

CONTEMPORARY POLISH TRADE UNION MOVEMENT AND ONE OF ITS ACTORS

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Historical Background¹

Polish trade union movement was shaped by three major events: the loss of political independence and the introduction of state socialism after the II World War, the emergence of the independent trade union *Solidarność* in 1980 and the system change in 1989. State socialism undermined the autonomous institutions that represented the interests of the working classes. In 1949, pluralist trade union movement, which was reborn in 1944-45, was centralised into *Zrzeszenie Związków Zawodowych* (ZZZ, the Association of Trade Unions) led by *Centralna Rada Związków Zawodowych* (CRZZ, the Central Trade Union Council). Despite some liberalisation after 1956, CRZZ was legally and practically subordinated to the communist party, *Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza* (PZPR, Polish United Workers' Party). Even though trade unions engaged the majority of employees, their tasks were reduced to the promotion of production plans, organizing leisure time, and providing services to workers. The suppression of free unionism led not only to a legacy of official trade unions subordinated to management, but also to workers' attempts to establish autonomous interests' representations through cyclic rebellions in 1956, 1970, 1976 and 1980, which were unique to Poland within the Soviet Block.

The peak of workers' unrest was the emergence of *Niezależny Samorządny Związek Zawodowy Solidarność* (the Free Independent Trade Union 'Solidarity'), the first independent trade union in the Eastern European communist bloc. It was the second major breakthrough. In its origins, the movement had a two-fold character (cf. Touraine et al., 1983). On one hand, it was a civil society movement inspired by strong Catholic values, a national liberation ideology, demands of civic freedoms, and based in the alliance of (skilled) workers and

¹ This part of the article is based on a draft analysis of the Polish trade union movement prepared by Adam Mrozowicki within the project of European Trade Union Institute on „The development of trade unions in the New Member States of the EU and candidate countries”.

intelligentsia. On the other hand, *Solidarność* was also a working-class and trade union movement documenting the completion and specific détournement of the socialist construction of working class. Dominated by skilled industrial workers, *Solidarność* left a legacy of a working-class “voice” at the workplace, in society, and in industrial relations that was oriented toward improving working conditions, promoting a just relationship between the quality of work and wages, industrial democracy and the protection of workers’ rights. Despite its suppression after the introduction of Martial Law in December 1981, the emergence of NSZZ *Solidarność* forced authorities to introduce reforms in industrial relations system. The most important of them included attempts to reform the official union confederation, which resulted in the foundation of OPZZ (Ogólnopolskie Porozumienie Związków Zawodowych, the All-Polish Alliance of Trade Unions) in 1984.

The final and the probably most decisive breakthrough came with the fall of state socialist system in 1989. Poland was the first among the post-socialist countries to apply a radical strategy of economic reforms, a ‘shock therapy’ inspired by neo-liberal ideology. Even though some part of working-class milieu retained its mobilization capacities (miners in Upper Silesia being a good example), the significant intensification of workers’ protest was observed only at the beginning of transformation in the 1990s. Accounting for relative peace during economic restructuring, existing studies have referred mostly to the strategies of trade unions and the properties of the structural context. From a structuralist point of view, union power diminished due to the accelerated privatisation, introduction of anti-union management styles in the private sector, high unemployment and increased segmentation of workforces. The strategies adopted by trade unions mattered, too. In the process of market changes, Polish trade unions played a specific role on account of their historical roots and incomparable to their counterparts in Western capitalist countries. In the case of the former official union confederation (OPZZ), the legacy of state-socialist unions established as the allies of management and depending on company’s resources, led to relative passiveness in responding to new labour-hostile conditions (cf. Crowley and Ost, 2001: 229). Even more complex was the position of *Solidarność*, which was assigned the role of “an umbrella over reforms”, buffering the social costs of economic restructuring of state-owned firms and protecting companies’ assets from appropriation by post-communist managerial elite.

As the result of more and more union-hostile institutional environment combined with the increasing discrepancy between union strategies and workers’ expectations, trade union density fell by 70% between 1993 and 2003 (cf. Carley, 2004). With around 14% of the

labour force unionised, Poland placed itself on one of the lowest positions in the EU (ibidem). Similarly to other Central and Eastern European countries, collective bargaining in Poland is company-centred, while the sectoral and national levels of interest representation are underdeveloped. Trade unions maintained their bargaining power in the public sector as well as in large privatized firms, which constituted a typical arena for collective agreements and industrial conflicts. Contrastingly, the situation in new companies founded by Polish or foreign private capital proved to be the least 'union-friendly' (Gardawski et al., 1999). Only recently, the situation in union movement began to change, including the practices of trade union organising in the private sector and the consolidation of non-affiliated unions, which led to the creation of the third largest confederation, Forum Związków Zawodowych (FZZ, the Forum of Trade Unions) in 2002.

Organisation

The overall shape of Polish union movement is pluralist. The number of national-level unions by the end of 1990s was estimated at 273, and the number of local (company-level) organisations at the same time amounted to 23 995 (Sroka 2000: 169). While the latter might be overestimation and the actual number of active company level organisations might be no higher than 7500 (see database at: <http://www.dialogspoleczny.org>), the proliferation of union organisations in Poland is undeniable and presents an obstacle to efficient collective bargaining at all levels of industrial relation system. The main organisational pillars of the contemporary unionism are three confederations: NSZZ Solidarność, OPZZ and – since 2002 - Forum of Trade Unions (FZZ).

