

Just as the capitalist dream hasn't spread effectively to most people in the global South, it is benefiting few in Central Europe. The end of the Cold War brought the glittering trappings of capitalism – fancy shops, imported foods, and luxury cars – for some but it also brought unemployment, depressed wages, inflation, and cut-throat business practices. The betrayal of capitalism here looks much like it does in Argentina, South Africa, and other countries where neoliberal policies have been rapidly implemented – the results are utterly devastating, and there is deep fear of what the future will bring.

Poland is the geographical gateway between East and West, and is a sort of testing ground for the regional transition economies. Rapid privatization has resulted in crisis, and many people are realizing that capitalism has even less to offer than did the state-controlled economy. They know that to guarantee a decent job and a good life, they will have to overcome their instincts to compete for scarce resources, and struggle together.

In 2001 the threat of liquidation of the shipyard in Szczecin forced workers to strike. Wildcat miners' strikes continue as their union negotiates with the government to close mines. In Wrocław, a struggle for the survival of a hospital has resulted in creative actions including a mass funeral march for the death of health care, a group of hospital workers giving away their passports and revoking their citizenship, and the hospital applying for asylum in Holland and Germany – which resulted in the German consul offering the workers jobs in Germany! The neighbourhood surrounding the hospital, as in El Salvador and Argentina, is offering the strongest support in the struggle.

All across the country are tiny pockets where people are learning to work together at a very local level. Squatters and anarchists are joining forces with workers and neighbours and on a small scale, are beginning to visualize and create a world in which principled action takes priority over ideology, a world which has space enough for everyone.

Forging Links in Ozarów

an interview with Zbyszek, by V. of Abolishing Borders from Below

Ozarów is a small town near Warsaw, with an economy entirely centred around a cable manufacturing factory. This factory fell victim to a hostile takeover in the spring of 2002 by the Polish monopoly, Telefonika, whose owner liquidated the plant and attempted to relocate the machinery to his two other production facilities, where workers' wages are lower. The workers in Ozarów responded immediately by barricading the exits of their factory and refusing to allow trucks to remove the machinery. Keeping the plant running is a matter of survival for them, since no other work is available in town, and so their primary demand is that the factory remain open, preferably under worker control. They are well aware that their struggle is connected to others in Poland, which has seen entire cities virtually dismantled over the last twelve years of economic restructuring and privatization.

As winter set in, locals developed a new strategy to prevent the removal of machinery; they continually poured water on the roads, which then froze in the -4°F temperatures, and prevented the removal trucks from entering or leaving the premises! The winter also saw the development of an unusual coalition, as anarchists from across the country came to Ozarów in solidarity with the workers. They provided support by doing basic legal trainings, assisting with organizing press conferences, relieving workers on the picket line, joining in defence

against the attacks by police and security guards, donating fuel, food, and money, and publicizing the struggle through international activist networks.

Abolishing Borders from Below: What was the first reaction of workers and the local community after the decision to close the factory? What form of protest did they choose at first, and how was it developed over the next months?

Zbyszek: Telefonika didn't even try to communicate with the workers, they just closed the factory and announced that the equipment would be taken out. So people decided to blockade the main entrance. Most of the protesters are Ozarów residents; the local police even promised not to intervene against them, though eventually, of course, they did. The non-stop occupation started with people living in two tents, believing that they would save their workplace. The next months came and went without a resolution, so the workers organized a march into the capital. They counted heavily on the support of Solidarnosc (Solidarity), one of the two biggest Polish trade unions. Unfortunately their help was insufficient, so the workers decided to create

their own organization. With the crew from other factories in similar situations, they initiated the Polish Protest Committee (OKP); a new and important branch in the nation's trade union movement. The chair of OKP became the leader of the protesters from Ozarów.

ABB: How have events in Ozarów been covered by the media? What is the view among Polish society? From where did the workers get the most support?

Z: Initially the media reported on the occupation in a reliable and factual way. It couldn't be ignored, as Ozarów is one of many places where Polish industry faces such problems, and it's a big story. However, as the workers became more radicalized and the coalition began to strengthen, reporters started to present events as hooligan-led riots, and the protesters as dreamers out of touch with reality.

Much support comes from the local community, which has brought food and other essentials. We anarchists started coming to Ozarów in the first weeks of the protest, and early on we proposed a broad offer of support, which was turned down after a few hours of discussion. We are not

Philippines stage a noise protest against new charges to their electric bills. Bills are sent in, unpaid, and marked "Under protest." In Sawata, thousands protest the charges by refusing to use electricity at all. The protests spread across the country throughout the year.

>> **May 17** >> Activists in Québec City, Canada march to demand social housing, concluding the march by occupying a house, which is then used by the local community as a

gathering place, and children are participating in painting and decorating it. They have three main demands: that the house be transformed into a self-managed housing cooperative, that a moratorium on any new condominium projects be implemented until the vacancy rate goes up 3 per cent, and that the provincial government start a program to build 8,000 social housing units a year.

