
(July 22, 2005) Lipinski Honors 25th Anniversary of Poland's Solidarity Trade Union

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MR. LIPINSKI. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to pay tribute to the workers of the Solidarity Trade Union in Poland. On August 30th we will celebrate the 25th anniversary of the workers' strikes in Poland that led to the unprecedented establishment of the Solidarity Trade Union.

At the end of the Second World War, Poland was forcefully incorporated into the Soviet Union's Communist Bloc. By 1980, they had endured decades of Communism, its endemic corruption, the lies of its press, and its denial of basic human and worker rights.

Although major strikes and uprisings against totalitarianism had taken place, all of them had been put down violently by military forces and the leaders had been arrested.

Things began to change in 1979, when Pope John Paul II, in his first official visit to his homeland, encouraged the people of Poland "not to be afraid." Empowered by the Pope's words, Poles soon began standing up to their Communist government.

On August 14, 1980, at the Lenin Shipyard in the Baltic port city of Gdansk, 17,000 workers staged a strike under the leadership of Lech Walesa. Initially formed as a response to increases in the price of food and the dismissal of several popular workers, the strike soon evolved into a broad demand for workers' rights.

In mid-August 1980, an Inter-factory Strike Committee was established in Gdansk to coordinate rapidly spreading strikes there and elsewhere. Within a week, the Committee presented the Polish government with a list of 21 demands ranging from the right to join independent unions and an increase in the minimum wage to broader issues such as censorship. On August 30th, accords reached between the government and the Gdansk strikers.

On September 22, 1980, Solidarity was formally established and became the first independent labor union in any Soviet bloc country. By early 1981 the trade union had a membership of about 10 million people and represented most of the work force of Poland.

In the early 1980's, Solidarity was forcibly suppressed by the Communist government and Solidarity was declared illegal. Although the union was formally dissolved, it continued as an underground organization. Solidarity reemerged in 1989 to become the first opposition movement to participate in free elections in a Soviet-bloc nation since the 1940s.

The case of Solidarity - the movement that ended communism in Poland without bloodshed - inspired other nations under Soviet control to do the same and led to the end of the Cold War.

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the strikes in Poland. Let us remember Solidarity as the beginning of a great struggle that ended decades of oppression and tyranny in Eastern Europe and led to the establishment of democracy in Poland. We must recognize and forever remember the sacrifice, determination, and struggle Poland endured to secure their freedom.

Mr. Speaker, I thank you for your time.