The organisational structures of three main union confederations reflect their historical roots. NSZZ Solidarność was historically based on the territorial structure, which distinguished it from formerly 'communist' confederations (The Association of Trade Unions, ZZZ, and OPZZ). The territorial structure made it possible not only to retain a vital link with local communities during strike actions in 1980, but also to avoid internal union conflicts along the sectoral lines. The branch structures of Solidarność existed already in 1980s, but it was not until the National Convention of Delegates in May 1991, when they were formalised into 15 national 'branch secretariats' of the union. In contrast to OPZZ and FZZ, NSZZ Solidarność does not encompass other union federations, but only company-level union organisations federated into a unitary union organisation at the regional level, branch level and national level, all having the same name, symbol and statuses.

The organisational structure of formerly 'official' confederation, OPZZ mirrors the mechanism of establishing 'new' trade unions provided by the Trade Union Act passed in 1982, when the activity of NSZZ Solidarność was banned. Company union organisations, which had all separate legal statutes, were federated into national-level organisations (108 in 1984). The latter were, in turn, confederated into national-level confederation OPZZ in 1984. Due to the voluntary membership of union organisations within the confederation, decentralist tendencies in OPZZ were present almost from its founding in 1984. They were additionally reinforced by the attempts to break-away from what was considered by a part of workers a 'post-communist' trade union. According to rough estimation, OPZZ lost about 200 000 members as the results of this internal changes at the beginning of the 1990s. In 2008, there were 89 affiliates of OPZZ.

While fragmentation processes meant breaking away some union federations from OPZZ, in the case of a unitary union such as NSZZ Solidarność they were synonymous with establishing new unions on the basis of factions that had its roots in the Solidarność movement of the 1980s. As already noted, consolidation attempts undertaken by some not-affiliated trade unions led to the establishing of the third confederation, Forum Związków Zawodowych (FZZ, the Forum of Trade Unions) in 2002. One of the central reasons behind consolidation attempts was the Act on Trilateral Commission passed in 2001, which established criteria for national-level representativeness at the level of 300 000 members; a threshold which was possible to reach by smaller unions only by their consolidation. Currently, FZZ associates 82 union organisations and federations.

The share of union members in organisations outside OPZZ, NSZZ Solidarność and FZZ is estimated at the level of 2% of adult population or about one fourth of all union members, which means that they associated about 600 000 people in 2008 (Wenzel 2009). The independent unions include both company-level trade unions and some national level federations. Politically, the most visible of them are the Free Trade Union WZZ 'Sierpień '80' (August '80), a radical break-away from NSZZ Solidarność promoting left-wing class discourse, and the All-Poland Trade Union of Doctors (OZZL), recently engaged in large-scale protest actions in health care. In some larger companies, especially in the public sector, the existence of more than dozen different trade unions is a common situation. The 'conflictual pluralism' within Polish union movement is often mentioned as one of the main impediments on the development of social dialogue in Poland (Gardawski, 2003).

Political agenda

The principal political and ideological divisions within Polish union movement in the 1990s reflected historical roots of two largest union confederations, NSZZ Solidarność and OPZZ. NSZZ Solidarność was re-registered in April 1989. It entered a new phase of its development with a double identity, as a political mainstay of democratic and market reforms and a trade union movement shaped by Catholic right-wing ideology. In the 1990s, even though Solidarność attempted to re-establish its identity as trade union movement, its activity continued to follow political logic. It was marked by strong opposition to OPZZ and the post-communist government of SLD (the Democratic Left Alliance), even though the latter actually slowed down harsh economic reforms in the years of 1993-1997. In the years of 1997-2001, NSZZ Solidarność became a member of the governmental coalition led by the Solidarity Electoral Action (AWS). Consequently, it took responsibility for four – only partially successful – reforms of the administration, education, health care and pension systems. It was only in 2001, when the National Congress of Solidarność officially declared that the union would break its ties with political parties and focus on the defence of employees' rights. However, the support for a right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) candidate in presidential elections, Lech Kaczyński, granted by the National Congress in 2005, casts some doubts on this new, apolitical union identity.

Similar to NSZZ Solidarność, OPZZ was also directly involved in national-level politics in the course of transformation, albeit on an opposite side of the political scene. The confederation initially took a wait-and-see stance towards post-communist party. However, it openly re-entered political scene in 1993, when the government led by the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) came into power. Currently, the confederation's ideological stance is openly left-wing, but its links with SLD became looser as the recent trade union congresses criticised market-liberal policies promoted by this post-communist party in the years 2001-2005. Amongst three main confederations, the Forum of Trade Unions (FZZ) is the least politically involved and has never had its own members of parliament. It should be added that while ideological conflicts are common at the national level, inter-union cooperation is more typical of union practices at the shop-floor level (Gardawski et al., 1999).