>> **May 23** >> Several hundred Russians burn American

flags to denounce President Bush during his summit talks in Moscow. Braving identity checks, detention, and intimidation by snipers on the rooftops, protesters speak out against the indefinite war on terrorism and the neoliberal policies which have sent their country into extreme economic turmoil.

>> **May 23** >> The Korean Health and Medical Workers' Union launches strikes in 16 hospitals; two engage in full-

sure if this was because at that time they saw our movement as too radical, or if they were forced to refuse contact with us by the Solidarnosc Union, which was still involved at that time. It is possible that someone from Solidarnosc gave them the choice between dealing with their union or with us anarchists. So, as we feel that there is no sense in supporting someone who has rejected our support, we stayed on the sidelines for a while. But not for long ...

ABB: How did it come about that you finally joined the protests and began playing such an important role? What was the reaction of the locals in Ozarów when they saw anarchists coming from all around the country to join them?

Z: Well, the situation changed a lot when anarchists from Poznan and Szczecin started to work closely within OKP structures. But the first solid contact came after the brutal attacks of IMPEL, a private security firm, in late November, after 219 days of occupation. At about 4.30 in the morning,

this firm violently attacked people who were blockading the factory's entrance. The security guards were drunk and extremely brutal, spraying tear gas on old women and beating up everyone around. Two local fire trucks arrived to help the workers, drenching the security guards with their hoses. Police then joined the security guards, and took over the factory, even though the protest was legal! When word spread about this attack, workers from Ozarów called for anyone to come and support them, and immediately many more anarchists from Poznan, Szczecin, Bialystok, Lodz, and Warsaw came to Ozarów.

Everyone was fighting to prevent the trucks from taking cables and equipment out of the factory, throwing stones, firecrackers, Molotov cocktails, etc. But we were outnumbered by police – there were 600-700 riot cops with water cannons – and the workers' enthusiasm was falling from day to day. So by the third day of almost non-stop confrontation, most of the people still fighting were anarchists.



Resisting factory closure. Ozarów, Poland

Indymedia Poland

ABB: What have the results been of mixing the workers' anger and world views, with those of the anarchists?

Z: It's hard to say, because many anarchists decided to focus more on helping people through direct actions and didn't talk so much about their politics. They were talking with the workers, of course, but there was a broad spectrum there – the Catholic National Front with their rhetoric, the Trotskyists with their newspapers, etc. I would venture to say that among all these groups, the anarchists were the least pushy with their views on the workers. When we first went to Ozarów, one of our people wanted us not to tell the locals that we are anarchists 'cause he thought people would have a bad reaction to us. But I saw a scene where one of our lot gave the workers a few packages of tea and coffee, and someone asked: "Who does this come from?" We replied, "It's from an anarchist." The woman's response was, "Oh God, I wish all people would be like these anarchists!"

ABB: How do you see what is happening in Ozarów in the context of overall changes in Poland?

Z: In Poland there is a big crisis now – the current system is

completely incapable – many people are living in really bad situations and people are starting to do something about it. Maybe one day we will see the riot acts like in 1980 when the Solidarnosc movement was born. I see in every sector more disappointment with capitalism, current political structures, and official propaganda of the media. The question is whether we can turn this disappointment into rebellion against the political and economic authority, or if the right wing will be allowed to use the frustration for their aims – for example, there is a popular movement behind Andrzej Lepper, who is a charismatic leader of a farmers' movement and who is known for his radical critique of the EU from an extreme right position.

ABB: What kind of repression are the authorities using to suppress these protests?

Z: Usually they just use truncheons, but the fact is that when there are 10,000 workers on the street, the police are afraid of using violence, 'cause they know that we are not playing a game, that it is not just about another 200 zloty (\$53) per month. People are taking to the streets with more

scale walkouts, while the others initiate partial strikes. Demands include abolishing the distinction between full- and part-time workers. On the same day, 5,000 members of other unions hold a sit-in at Jongmyo Park in Seoul in opposition to privatization plans.

>> **June 4** >> Peasants march 87 miles from Coronel Oviedo to Asuncion, Paraguay to demand the revocation of a law allowing for privatization, and to prevent the sale of

the public telephone company, a sale which has been suspended six times due to corruption investigations. The 7,000 peasants attempt to break through a police cordon in order to continue the march, and are attacked. A farmer is killed by a bullet to the head, another is critically wounded by a shot to the stomach, and several others are injured. A general strike takes place two days later, with the nation's main trade union demanding that the

government, "reject the prescription of the IMF and WB and defend our sovereignty".

