required a brief training, and learning how to operate the machine. Although they found it hard to identify their work in the finished products, it began to give them a feeling of their own strength (10:9—30; 14; 5:120—121, 246—247, 260—261). Now they were also closer to the former group of highly skilled workers.

During the wave of strikes in the years 1916—1922 one of the objectives of claims was an increase of independence, and freedom of the workers, as well as control and workers' autonomy in the industrial plants. These claims were put forward by the »new immigrants« and their communities. The latter ones also exerted a decisive influence on the shape and the course of many of the conflicts. The events, which occurred in those years, entitle one to put forward a hypothesis that the »new immigrants« (in any case the Polish immigrants) were becoming a part of the American proletariat. The above thesis is confirmed, by a considerable increase of activity from the bottom up, formation of the immigrants' own (but not ethnic) unions, the changing character of the existing unions, and the struggles to defend them; the creation (often quite independent from the union structures) of shop committees. Representatives of different worker groups, skills, ideological orientations, and nationalities entered the unions. Yet, it was the ordinary members who tried to shape the policy of the organizations and determined the character of events. Some of the unions considered their membership to be a threat and a danger (20:91—112).

In the course of strikes in the textile industry in 1919 in Lawrence, Passaic, Paterson, and other places, the immigrants simply severed their ties with the United Textile Workers (UNW-AFL) where they previously belonged.[1] They formed their own, independent organizations. In Lawrence and in other towns it was the Amalgamated Textile Workers of America (ATWA), an organization which was clearly hostile towards UTWA. The ethnic groups chose their own representatives to the strike committees. Yet, all the more important decisions were taken by the workers themselves during common meetings. In Passaic Poles formed another union, called the Independent Union of General Workers of Textile Industries of Passaic and Vicinity, which was not supposed to be »dependent on anybody«. The president of this union was Mateusz Plukarz. ATWA and IUGWTI created their grassroots structures. During a general strike in 1922 each plant selected its own strike committee,

[1] In the period before and shortly after World War I there existed at least 12 Polish locals of the union in New England (cf. 13a; 21).

which practically decided about everything: i. e. both about the particular demands submitted to the employees and about the methods of struggle (9:6—16; 11c—e; 6:153—156; 26:13—16; 26—27).

The strike committees in the oil refineries of Bayonne, N. J. consisted exclusively of Slavic workers who did not know English. Their demands and postulates had to be translated into English (outside agitators had very little influence on the organization of the strike). Marcin Karecki, one of the strike leaders, told a representative of the Federal authorities: »We will advise the men to go back to work and we will do this because we trust you to help us better our conditions [. . .] we want peace and quiet. There have been many troubles since the strike started. There had been people killed. Property has been destroyed. Men have fought police with guns. This is not right. It won't help us. We will go back and be orderly and the police can arrest the bad men who came in from outside to hurt us by shooting the police. Then we will organize ourselves. We will have a regular organization and we will get better conditions and without riots and troubles (13f). In the New York Mill Co. in Yorkville, N. Y. the Polish workers said: »The workers themselves have led to the general strike but they have given a chance to conduct it to persons who are well-known for their honesty and respectability«, in other words to the strike committee consisting of: W. Nowak, A. Knutelski, F. Sliski, P. Maziarz, J. Kwiecinski (25d).