Membership

Based on the survey data of the Public Opinion Research Centre (CBOS), the number of members in Polish trade unions can be estimated at about 2 000 000 people in 2008. This

includes about 600 000 – 800 000 members of NSZZ Solidarność, about 500 000 members of unions confederated in OPZZ, some 300 000 members of unions confederated in FZZ (Wenzel, 2009). The membership in NSZZ Solidarność decreased especially in the first years of transformation and in the years 1999-2001, when trade union took co-responsibility for 4 large political reforms. OPZZ also lost its members in the 1990s. Since the beginning of 2000, union membership in all three confederations became to some extent stabilised at the level of 14%-16% of the dependent labour force.

As far as socio-demographic characteristics of Polish unionists are concerned, representative sociological research and survey data allow us to note some changes in the social composition of union movement (cf. Gardawski et al, 1999; Wenzel, 2009). In CBOS survey conducted in 1991, 23% of men and 15% of women declared that they were trade union members. Contrastingly, in 2007, the share of men and women in trade unions became almost even (8% of adult men and 7% of adult women belonged to trade unions). Despite new grassroots union activism of women (Hardy et al., 2008; Mrozowicki et al., 2009), the leadership of the main trade union confederations is still constituted by men. While in its nascent NSZZ Solidarność associated much younger workers than ‘official’ trade unions, there is not much difference today among the main confederations in terms of their generational profile. They are all best represented among middle-aged employees. Young people, except for some new committed activists, very rarely join trade unions.

Despite mentioned similarities in terms of gender and age characteristics of their constituency, NSZZ Solidarność and OPZZ differ in the social composition of their membership. In 1991 (Gardawski, 1999), NSZZ Solidarność had almost three times more members among skilled blue-collar workers and more members among semi-skilled workers in services than OPZZ. OPZZ, in turn, had more members than NSZZ Solidarność among mid-rank managers and professionals. CBOS surveys conducted in 2007 (Wenzel, 2009) suggest that this general difference between NSZZ Solidarność and OPZZ has been maintained until the present moment. The new confederation, FZZ resembles OPZZ in terms of membership basis. It is best represented among professionals, middle level managers and semi-skilled workers employed in health care and administration. Since trade unions lost their members especially in the milieu of blue collar workers, the highest unionised occupational categories nowadays are mid-rank managers, teachers, engineers and professionals who hold university educational degrees (Wenzel, 2009).

New Developments: Towards Trade Union Revitalisation?

In response to the declining membership, the strategies of Polish trade unions began to change from the late 1990s. This new trend coincided with the revival of grassroots union activism in some sectors (such as healthcare, supermarkets and greenfield industrial enterprises). By the end of the 1990s, NSZZ Solidarność, supported by American unionists from ALF-CIO, established a Union Development Unit (DRZ), and OPZZ founded the Confederation of Labour (Konfederacja Pracy), both aiming to organize employees in the private sectors and the sections of economy previously abandoned by unions. Both initiatives initially encountered strong internal opposition, and the Confederation of Labour was even forced to accept the status of one of 89 union federations within OPZZ instead of being recognised as an internal inter-branch structure of the confederation (as it is the case of the Union Development Unit). The strategies of DRZ, targeted mainly at new private enterprises, combine 'organizing model' with some elements of 'economic unionism', including the union's acceptance of the market economy and the emphasis on the work-related interests of workers (Gardawski, 2001: 203). The Confederation of Labour seems to be more critical of capitalist relations. Functioning as 'the last resort' for employees endangered by redundancies, this union extends its activity into the broader communities of ex-employees, pensioners and unemployed (Gardawski, 2001: 233). In addition, the most of union federations began to include in their programmes the need to stimulate the development of membership basis and union commitments.

While it is too early to evaluate the long-term outcomes of the new, pro-active strategies of Polish unions, the first indicators of union renewal are already visible. Until March 2007, the Confederation of Labour established 220 new union organisations in the whole country. In the first years of its existence (1999-2001), the Union Development Unit of Solidarność managed to unionise 3000 workers in 30 large retail shops (hypermarkets) (Gardawski, 2001). Next, trade unions were established in a range of other multinational companies in service sector and manufacturing. In February 2008, the first ever strike in hypermarkets in Poland took place organised by the radical break-away from NSZZ Solidarność, the Free Trade Union August' 80. Even though union density has not grown, the halting of its decline in the years of 2006-2008 seems to be the first positive outcome of new union strategies. As documented by qualitative research, union organising coincided with the emergence of the new wave of union activists, who started to confront the established union structures with the need for internal reforms (Hardy et al. 2008; Mrozowicki et al. 2009).

Reinvigoration of the Trade Union Movement in Poland

They were represented, among others, by new wave of women activists like Grażyna, whose case is discussed in details in the further parts of this report.

Grażyna: the Story of Union Activist in the Private Sector

Grażyna's narrative illustrates some more general properties of trade union activism in the private sector in Poland which draw from the "organising model" of trade union movement promoted by the Union Development Unit of NSZZ Solidarność. As a lone mother and activist of Solidarność, who co-established trade unions in a large hypermarket in Upper Silesia, Grażyna represents the new forms of collective commitment. Grażyna spontaneously structures her biography in terms of "becoming a union activist". Importantly, her activism is not rooted in grand ideas transmitted through primary or secondary socialisation. Grażyna's involvement in trade unions, her spontaneous feminism based on the rejection of gendered roles at home, and her moral radicalism based on the defence of the human against exploitation reflect the praxis of resistance at the workplace. As such, her activism is a manifestation of grass-roots workers' agency, which transcends the privatism of disorganised workers and the traditional unionism of male, skilled core of the working-class milieu².

