

**‘SOLIDARITY’, SOLIDARITY AND THE CHALLENGES OF  
TRANSFORMATION: RESTRUCTURING LABOUR AND  
COMMUNITY IN POST-SOCIALIST POLAND**

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# **‘Solidarity’, solidarity and the challenges of transformation: Restructuring labour and community in post-socialist Poland**

## ***Introduction***

As many commentators have noted, trade unions have held a special place in the transformations taking place in Poland. Just over twenty years ago, strikes in most of the country’s major workplaces led the Communist government to concede on a number of popular demands, including the creation of the first independent trade union in the Soviet bloc. The legalisation of Solidarity in August 1980 was a major step on the road to the end of communism in east central Europe and heralded a central role for the union in the replacement of communism in Poland. This paper explores the changing role of Solidarity, and other trade unions, in one town in Poland, in a particular context - the role and function of labour organisations in the community, that is *beyond* the workplace. The nature of work and labour politics in Poland, both before and after August 1980, suggest a particular relationship between labour and community, and between labour politics and community politics, and this paper develops a train of thought presented in a historical context in Stenning (2000b). This paper begins within a brief overview of trade unionism in post-war Poland, focusing on the issues facing unions today and then presents an introduction to the town of Nowa Huta in southern Poland and its particular labour history. These two parts are brought together to explore, using material from interviews and other research in Nowa Huta, the contemporary role and importance of union activity in the wider community, linking wider ideas about community unionism to the particular historical context of a Polish ‘town of labour’.

## ***Trade unions in Poland***

There are a range of conflicting views concerning the strength or weakness of trade unions in Poland today which arise undoubtedly from the country’s particular labour history. As in every country in the former Soviet bloc, the post-war era was characterised by unions which effectively acted as ‘transmission belts’ (Gardawski et al., 1999; Herod, 1998b) for the Party and the state. Briefly put, unions ensured conformity to state policy in economic and political fields and became the main conduits of social policy, controlling access to social, cultural and recreational facilities, loans and other assistance for workers and their families. In small towns and urban districts where a single plant dominated the economy, enterprises and their trade unions structured the community in very influential and visible ways (Domański, 1997). That trade unions’ focus on social provision encouraged little independent defence of workers’ interests was demonstrated by the dramatic but sporadic emergence of independent workers’ actions across the region from the late 1950s onwards. This autonomous ‘movement’ was perhaps more pronounced in Poland than in anywhere else in the region and culminated, as I have already suggested, in the legalisation of Solidarity as an ‘independent

self-governing trade union' [niezależny samorządny związek zawodowy, NSZZ] following the Gdańsk Agreement of August 1980. As Solidarity was formalised across Poland it quickly gained members - within just 16 days of its foundation, 6 million Poles had joined (Garton Ash, 1999, p.80).

### *Solidarity and community*

Solidarity developed in a unique and specific manner, arising as it did out of a widespread social movement, which included not only workers, but intellectuals, students, peasants and wider families. The central institutions of nascent Solidarity were the so-called Inter-Factory Strike Committees (*Międzyzakładowe Komissii Strajkowe* or MKSs) which acted at a local and regional scale to coordinate the demands of strikers before the Gdańsk Agreement.<sup>1</sup> As Bivand notes, these MKSs, which arose throughout the country, were explicitly local organisations which reflected “local abilities, including knowledge of local informal contact networks (for example, parishes) which could be harnessed by local people taking initiatives in their own interests” (Bivand, 1983, p.399). The legalisation and consolidation of Solidarity after August 1980 saw the conversion of the MKSs into Founding Committees (*Komitety Założycielskie*, KZs) which maintained a strong local and regional structure, depending as before on inter-factory coordination at the district and urban scale.

At a local scale, Solidarity took on the roles of much more than a trade union. Bivand argues that its spatial construction meant that the local organisation was regarded by the people “as an agency to whom they could turn in pursuit of their rights in any kind of conflict with the State and its officials” (Bivand, 1983, p.402). MacDonald (1983) adds that Solidarity came to replace the Party as the social centre. In this way, the nascent Solidarity organisations and their leaderships became community leaders expected to act in spheres well beyond the workplace.<sup>2</sup> This role was exaggerated still further after the declaration of Martial Law in December 1981 and the subsequent criminalisation of Solidarity. The mid-1980s were years of incredible hardship in Poland, and during these years, especially in the industrial bastions of Solidarity, the illegal union became a point of community focus. In the absence of visible central leadership, either from Solidarity or even from the Communist government, local Solidarity units were forced to provide local leadership in resistance, both active and passive, against Martial Law. These activities and the demands placed on Solidarity to act throughout the community would seem to suggest that it never really developed as a traditional trade union, representing workers' interests in the workplace.