The mutual relations between the Polish and other workers, as well as the unions in the Chicago slaughterhouses, were more complicated. Few locals of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen operated here in the years 1916—1917. It was then that on the initiative of W. Z. Foster and J. Fitzpatrick, the Chicago Federation of Labor (CFL) began to organize the workers in the Chicago slaughterhouses. With the permission and help of AMCBW, in the middle of July 1917, the Stockyard Labor Council (SLC) was created. It consisted of different unions, most of which were affiliated to AMCBW, though at the same time, they remained loyal to SLC, where the workers' leaders came from. The newly created locals consisted of representatives of various ethnic groups. They also applied the criterion of qualification with respect to profession and, partially, the place of habitation. In January 1918 Polish local No 554 consisted of 12,000 members, whereas shortly before the end of the war its numbers grew to 20,000. It was an immense personal success of John Kikulski, the local's president, organized and at the same time secretary of SLC. Apparently Kikulski was generally »adored« by the Poles and other workers employed in the Chicago meatplants — »they obey his every order; they congregate and listen with admiration to his famous speeches«. However, in the different locals there appeared numerous other Polish activists of a lower rank (12a—c,f,i,l—n; 3:47). SLC and the AMCBW forbade the workers to create worker shop committees in the plants, as was the case in the years 1900—1904. They feared that the creation of such committees would be an obstacle in maintaining discipline among the union members, whereas discipline was very much needed, if initially the union meant to settle the arguments between workers and their employers with the help of the Federal arbitration. Yet, unofficially, informally, and contrary to the position of the union and law courts, such committees did exist and operate. Quite frequently, particularly in the year 1919, there occurred »illegal« strikes which were organized without the permission of the union leaders. When union activists came to the plants, they often came across worker representatives and even worker committees whom they had never met before, or even

heard of. Here is an example from the G. H. Hammond Company. The conflict broke out in this plant when it turned out that out of 83 persons slaughtering cattle 8 did not belong to the union and categorically refused to join it. Later on the workers themselves gave the following report about the conflict: »When we talked to them in a good way they said: 'Fuck the union, fuck you and the button'«. People complained to Jan Kubik who enjoyed the greatest authority among them. He went up to the foreman and demanded that the persons who did not join the union should be fired. The introduction of closed--shop was forbidden according to the union-company agreement. But the unionists from the G. H. Hammond Co. did not want the closed shop. The reason of their strike was that »The men was getting abusive [...] These men here won't work with these non-union men because they are getting abused [...] They were getting treated very bum from the non-union men and they stopped«. In one of the departments of the Armour plant there was Stanisław Sojka, previously employed in Swift's plant. He enjoyed a similar respect. When he was asked whether it was the union that made him the shop steward of the department, he replied: »I was not regular shop steward but from the beginning of the plant starting operating some fellows found out I was working at Swift's and they wanted to know everything how this thing go and appointed me a couple of times [...] Not by the local but by the gang on the floor« (13g; 7a; 12d—g; 4:chapt. 5,27—29).

The workers not only supported enthusiastically, not only identified themselves with the union, but tried to act on their own, solving their own local problems, changing the principles of pay, and conditions of work. Besides, they demanded all these things from the union. They were also taught these things by Kikulski (assassinated in the spring of 1920), Stanisław Rokosz (Kikulski's deputy, also murdered a year later), Franciszek Krasowski, Aleksander Nielubowski (the latter two continued Kikulski's and Rokosz' works in the years 1921—1922), A. Burdzinski, Maria Janik (referred to as Polish Mother Jones) and others.[2]

In 1918 J. Fitzpatrick and W. Z. Foster began an organizational effort in the steel industry, paying particular attention to attracting the foreign unskilled workers to the unions. The National Organization Committee of Steel and Iron Workers coordinated the activity of 31 unions. Agitators familiar with the languages of the immigrants used to work in ethnic neighborhoods at that time. Soon, there also appeared new activists, selected by the workers themselves. Among them were many Poles (in Cleveland eg. C. Nowak, M. Polaski, F. Pachowski, J. Zgrabil, J. Kalamejsko, J. Mroczek). The cautious AFL leaders tried to control and pacify the foreigners. During meetings, attempts were made to avoid discussions, while the meetings tended to be rather short (5:120—121, 214—217; 28d—f). A letter from Gary, Ind. sent on March 24, 1 1919 to J. Fitzpatrick is the best evidence of the Polish reactions:

»Dear Board of Directors, We do not know what you are up to, has the company bought you up or something, it's almost half a year since you started organizing a union and nothing has yet come out of it, and possibly nothing will; some who have joined must pay and in the end you'll take away the money and say that nothing can be done and the union must be dissolved, for it is bound to happen that way, as you don't do anything and now people refuse to join. You should organize things, whereas you only call a meeting

[2] The names are from the Polish ethnic press from the Chicago area.

when money's needed to be paid, and the company people can see your negligence and they laugh at the union; the bosses harass the workers and threaten them, they don't even let them wash. You should get together those members who are already in the union, choose delegates and send them to the company to negotiate; you should tell every person at the meeting to persuade others to join the union, and if someone does not want to join, he should be boycotted by others. We turn to you, as we don't know if you do anything in this union or not, for if you don't do anything you should let people know, so that they do not pay money for nothing. In our opinion things should not be like this but it seems that you have all sold yourselves to the companies. Let's hope a day of reconing will come but when. With due respect« (7b).