Grażyna is the president of the Intercompany Trade Union Organisation of NSZZ Solidarność established in three hypermarkets in the Upper Silesia conurbation in South-Western Poland. She is also a president of the Regional Section of Trade within the Śląsko-Dąbrowski Region of NSZZ Solidarność (since 2006). She was interviewed three times: twice in the regional office of NSZZ Solidarność in Katowice (in 2003 and 2007), and once at her union office in a hypermarket in Czeladź (in 2009). She is a warm person who was always willing to help in the research despite permanent lack of time. During the last interview, she was wearing brown trousers and beige Polartec jacket. She had a lot of brown make-up and heavy bracelets on her hands. Interview was arranged one day after the demonstration of NSZZ Solidarność in Katowice, in which we both participated. Due to the circumstances, we shared first the experiences from the demonstration and then we started an interview. All in all, the forthcoming presentation is based on about 5 hours of transcribed interviews with Grażyna conducted in the years 2003-2009. The factual data was cross-checked with informant and her permission to publish it under her actual name was obtained.

² For a detailed analysis of the difference between the 'transitional' type of unionism and the 'reinvented' type of unionism, see: Mrozowicki, A., Pulignano, V., Van Hootehem, G. (2009) Reinvention of Activism: a Chance for Union Renewal in New Market Economies? - The Case of Poland. In Gall, G. (ed.) *The Future of Union Organising. Building for Tomorrow*. Palgrave, pp. 79-96.

Childhood and Youth Experiences: Primary Socialisation

Grażyna was born in 1962 in Będzin (in Dąbrowskie Basin) as a single child in a working-class family. Her mother came from Sosnowiec, a middle-sized city in a highly industrialised region of Dąbrowskie Basin in the South of Poland. She worked for most of her life as a shop assistant. Her father was first employed as a shoemaker and next worked in construction as a skilled brick-layer. He came from a rural region of Kielce. Soon after Grażyna's birth, her family moved from Dąbrowskie Basin to her father's native village. Grażyna accounts for a part of her feeling of self-reliance by pointing at the liberal upbringing in her family: "As the only child I was brought up to be independent. I wasn't told what to do or not to do." All in all, she remembers her childhood as peaceful and uneventful. As a single child she was the apple of her parents' eye.

Grażyna attended primary school in a village in the Kielce district. As a teenager, supported by her parents, she developed various passions. At the primary school, she trained in archery, played keyboard-flute, mandolin and accordion. In 1976, she started a general secondary school in Kielce. She attended a reputed grammar school. She recalls that initially she felt uneasy in a larger city: "It seemed to me that everybody knew, as if it had been written on my forehead, that I came from a village". Retrospectively, however, she considers this experience as a lesson of self-reliance: "I had to find my way in this urban milieu, to acclimatise myself, to cope with it on my own". After one year of education, she moved with her parents back to Dąbrowskie Basin, where her father was allotted a flat and where he started working in a housing association. Her mum was given a job as a manager of the canteen at the newly built Steelworks Katowice. At the new place, Grażyna continued her education in a general secondary school, this time located in Będzin.

In 1979, Grażyna met her future husband who was a locksmith in a local steelworks. She became pregnant at the age of 18 and dropped out of secondary education. Although she does not narrate about this moment in details, early pregnancy was a clear turning point in her life: "I met my husband... Well, the ex-husband. And, you know how it is with youth, we couldn't play well, and soon I got pregnant. So, at the age of almost 19 I gave birth to my son. Of course, I gave up [secondary] school and I went to an evening school. And this is how I ended up at the vocational school." In 1980, Grażyna started attending an evening vocational "business" school (*szkoła handlowa*), which trained her for the occupation of shop assistant. She also started working. In 1979, she became a post dispatcher in a large wholesale outlet of

smelting products in Będzin. She recalls enjoying this job. It relied on managing orders from different parts of the country. There was very good working climate and women employed in the outlet understood each other very well.

Her son was born in 1980. The following year she gave birth to her second child, a daughter. Despite her young age, she does not recall today the early and unexpected motherhood in terms of trauma. She enjoyed both emotional and practical support from her family and managed to combine work with the upbringing of her children:

“I think I was very resourceful as for such a young person. Well, another thing is that these were different times; it was easier to get a job. Anyway I pulled myself together with my new obligations. Next, there was another pregnancy; I gave birth to my daughter, in 1980 to my son and in 1981 to my daughter. After maternity leaves I returned to work. Of course, my parents helped me. My mum drew allowance (renta) at this time and she helped me to bring up my children when I was leaving to work.”