>> **June 4** >> The Dutch network *GroenFront!*, a branch of Earth First!, occupies a construction crane set to build a new docking pier in the expansion of Schiphol Amsterdam Airport. Work is stopped. Banners hang from the crane, saying "Stop Jet Expansion" and "Nature Will Strike Back". This action adds to *GroenFront!*'s ongoing campaign, which

determination, they know why they're in the streets, and even when they fight the police, they understand why they are doing it. It's not a blind aggression, as the media portrays it. Another form of repression is economic pressure – many people have harsh living conditions in Poland. Many people could not meet their comrades in Ozarów because they don't have a job and are too poor to travel, others who have jobs are not allowed to take two or three days off work. The [state welfare] subsidy in Poland is minimal, and fear of losing a job is incredibly strong. It's a very stressful situation typical for many Polish communities. It seems that it cannot continue much longer and something must change.

ABB: What is the current situation in Ozarów, and what are the plans of the workers? How do you and other anarchists envision your participation in the future?

Z: It is still unclear what will happen with the workers – whether they will succeed in creating their own company, which would require certain negotiations with local authorities, or if the company will take back the whole factory and its contents. The problem is that Telefonika's owner prefers to keep the machines shut down and going to ruin rather than give them to the workers. He announced that he will sell the factory back to the government, but there is no way to create a brand new cable factory. But the workers don't want any other job. They are very highly qualified in their profession and if the factory is sold, it could become, let's say, a potato chip factory and what then

– they have to peel potatoes for the rest of their lives?!

At the moment our role, as anarchists from Warsaw and other cities, is to do what we can with financial help, and to remain in contact with people from Ozarów. We are planning some collaborative projects – for example, we are working on making a video about the history of this struggle, and we will have it translated into different languages. We gave them fuel to keep their tents warm, and we are trying to get some more. We're trying to give very practical support. We've got some far-reaching plans as well, but it's too early to speak about it yet.

ABB: Do you believe that the events in Ozarów have changed anything in the overall Polish reality?

Z: Ozarów for sure has become a symbol of resistance across the country. Maybe there are now just a few people left at the factory gates but they are still there – in harsh freezing weather. They are transforming themselves through struggling, and are very effective in what they are doing. Their story has become legend, and has travelled so widely that when any of them are applying for a job and the interviewer learns that they come from the cable factory in Ozarów, they don't continue the interview, because they are afraid of people who can fight for their employment and who are so conscious about their rights. That's what some of them have personally told me. And what is amazing is that they don't say it with regret or despair at not getting the job, they say it with a kind of pride in their voices ...

Update: After almost one year of striking, workers in Ozarów have attained a partial victory. In cooperation with the Industrial Development Agency, and local authorities, the workers succeeded in gaining control over two production facilities and their own company. Unfortunately, it seems that they will not be producing cables; however all former cable factory workers are guaranteed jobs. The organizers would like to thank all who have supported them in any way during their year-long struggle, and invite them to visit occasionally for celebrations.

Zbyszek has been a member of the Warsaw Anarchist Federation for ten years. Before that he organized against the communist regime, as most people in Poland did at that time. He currently works with the antiglobalization movement, and is a journalist.

V. is a co-founder of **Abolishing the Borders from Below**, an international anarchist collective focused on Eastern European activism, which publishes a paper by the same name. Born in Warsaw, Poland, V. left in 1993 and is now an unemployed squatter, occasional underground musician, writer, anarcho-punk vegetarian living in Berlin.

ABB also organizes a prisoner support group, a libertarian library, various solidarity actions, and cultural events in order to support local and global struggle against all kinds of oppression and with support for development of an anarchist movement across the borders.

Resources:

- » *Abolishing the Borders from Below – an anarchist courier from Eastern Europe* Available from Active Distribution. www.activedistribution.org
- » Information about the protest in Ozarów (some in English): www.fko.prv.pl
- » Website of Anarchist Workers' Initiative: republika.pl/paspartooo/wi

has included digging up a new landing strip in the Transport Minister's garden.

>> **June 7** >> One hundred people protested against the WEF in Durban, South Africa, bringing attention to the New Plan for African Development (NEPAD). "NEPAD will deliver in Africa, but only to the elite. The poor will just get poorer. President Mbeki is looking after the interests of the emerging elite in Africa", says Ashwin Desai of the

Concerned Citizens Group. "We regard NEPAD as a new form of colonization with the consent of African leaders", adds Professor Dennis Brutus of Jubilee South Africa. Protesters are confined to Speaker's Corner, about 110 yards away from the WEF meeting, but about 30 manage to slip away engage WEF delegates in discussion about NEPAD until police remove them.

>> **June 13** >> Massive demonstrations in Arequipa,

Peru's second largest city, and in Tacna on the Chilean border turn into riots after 90,000 police mobilize and attack. Protests nationwide are underway due to the government having auctioned two state-owned electricity companies to Tractebel, a Belgian company, for \$167 million. One demonstrator is killed after being struck by a tear gas canister. Protesters vandalize the airport, smashing landing lights and stealing equipment, and