Five months later all the federated organizations opted out for commencing an industrial strike. Altogether 98% of all the employees took part in this strike. In Pittsburgh a Pole and father of six, when asked whether he would decide to remain unemployed until the strike win, replied: »What a question!« (17:113). Although the strike was announced by the leaders of the National Committee and although the AFL tried to conduct it in a traditional way, in practice, the decisions belonged to the shop committees, which were often dominated or created by the foreigners. In Hammond, Ind. for instance, the following persons were members of the workers' committee: F. A. Kciuk, Stanisław Kinach, Andrzej Opalski, Jan Karłowski, Adam Fabjan, Aleksander A. Feder, Jan P. Sanowski, Józef Bieh (5:230—247; 2:158—159; 28g; 23; 12j).

The shop committees existed in the clothing industry where since the year 1914 there has operated an industrial union Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA). The locals grouped the representatives of either one specialization or an ethnic group. After World War I there existed 6 unequivocally Polish locals (including the biggest one, local number 38, which in 1924 numbered 4,000 members (8:3—4).[3] Shop committees were oficially recognized by the union. All the workers chose their representatives whom they could recall in the course of regular meetings which were held three times a month. These committees tried to solve all the problems of a given worker group in a factory department.

One of the Polish union activists defined its objectives in the following way: »... we should make everyone without exception join the union ranks in order to gain a complete control over the tailoring industry« 22a,b; 11e; 8:4,65—66). Thus, the union tried (in the majority of cases quite successfully) to supervise the employment policy in the factories, as well as the wage policy, and the process, of work itself. ACWA's organizational success was, no doubt, due to the organizational freedom which the union had left to its locals and shop committees. Unlike in the steel industry, here, the workers and immigrants were constantly encouraged to be active (22c). The members of ethnic locals themselves tried to surpass the ethnic and language foundaries. In Baltimore a Polish »local 100 emphasizes at every step its solidarity with brothers representing other nationalities, because in many factories the Poles and the Czechs work side by side, and although the Polish and the Czech locals have separate meetings, their executive committees work together at common sessions, during which many problems are settled jointly«. In Buffalo and Rochester, the Poles together with workers from the other ethnic groups organized common meetings, educational sessions and balls (22d—f).

[3] Information concerning Polish locals can be found in the Polish language version of the ACWA paper *Przemysłowa Demokracja* (New York), and in the minutes from the subsequent union conventions.

The shop committees had survived in the clothing factories until the twenties, although functions had slightly changed. The ACWA leaders had come to the conclusion that the union and the worker committees should cooperate with the employers in order to increase the output, rather than limit it. At the same time, they should not obviously lose any of the influence they had on the wage policy, as well as the conditions of work. This was considered to be the best way of serving the workers' interests. Expressing, no doubt, an attitute similar to that of S. Hillman, president of the Union a Polish activist in one of the ACWA locals wrote: »... if that great masses of people who are involved in the production have no control over the production process, or do not even know the value of their work«, then they still treat work as punishment for Biblical sin. Whereas »people who are able to see the real value of work, regard it as a social duty« (22g; 18:108—109). Were the Polish workers in the United States during these years able to see the value of work?

»We, Polish workers who are now on strike in New York Mills, N. Y. [...] have joined the strike as we were being wronged and we could no longer live in such conditions«. »For our wages, for cutting our minimal pay, for pushing the Polish worker around, we have now united ourselves against the oppression« (25c, d). In Camden, during another strike it was said: »What we have in mind is the defence of our dignity against brutal attacks which we experience daily in different plants« (25b). »Up until now we had to suffer and do the most difficult jobs in the entire United States for very low pay; we were treated as if we were not human beings and when we grew impatient with the difficult conditions which made it impossible for us to maintain our families, we were forced to leave the factories and go on strike, in order to obtain better conditions of pay and better treatment« wrote the member of the shop committee in Waterbury Conn. (1c). A worker injured in an accident at work complained that »such slavery should not exist in the world, for this is not a country of slaves, and there are no tsars here. And who is this contractor that should be outside all judgements, like some God above us?« (1e).