In 1984, her marriage broke down. Her husband left her and started a new family. During the interview Grażyna systematically avoided talking about her divorce. Questioned about her further relations with her husband she limited herself to saying: “He just started a new family. I am a person who simply avoids entering into the same river. If somebody does not show any interest in contacts, I do not disturb him either. So many years and we had no chance to meet (...) But we have no trauma connected with it. Anyway, so many years passed. Perhaps one had some grudge at the beginning, but not anymore.” Although Grażyna never admits it, it can be deduced that it was her husband who was responsible for breaking up the marriage. He has paid to her the maintenance awarded by the court, but never came back. Consequently, Grażyna was left alone with two small children. Even though her family helped her a lot, she recalls her experiences from this period as a solitary existential struggle: “If I hadn’t pushed myself forward and if I didn’t have such a character, I wouldn’t be a person I am at this moment and I hadn’t reached what I reached. It’s been all the time a struggle for existence”. She needed to search for a better paid job to support her children.

Private Struggle and Fragmented Occupational Career: Secondary Socialisation

It was in 1985 when Grażyna secured a well-paid job in the heat and power station in Będzin. She became a storeperson in a spare parts department and received a company flat. It was a

period of deep economic crisis in Poland. In order to provide her family with foodstuffs (such as meat), which were unavailable in the shops, she travelled regularly to the home village of her parents. Once she was at work, an older woman living in her neighbourhood took care of her children. Thanks to her resourcefulness and the help of her neighbours and parents, Grażyna had managed quite well, despite difficult times in Poland and her uneasy situation as a lone mother.

At her work, Grażyna came into conflict with the director, who through an “absurd regulation” forbade drinking water during working hours. It was the first stage of the biographical process of becoming an activist: “It was there, where my, so-called, hidden, rebellious soul started to emerge”, she recalls. She intervened with the official trade unions but they did not help her. “These were typical communist trade unions which cooperated with management and not with employees”, she explains. Left alone by trade unions, she “started her private fight with absurd directives of an employer.” Thanks to the husband of her friend, who worked at the National Labour Inspectorate, she managed to force the director to cancel his earlier edicts. She won, but at the same time was punished for her resistance: “I was discriminated for the first time in my life. They didn’t give me a raise”. She described these events as her personal struggle: “it was a struggle for myself, for my honour, for what is today called the dignity of an employee”.

In 1986 through her “connections”, she found a new job in the League of National Defence (LOK), a communist-controlled organisation, which dealt, among others, with paramilitary training, organising sport camps and driving licence tests. She presents her work there as a next stage of becoming an activist: “It was here, where I entered into the political arena, got my own conviction concerning the views on life...”. She worked as a vice-director for social and political issues in a local division of LOK in Dąbrowa Górnicza. She was aware that this kind of job might have suggested an involvement in the communist party. She severely rejected this interpretation and emphasised her political autonomy “They didn’t manage [to get me involved in the Communist Party]. I kept my post, but also saved my dignity and face.” Simultaneously, however, she did not get involved in the (illegal, at this time) activity of NSZZ Solidarność either. She enjoyed some aspects of the job, recalling, for instance, a chance to organise summer camps for children and a possibility to obtain a driving licence. Nevertheless, in 1988, when she was given a choice between joining the communist party (PZPR) and quitting the job, she chose the latter.

Thanks to her contacts with the director of a press distribution cooperative (RUCH), she found a new job running a newspaper stand in Będzin in 1988. She recalls this job as both absurd and frustrating. Due to the economic crisis in Poland, there was not enough stuff to sell and once they appeared they were immediately sold out. In 1991, as RUCH changed its legal status from a cooperative to a state-owned firm, she had to change the location of her “kiosk” to a less advantageous one, on the peripheries of the city. She quit her job again and ended up being unemployed for five years. She managed to get by thanks to help from her family and friends and advantageous benefits for lone mothers: “I went on the dole. At this time it was, well, rather advantageous because it was difficult to get a job anyway and the dole was for lone mothers (...) So there were some regulations at this time which protected mothers, that they could get this benefit for an indefinite period, until they found a job.” She made use of this time to take care of her children: “I spent more time with my children. We became closer to each other. My children went to primary school at this time, so it suited me, I could keep my eye on them.” She also mentions that her contacts and connections helped her to go through this difficult period. Thanks to her contacts, she started earning some extra money by “helping” from time to time at a small shop owned by her colleague. In 1996 she found a regular job again. She worked for half a year at a grocery shop of another colleague. She claimed to like the job and was even offered a chance to take over the shop. However, she was aware of limited job security in a small shop and therefore began to search for a better offer.

Biographical Turning Point: Trade Union Activism in the Hypermarket

In 1997, Grażyna found out from press announcements that a new hypermarket was being opened in nearby Czeladź and decided to change her job. The hypermarket was part of the large foreign company in a group owned by the French capital and having 12 similar shops in Poland. At this time, she was convinced that work in a multinational company would enable her to get more job security than in a private local firm. She got a half-time job as a cashier. Contrary to her expectations, however, working conditions were very hard. She remembers the beginning of her work as traumatic: “We were exploited. They were notoriously breaking the labour code, with zero respect for the dignity of an employee.” She felt especially annoyed by work on Sundays when the most of other Poles enjoy their free time: “People would come back from the Church and look at us in this mall like monkeys in a ZOO, like

some apparitions who work on Sunday.”³ Trying on her own to improve the situation, Grażyna was very active during the staff management meetings. “My soul is rebellious, so I noticed some irregularities [in the firm], and I started also to fight [on my own] (...) Managers used to say: ‘You’ll see, Mrs. W. will establish a trade union here’. It was strange that they had known before I knew that I would establish trade unions.”

