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SPECIAL ANALYSIS

POLAND: Profile of Solidarity

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Recent labor unrest has brought into sharper focus the different forces at work within Solidarity and the ambiguous power exercised by its chairman, Lech Walesa. These anomalies will not be resolved soon, and the union's behavior will remain erratic. Solidarity is likely to respond to heavyhanded tactics by adopting a more united and militant posture. Over the short term, it will retain its considerable popular support.

Solidarity is a loosely organized group of workers that shares distrust of the regime and a determination to change previous policies. Its members are committed to an independent union as the only way to protect their interests, but they have only vague notions of how to translate this ideal into reality and do not understand or ignore many of the political sensitivities surrounding their task.

Solidarity's membership probably is between 5-10 million. The union's popular acceptance, however, extends far beyond its actual membership. It commands the sympathy and support of most Poles, and its success thus far has increased its popular esteem.

Most members are from the work benches of Poland's large industrial plants, but members also are found among the white-collar workers and in the universities. Solidarity is advised by intellectuals, including dissidents, who provide political, economic, and legal guidance. The number of Solidarity activists may run into the tens of thousands.

Differences on Goals and Tactics

All Solidarity leaders agree that the union must gain a voice in national decisionmaking and must support political reforms that help guarantee its existence, but

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they differ over how extensive union activities should be. Solidarity adviser Jacek Kuron, for example, believes the union should become a "second power" that checks the party in virtually every area of decisionmaking. He and others advocating a broader role have been aided by the considerable grass-roots pressure on Solidarity to take up a number of causes.

All leaders also accept the need to press the regime to make concessions, but the moderates believe large-scale strikes should be used as a last resort. The moderates have usually won out on this issue, partly because of the realization that strikes can be turned against the union.

Some union leaders and advisers believe that Solidarity should keep political dissidents at arms' length to preserve the appearance that the union's primary interest is worker issues. Many dislike Kuron, but no one is willing to give in to regime pressure and expel him.

In addition, there are widely differing views in the leadership over what Moscow will tolerate. Some believe that the Soviets will intervene militarily only if there is extensive civil disorder in the country. Others believe that Moscow would act if the facade of the party's leading role is badly damaged.

Thus far, however, the union has not reacted in any consistent way to threats of force by the regime or to Soviet saber rattling. Although such threats may deter some within the union, they probably push many others toward greater militancy.

The union's national leadership faces its most difficult task in trying to control strikes and other turmoil caused by local chapters. The leadership--the 55 members of the National Coordinating Commission--does not have the inclination or power to settle every local problem.

On the other hand, ignoring local grievances for any length of time risks letting them balloon into national problems. The national leadership also cannot afford to turn its back on its followers, and thus remains hostage to local militancy.

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Walesa's Position

Walesa became union chairman because of his long history of labor activism and his key role in negotiating the Gdansk accords, and his standing has been strengthened by his charisma and political shrewdness. His position as Solidarity's leading spokesman, however, is not unassailable. He has been outvoted at times--usually over the strike issue--and has been criticized for taking actions without consulting the full leadership.

Walesa probably will never try to dictate union policy. His stress on worker unity will prompt him to take account of militant views, and when in a minority, to represent the majority views in good faith. He will continue to be an influential force for moderation, however, and can probably remain union chairman as long as he wants.

Solidarity's internal problems cannot be easily exploited by the regime. Attempts to split the union would in all likelihood result in its greater cohesion and militancy. Arrests of militant Solidarity activists or of dissidents would be a unifying action and probably would lead to a confrontation with Solidarity--with much of the population on the union's side.

Outlook

Solidarity will continue to swing between moderation and militancy for some time to come. Any efforts by the regime to seek compromises to difficult problems will to some extent encourage moderation by the union but will not prevent such swings.

Militancy in the union will be nurtured by a habitual distrust of the regime on the part of many workers and by the likelihood that the populace will continue to press Solidarity to resolve their grievances. The venting--and resolution--of various grievances will be a lengthy process involving scattered unrest. The fact that the regime cannot consistently show moderation--or risk appearing permissive and causing an increase in demands--also will feed antiregime suspicions in the union.