The textile workers congregating in the Polonia halls as well as in the Lawrence saloons said that »they were already fed up with this overpraised idea of American freedom« and that »when this country was endangered, the Poles fought for its cause, side by side with the American army in France; they bought liberty bonds and buttons, but when they demanded a pay rise, the same government had sent police squads with batons to put down the strike« (28b,16). In the same year a Polish immigrant employed at a steelworks said: »For why this war? For why we buy Liberty Bonds? For mills? No, for freedom and America — for everybody. No more [work like] horse and wagon. For eight hour day« (5:261). During strikes and immigrant worker manifestations, the American flag had been appearing for a long time. It was carried during manifestations, unfurled in front of picketed plant gates; it appeared during meetings and gatherings addressed by Kikulski, Kucharska, or some other union activists (11b). In Hammond, Ind. when the strikers confronted the strike-breakers, they were led by Tomasz Skuba, a former soldier in the American army. He was wearing the American army uniform and holding the American flag. Later on he was blamed that when fleeing before the firing policemen, he let go of the flag, allowing it to be defiled with the boots of others. The funeral procession in honor of the victims of this police attack was also preceded by workers bearing the American flag (12h, i). The flags and banners had a wide significance. However, they mainly

meant that the strikers are »not the scum of society but rational human beings and good workers« (28c). For the Polish moulder from Chicago knew very well that »it is not the foreman who does the work but the worker; therefore the foreman should mind his own business« (11b). »Our work is waiting for us and nobody except us will finish it on time« (11a). We are good workers. The job is ours. It is not surprising, therefore, that in Camden, N. Y. in 1916 women workers declared: »The striking women in the cigar factory [...] have decided not to heed the advise of all kinds of agitators, but to stick to the previously made resolutions [...] we are consciously declaring war on the capital. We will not be appeased and coaxed by the bosses and we will demand what is justly our right« (25a). Another immigrant demanding compensation wrote: »As my request has been refused I feel that my just rights have not been granted me« (1b); whereas the workers from the L. Wolff Mfg Co. declared: »We wish to win and we must do so for these are our legitimate rights« (11b).

These rights are mine. They are ours. Therefore: »Why do we have to listen to gossip that the company will not allow us to form a union if we have been organized for over a year and the Federation supports us generally? The company doesn't have to allow us anything. We already have a great union« (28a). Somebody else wrote: »I'm a worker« (1a), and »the life of a worker is very hard« (1d). The work is no longer defined as »hard« or »light«, but it is referred to as work that »has to be done«. It is work for a »company«, for »a plant«, at Swift's, Wolff's, Schaffner's in the slaughterhouse, steelplant, textile factory (27).[4] Whereas Wittgenstein said that »the limits of my language are the limits of my world«.

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TVRDOGLAVI DOŠLJACI: POLJSKI IMIGRANTI, SINDIKATI I RADNIČKA KONTROLA U AMERICI, 1916—1922.

SAŽETAK

U ovom radu pokušava se osvijetliti sudjelovanje iseljenika iz Poljske u raznim sukobima u industrijskim postrojenjima i u borbi za radničku kontrolu, do koje je došlo u Americi početkom 20. stoljeća. Najveća pažnja posvećuje se događajima iz razdoblja 1916—1922, kada se čini da su imigranti, za razliku od ranijeg razdoblja, počeli uočavati svoj položaj i ulogu u američkom društvu. Izjave tih radnika potvrđuju tezu da se dogodila značajna promjena u njihovoj svijesti. Te izjave i mišljenja, izražena na sastancima, a zabilježena u rezolucijama, zahtjevima i pismima dokazuju da su ti ljudi bili posve svjesni toga tko su, što rade, kakva je njihova uloga u društvu, te kakva im prava pripadaju.