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<sup>1</sup> For more on August 1980 and the history of *Solidarność* (Solidarity), see MacShane, 1981; Laba, 1991; Kennedy, 1991; Ascherson, 1981; Ruane, 1982 and Touraine et al., 1983.

<sup>2</sup> These issues are developed further in their historical context in Stenning, 2000b.

A further round of strikes and protests in 1988, in very different international circumstances, led to the re-emergence of Solidarity and its participation in Round Table talks with the government. The Round Table talks themselves led to semi-free elections which saw Solidarity's conversion from banned trade union to something resembling a political party. In elections in June 1989 Solidarity-sponsored candidates won all but one of the seats they possibly could have done and formed east central Europe's first post-war non-Communist government.

#### *After 1989: the state of the unions*

For Solidarity, the 1990s were primarily a period of fragmentation as different factions established parties and alliances of their own under new leaders (Garton Ash, 1999) and as the rump Solidarity progressively narrowed its base of potential support (Wenzel, 1998). The trade union now forms the core of a centre-right coalition - Electoral Action Solidarity (Akcja Wyborcza Solidarność, AWS) - established in June 1996 and although AWS itself claims that a trade union activist "will have to decide between work in the trade union or work for the political party" (<http://www.aws.org.pl/ie/aboutaws.htm>), the distinction is not as clear as the AWS centre might hope. Indeed, as Wenzel notes, AWS "is a party in the service of a union" (1998, p.155), albeit one which, as we will see below, is rarely seen to be representing workers' interests (see also Ost, 2000).

The historical context of Poland's labour organisations leads some commentators to conclude that unions play an important, perhaps even pivotal, role in Poland's post-communist politics. Whilst Solidarity is a major partner in the AWS coalition, the post-communist OPZZ (*Ogólnopolskie Porozumienie Związków Zawodowych*; All-Poland Agreement of Trade Unions) has forged a close relationship with Poland's post-communist party, the SLD (*Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej*; Democratic Left Alliance). Such a close relationship between unions and political parties is not unusual, but seems to be taken further in Poland than in many other instances. Indeed, some argue that Poland is ruled by a 'unionocracy' ['związkokracja'] - union leaders often dominate the boards of major Polish companies and rather than simply supporting the activities of Polish political parties, actually fulfil major roles within them, directing policy and shaping economic agendas (Pańków, 1999; Ost, 2000). Others suggest that Poland's labour organisations have been incredibly successful in recent years in gaining concessions through strike action and actions short of a strike (Osa, 1998).

Nevertheless, against these pictures of union strength, repeated research and social surveys demonstrate that, as elsewhere, union membership is plummeting and popular support for union activity and union leaderships is very low (Gardawski et al., 1999). The national Centre for Social Opinion Research (CBOS) records that just 17% of the workforce belongs to a trade union, down from around 60% in the early 1990s (CBOS, 2000a; Kozek, 2000). Trade union membership varies, of

course, by sector with membership amongst state workers being much higher than privately-employed workers or those in mixed-ownership firms. The majority of state-owned firms have active unions, though they are still more common in large firms (i.e. those with over 200 employees). Just 6% of privately-owned firms have active unions. Fundamentally, trade unions presence can be explained by size of employment, type of ownership and share of foreign capital. A small, privately-owned firm with foreign capital is extremely unlikely to support union activity (Kozek, 2000).

What is perhaps more disturbing are assessments of union effectivity and value. According to CBOS, just 49% of union members see union activity as essential and only 17% see it as effective. 72% of union members believe that unions are ineffective in defending the interests of workers. 44% of those surveyed by CBOS felt that no union represented the interests of people like them. The picture for Solidarity was even gloomier - CBOS research exploring attitudes towards Solidarity twenty years after its dramatic birth concluded that popular opinions of the organisation have got steadily worse (CBOS, 2000b). Whilst 69% of those interviewed saw Solidarity's historical role as positive, 74% believe Solidarity has changed for the worse over the past 20 years.<sup>3</sup> 67% of those surveyed feel that present-day Solidarity serves its leaders above society as a whole or even its members. The only positive sign within CBOS's assessment of the union movement was a growth in new unions independent of both Solidarity and OPZZ. A number of such unions emerged from professional organisations in the course of public sector reforms to coordinate industrial action in the face of what was perceived as OPZZ and Solidarity complicity. Though still small in absolute terms membership and support for these unions - for example, among nurses and midwives, doctors and anaesthetists - is growing fast, exemplified by the recent widespread strikes and protests carried out by nurses in pursuance of a pay rise and condemned by the nurses' Solidarity (Hardy and Stenning, 2001).

It is against this background of strong union leadership and high levels of politicisation yet declining membership and growing perceptions of irrelevance that I explore the nature of union activity in Nowa Huta.