In 1999, trade union organisers from *Solidarność* visited the shop and she was called on by her colleagues as a person who might be interested in organising trade unions. She agreed and helped her younger colleague to co-establish *Solidarność* in the hypermarket. Subsequently she was elected a vice-president of the new trade union organisation. This event transformed her private “struggle for existence” into a struggle for collective rights. The biographical change is a clear answer to the explicit question about the summary of her life: “My life’s became more interesting, since I’ve been in this firm and I’ve joined unions. Before it was only, you know: work-home-kids, work-home-kids (...) Now, since 2001... I feel that something’s going on around me, that I have an impact on something.”

Grażyna presents the process of unionisation as the result of the interplay of union support by organisers from the Union Development Unit of *Solidarność* and the “collective will” of employees: “out of employees’ needs, an idea emerged to join unions”. In 2002 she was elected by the staff as president of the union branch. The beginning of her presidency was marked by a constant fight with a female director who persecuted trade union members (“She managed to mow down half of my people, because she frightened them.”) At this time, she felt as if the managers considered trade union organisation “public enemy number one”. Nevertheless, she managed to rebuild union organisation which shrank from 110 to 40 people. Grażyna recruited 40 additional members. In the same year, she got a contract for three-quarter time. Her son, who worked at this time in the same hypermarket as a low-rank foreman in one of the departments, was also active in *Solidarność*.

In 2003, Grażyna wrote an article about mobbing in the hypermarket for a trade union magazine. She criticised, among other things, the psychological harassment of cashiers: “Cashiers gets smacked for everything. For the lack of prices, for bad stock, for different prices than the people expected, for the mumbling of the people from customer service...As if

³ Grażyna’s opposition to work on Sundays does not necessary reflect her strong religious beliefs. As noted in the next part of this presentation, she declares herself as a Catholic but she is not particularly involved in religious practices. In this context, her criticism can be interpreted in terms of the opposition to unlimited managerial prerogative at work, of which work on Sundays is only one, even if the most striking example.

a cashier was guilty of everything. People cannot stand it psychologically and physically”. As a result of the article, she was accused of defamation of the company and its director tried to find some excuse to lay her off, including false accusation of drinking alcohol at work. The management of the hypermarket supported by the Polish headquarters of the chain put a criminal case as well as a civil case against her. In court Grażyna was cleared of all allegations. With the help of Solidarność lawyers from the region, she won both trials in 2005⁴. As these trials were widely reported in the regional and national press, Grażyna became a public figure of trade union movement in hypermarkets. Shortly after, however, her son quits his job at the hypermarket due to a sharp conflict with the director: “My son could not advance (...). Everybody knew that he should have been given a higher post. Why was he not? Because of his family name, and because of this struggle, which they lost”. In summer 2006, when Grażyna went on holidays, she received a phone call from her son:

“He felt down, he cried, he was jittery. This woman manager began to offend him in the front of the people on the first day [after I went on holidays]. I told him to go to a psychologist (...) I know my son: he has never cried, he was peaceful, introvert (...) I got to know only afterwards that there were couple of similar situations earlier (...) So he went to this psychologist, went on a sick leave and then he took holidays and immediately after they finished he handed in his resignation (...) Of course, I took a stand on it as a representative of company’s unions. I informed the headquarters of the hypermarket. But, of course, they saw no problem with it. They wrote back to me that the behaviour of the manager was perfectly fine.”

Despite psychological harassment of her and her son, the trial did not break Grażyna’s involvement in union issues. On the contrary, it made her commitment even stronger. She has started to take part in demonstrations in support of other suppressed union activists in different parts of Poland. She developed strong solidarity feeling and believes in mutual help among union activists, especially in private sector firms: “if something bad happens in his company, I go to him, if something bad happens at my company, he goes to me”. Simultaneously, she advanced up the trade union organisational ladder. In 2006 she was

⁴ To the best of our knowledge, no financial compensation was granted to Grażyna. Some press reports about her case can be found in “Gazeta Wyborcza” from 22.07.2005, in the article by Marcin Pietraszewski “Hypermarket przegrał z przedstawicielką związku zawodowego”

elected as a regional delegate for Upper Silesia to the National Congress of Solidarność. In 2008 she was contacted by people from a hypermarket belonging to the same corporation, who had known her from the local press. They asked her for help in establishing trade union in their firm. Shortly after, she consolidated the trade unions in four hypermarkets into an inter-company union organisation (MOZ) which she led.

In the last year, in the wake of the acquisition of French-owned shops by a large German investment group active in retail services, management at her hypermarket was replaced by new people. This change at the level of the management in Polish headquarters led to more cooperative relations with trade unions. Despite this positive change, trade unionists face a range of unresolved problems. The new employer is reluctant to sign a collective labour agreement and the recruitment to unions is constrained by high labour turnover and a significant share of temporary workers. In addition, the situation of global financial crisis in 2009 is used by managers as an excuse to withdraw from enacting agreements negotiated by trade unions in the past (such as pay bonuses for job seniority). Meanwhile, the second largest union confederation, OPZZ the Confederation of Labour, managed to create unions in the hypermarket as well. However, it did not create a tension. Both unions cooperate closely in negotiating with management. All in all, Grażyna emphasises positive effects of trade union's presence in the firm, including better control over social funds, more accurate remuneration of overtime and the significant improvements in working conditions (e.g. the imposition of the right to have a break during working hours).