### ***Nowa Huta***

Nowa Huta presents a particularly interesting case in which to explore the issues of union activity and the wider relevance of labour politics. The town lies just to the east of Kraków in southern Poland (and is in fact administratively part of Kraków) and was founded in 1949 as home to Poland's new integrated steelworks (Stenning, 2000). It was consciously constructed as a town of labour, in which

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<sup>3</sup> There is surprisingly little variation in these figures when past and current party and union membership is taken into account. 'Communists' viewed Solidarity favourably historically, whilst Solidarity supporters were similarly disenchanted with its contemporary activities.

workers, their workplaces and institutions were accorded primary importance. Under socialism, labour and Party organisations were central to the town's development with plans to physically centre Stalinist union and Party headquarters in the town's main square. Though these plans were dropped with the inclusion of Nowa Huta in Kraków's administrative hierarchies, the centrality of labour politics in the town was not reduced. This activity was of course focused on the town's central, and to all intents and purposes, sole workplace - the Lenin steelworks (now Huta Sendzimira, HTS) - where both the Party (PZPR) unit and the main workplace union were the largest such institutions in the country (Choma et al., 1999). For these reasons, Nowa Huta was seen as a Party bastion, a countervailing force for bourgeois, intellectual Kraków<sup>4</sup> and workers were used on more than one occasion to quell 'rebellion' in Kraków.

Nevertheless, in an apparent paradox of history (Gil, 1997), Nowa Huta itself soon began to display signs of dissent. What began as a struggle for a church in Nowa Huta gathered strength, nourished by growing dissent across Poland, and developed into a fully-fledged, deeply-felt and widespread opposition movement (Kozłowska, 1997; Gut, 1997; Stenning, 2000a). From the late 1970s onwards, Nowa Huta became known as a bastion not of communism but of opposition to the regime. The steelworkers and their families followed the Gdańsk shipbuilders into protest and strike action and Nowa Huta developed a network of independent unions, united within an interfactory commission and converted into a Founding Committee (MKZ) after the Gdańsk Agreement. Throughout 1980, the steelworks' founding committee "fulfilled the most important role in the process of creating and building the union [i.e. Solidarity] in the Małopolska<sup>5</sup> region" (Choma et al., p.118). The Kraków MKZ, though incorporating 160 workplaces, was dominated by steelworkers and the steelworks became the site of the MKZ's weekly meetings. In an ironic echo of earlier Party and union membership, Huta Lenina's Solidarity organisation, with 38,000 members, was the largest in the country.

As I have already suggested, Solidarity's activities were rooted in a number of communities whose activists dominated the national scene and provided a vital focus at the local scale. In Nowa Huta, this became ever truer through the Martial Law years when repeatedly the community rallied in support of Solidarity and in opposition to the regime (Stenning, 2000b). Solidarity's association with Nowa Huta was second only perhaps to its connection with the Baltic ports - the town was the site of frequent street battles between activists and the security forces and provided considerable leadership in southern Poland. At the local scale, the strength of dissent and the brutality of the regime's response

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<sup>4</sup> Indeed, this is popularly mooted, and with some reason, as one of the main motivations for the new steelworks' location in Kraków's hinterland.

<sup>5</sup> Małopolska (or Little Poland) is the administrative region centred on Kraków.

strengthened the sense of community in Nowa Huta and broke down many of the antagonisms between Nowa Huta and neighbouring Kraków. Nowa Huta was bound together by a particular geography of protest which incorporated the steelworks, the town's two churches and the central square with its statue of Lenin, by the merging of the political and the personal (especially through the deaths of two protestors) and by the solidarity (little 's') forged amongst the residents to provide money, food, second-hand clothes and moral support to the families of activists in prison or in hiding. As elsewhere, Solidarity's underground strength in Nowa Huta was founded on alliance of workers with their families - including students and children - and other local organisations, most especially of priests and intellectuals.

During the difficult years of Martial Law and its aftermath, when economic crisis and political stalemate led to shortages in even the most basic products - both industrial and consumer - Solidarity's underground incarnation came to play a critical role in Nowa Huta's daily life. The organisations on which everyday life had earlier been centred - the Party and the official union - suffered dramatic losses of legitimacy. Even committed Party members publicly declared their intention of leaving (Choma et al., 1999, p.39). In all, between 1979 and 1983, the steelworks' Party unit lost almost half its members. The official union was replaced by new, apparently independent unions which embarked on a recruitment drive in the Martial Law years but suffered at the hands of Solidarity strength. When Solidarity arose again in April 1988 "the steel workers' strike in Nowa Huta ushered in a new stage of political changes in Poland" (Nowak, 1992, pp.138-9). The demands of Huta Lenina's workers set the standards for claims across the country and began a phase of protest which culminated the Round Table talks of 1989. However, as in the rest of the country, Solidarity of 1989 in Nowa Huta was a very different organisation.