Private Life, Living Standard and Life Style

Family life is almost absent from the main part of Grażyna's story. She does not narrate a lot about her divorce, her subsequent relationships and the relations with her children. Grażyna does not keep in touch with her husband but meets from time to time with her former sister-in-law. Her daughter migrated to Germany, where she married and started a new life. They stay in touch, regularly visit each other and organise joint Christmas. Her son lives in the same district of Będzin as Grażyna. He continues his university studies in informatics, which he broke earlier to work in the supermarket. Grażyna herself lives alone in a small apartment (48 m²) in a block of flats. She inherited this place from her parents, both of whom passed away at the turn of 1990s and 2000. She evaluates her living standard as "moderate", saying that "as the majority of Poles, I face some minor financial problems. Our incomes are not proportionate to prices and the bills consume the lion's share of my wage. However, I am in

better position than others because I am alone in my household, so I have better changes to plan my budget than lone mothers or people living with family.”

Trade union activism is the central element of Grażyna’s life style. Most of her friends are trade unionists as well. Her private life is strictly interconnected with collective involvement: “my working time is not 6 hours (...) but it’s all day long and into the night, because people call all the time. My private phone number is available for all union members and employees.” She invests her private money in technical equipment at her union office; she spends a lot of time communicating via internet with other unionists in different part of the country. She feels personally fulfilled and she is glad to have time for what became her passion: “It’s good that my children are grown up so I can devote this time. On the other hand, I have to tell you, I can’t imagine living without it.”

Trade union activism also has its biographical and family costs. They include psychological harassment of Grażyna and her son by management in the first phase of her activity in trade unions. They are also clear in the story about Grażyna’s relationship with her partner, whom she met in 2002 and with whom she has lived until 2008. He initially accepted her full-time engagement in trade union issues. However, with the passage of time, he attempted to limit her involvement which often came at the cost of their interpersonal contacts. Rejecting what she considered an intrusion into her life, Grażyna set clearly her life priorities: “It is my life, it is my passion, I pulled myself together by doing this. So I cannot give this up for a partner (...) And I thought that it was the time to end this relationship.” Even earlier, however, Grażyna’s attitude towards men was marked by strong feeling of independence, a kind of spontaneous feminism visible, among others, in the statement: “I have never been dependent on a man! As I said, I have always been a liberated woman.”

Grażyna’s time is filled with activities related to trade unions. She takes part in a number of union training sessions. They concern not only labour law, civil law and penal law, but also some aspects of psychology, communication and socio-technique. Union training also provides a chance to meet other trade union activists, to build up social networks and to exchange views. Grażyna says that she would like to continue her formal education but there is no time for it at this moment. She admits that some people think of her as a “workaholic” but she disagrees with such a description of herself: “I don’t count time which I devote to unions. As I said, it is a pleasure for me. I simply like it, I like contact with people, I like to talk, I like to participate in training and demonstrations.” In her neighbourhood, she is recognised as an activist. She is aware that for some people her activism might look strange,

but it does not discourage her: “My neighbours know what I am doing. They can see how I look like when I go for a demonstration like yesterday: a headband of Solidarność, a scarf, sticks in my hands, some gadgets, and off I go!. So they probably look at me like at some phenomenon. But you know, this is what people are for, to be astonished and talk. If we had done nothing, we would have nothing. We wouldn’t have this freedom without solidarity.”

Grażyna has limited time to spend on issues not related to her work and activism in trade unions: “Sometimes, when I come back home, I just take a bath at night and go to bed. I light a cigarette, I start watching a movie and I usually fall asleep in the middle of it. I leave the next half of the movie for the next day.”. She prefers light movies, such as westerns; she also watches documentaries broadcast by Discovery Channel, Animal Planet and Travel. If she finds some free time and during her holidays, she reads wartime novels and history books: “you can learn a lot from them about the character of the people who could manage in such dramatic situations.” She sometimes goes with her friends for pop concerts. She recently attended the concert of Beata Kozidrak, who is a singer from a Polish pop group famous in 1980s. Grażyna also goes from time to time with her friend to discos to “release the stress and dance a bit.” She used to spend her holidays in Bulgaria. In the last year, she stayed in Poland, in a lake district. She enjoyed it a lot due to beautiful natural surroundings.

Political Views: Anti-politics and the ‘Moral Economy of Unions’

Grażyna’s political views are marked by ambivalence. On the one hand, she reproduces some aspects of anti-communist discourse promoted by Solidarność. Among others, she interprets the lawsuit brought against her by the hypermarket as an “attempt to break her by UB methods”⁵. On the other hand, however, the practices of resistance transcend the ideological discourse of Solidarność national leaders. Grażyna openly distances herself from political involvement of NSZZ Solidarność (“I’m not interested in politics”). In particular, she does not identify herself with right-wing conservative Law and Justice (PiS), which NSZZ Solidarność supported during the presidential elections in 2005. She disbelieves in a possibility to create a broad social movement based on the national leaders of trade unions: “It is doomed to fail. I think so because they are simply... hungry for power.” Asked about the heritage of Solidarność, Grażyna expresses her general disappointment with the development of the union after 1989: “What disappeared from this social movement, which used to be there in the

⁵ UB, in Polish *Urząd Bezpieczeństwa / Security Service* was the Communist secret police in Poland known for the suppression of anti-communist activists involved in NSZZ Solidarność in 1980s.

past, is human solidarity. It is preserved in branch structures and in regions. But there is no unity, cohesion, solidarity. You can see it, there is a split in this movement. Wałęsa, Gwiazda, Walentynowicz, they fight with each other about who is more important as a hero. I think that they should stand together.”⁶

The next important difference between Grażyna’s views and her union’s ideological stance lies in her relation to the Catholic Church. She is very critical of the insufficient division between the Catholic Church and NSZZ Solidarność. Asked about the religious context of the union movement, she openly states that trade unions should remain ideologically independent:

“I am a Christian, I believe in God but I rarely go to the Church and I think it’s not good that we entangle some elements of Christianity in union activities (...) For instance, our union organised an action against abortion. In my view it was sick. Why a trade union should waste time on such issues?! As I said, I am a Christian but it does not mean that if Mr. Kowalski, who is an atheist wants to join a trade union, I would not accept him. A trade union is not a division of Christianity, religion or a church. We call ourselves ‘Independent’ and yet we are manipulated. It’s not the right way. Let’s focus on the issues for which we created the union.”

Despite her activism in NSZZ Solidarność at the company and regional levels, Grażyna disagrees with some aspects of national-level union politics. She is critical of the National Committee of Solidarność for the lack of necessary organisational reforms (e.g. keeping alive a lot of weak regional structures). She also criticises the Union Development Unit and accuses its representatives of the “appropriation of the achievements” of local activists. Her vision of trade unions is based on the notion of selfless engagement for collective goals. This ethical and actor-centred stance leads her to postulate a kind of moral renewal of NSZZ Solidarność: “I’d like this union to be worth its salt. I’d like everybody,

⁶ Grażyna refers to the political struggle within NSZZ Solidarność at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s. By the end of the 1980s, some historical leaders of NSZZ Solidarność, including Andrzej Gwiazda and Anna Walentynowicz, opposed negotiations with Communist authorities supported by Lech Wałęsa. They criticised the proponents of the negotiations with the communist party of betrayal of Solidarność ideals from 1980. They also accused Wałęsa of being an agent of the communist secret service. The conflict has many additional dimensions, including Gwiazda’s and Walentynowicz’s opposition against hard-line market reforms and support granted to them in the conflict with Wałęsa by the president of Poland, Lech Kaczyński.

let's be honest, to take to his and her heart what she or he has to do in this trade union. That they are radical in their actions, that they are full of charisma and they don't let employers to manipulate them, that they don't stick to this union just for their own interests". Asked about the priorities for the Polish union movement, she emphasises the need for universal, unconditional defence of employees' rights and interests: "our priority is to totally eliminate these bad actions towards ordinary workers, to make employees feel at home in the company, to make them feel respected, so his/her work is appreciated no matter whether s/he is in unions, if s/he has certain religious convictions, if s/he is homosexual. S/he should be evaluated as a human being, as an employee, honestly, who deserves respect because s/he does her/his job as s/he should."

Being disillusioned with the functioning of the public sphere in Poland, Grażyna is focused on grassroots activities at the workplace level. She actively addresses new organisational challenges (among others, she tries to unionise temporary workers in the firm) and participates in solidarity actions in different parts of the country. Grażyna's attempts to gain more control over private and occupational life is transformed into a desire to have more control over the labour process. This desire is very clear in her interpretation of union activism as the mechanism of individual and collective empowerment: "To be in a union, to be active in an organisation ... this means, that you aren't idle, you don't stay aside, but you're active all the time, let's say, you are always in control, you have this control over the employer and over what happens in the firm". Grażyna's ideals are consistent with her morally laden vision of politics as the domain of selfless engagement for collective goals. Asked about persons she admires, she mentions only one, John Paul II, and yet she immediately adds that the figure of former Polish Pope is meaningful for her "not as a trade unionist, but only as a human being". She emphasises that she cannot find any other ideals at the present moment because it is "an unbelievably brutal world". She adds that she "could find an ideal in Romanticism" and mentions two Polish poets, Adam Mickiewicz and Juliusz Słowacki.

Despite her critical attitude to the development of NSZZ Solidarność after the system change in Poland, Grażyna's political views are not detached from the traditions of her union. At the firm level, she postulates to combine market logic with cooperation for common goals. She is convinced that "if staff is unified and everybody respects and likes each other, it's more efficient at work, more productive." At the level of the state, she defends the idea of a guaranteed average income for all employees, which would enable them to fulfil both their

basic and broader needs, such as the need to “go on – not necessary luxury – holidays.” Both ideas implicitly refer to the vision of socially embedded market economy, which was foundational for the tradition of Solidarność. In this sense, contrary to the pessimistic views on the future of Polish unionism (Ost 2005), Grażyna’s case demonstrates how old cultural resources, rooted in workers’ struggle against authoritarian socialism in the 1980s, can be reinvented by workers in new, capitalist conditions and motivate their practices of resistance in union-hostile private sector in Poland.

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