### ***Unions and community today***<sup>6</sup>

#### *Union membership*

Eight unions are currently represented in Huta Sendzimir (HTS), which now has a workforce of approximately 9000 workers. The two largest are NSZZ Solidarność with approximately 3,500 members and NSZZ Pracowników HTS SA, allied to OPZZ, with 2,800 members. NSZZ Solidarność '80 HTS SA (a splinter group of Solidarność created in 1990 to re-create the Solidarity of 1980) has approximately 600 members and the Autonomous Steelworkers Trade Union (Autonomiczny Hutniczy Związek Zawodowy) approximately 200. Other smaller unions represent particular parts of the workforce, such as engineers and young workers and there are also a number of professional associations active in the steelworks. The picture of union activity is complemented by the

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<sup>6</sup> The following sections are based on interviews and other research carried out in Kraków and Nowa Huta between 1998 and the present day, funded by the HSBC Holdings of the RGS-IBG and the ESRC.

involvement of the same unions in the firms spun-off from the steelworks in the process of restructuring. Trade unionists in those firms form part of the same union branch as workers from the parent company. In most cases, membership in spin-off firms adds another 50% plus to the core steelworks' membership. In addition to these employed workers, every union also has pensioner-members (both old-age and disability) and laid-off workers who have the right to union membership for the first six months of redundancy. As I will outline below, these non-working members are critical to the activities of the unions.

All of the unions have, up till now, maintained levels of membership in the face of a reduced workforce since there were no compulsory redundancies until 2000. Membership has remained steady within the steelworks, largely as a result of fears further redundancy and although the workforce of the steelworks has been reduced to about 9,000 (from an all-time high of 43,000), this has either been through retirement or through the employment of workers in spin-off firms - and both these constituencies maintain their union membership. What has clearly changed is the make-up of union membership - a significant percentage of each unions' membership now consists of non-workers.

There is a considerable level of cooperation between the individual unions, notwithstanding some expressed antagonism particularly on the part of Solidarity '80, and all were involved in the signing of an agreement with management in 1999 over the further restructuring (that is, reduction) of employment (*Porozumienie*, 1999) which agreed terms for early retirement and voluntary redundancy. In the light of their particular conflictual histories, it is very interesting to witness the high level of cooperation between Solidarity and the post-communist NSZZ Pracowników HTS.<sup>7</sup>

#### *The defence of workers' interests: in the workplace...*

All of the unions still declare the defence of workers' interests as their primary function. In the early years of post-1989 transformation, the central focus of activity was ensuring an increase in wages. From an environment in which steelworkers were amongst some of the most highly paid employees in the country (Kennedy, 1991), wages fell to incredibly low levels. However, it soon became clear that the real battle was in fact for the survival of Huta Sendzimir itself. Solidarity '80 argue that in 1991 management was conspiring with Solidarity as a local union and as a government to close Huta Sendzimir. Although Solidarity '80 reacted to these events with a series of increasingly radical protests (work to rule, hunger strikes etc.), they soon came to focus their attention on ensuring the modernisation of the plant and playing an active role, with the other unions, in shaping the restructuring process.

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<sup>7</sup> Gąciarz (1999) confirms the high level of cooperation between workplace unions in research in a range of Polish enterprises.

Every union at Huta Sendzmira now supports the restructuring policies of management and accepts that compulsory redundancies are now inevitable. This stance reflects David Ost's findings that most union leaders support market reform, the prerogative of management and a limited role for employees (Ost, 200, p.5). Ost argues that union leaders seem to be acting against the interests of their members - a view blatantly and almost unashamedly represented by the vice-president of NSZZ Pracowników who stated: "on the quiet we support the management of the steelworks, although out loud we say that they act wrongly". Unionists from Solidarity, Solidarity '80 and NSZZ Pracowników all stressed that modernisation, especially technological modernisation, was critical to the survival of the steelworks, and that some resulting job loss was a price worth paying in order to avoid the threat of total closure. The almost complete dependence of the town of Nowa Huta on the steelworks raises the spectre of social and economic devastation if closure becomes a reality - "we began to fight for the existence of Huta Sendzmira, because the majority of us live in Nowa Huta ... it will be some 300,000-person slum" (President, Solidarity '80). In some ways then, the union focus shifted from the defence of individual workers to the defence of Nowa Huta as a community. In this way the unions' adversaries were no longer management, who also have interests vested in HTS's survival, but other steelworks, foreign investors and the government in Warsaw who had the power to threaten or secure HTS's long-term survival. In all of the discussions of HTS's future, even with the vocal and more radical Solidarity '80, the interests of the unions and management were seen to coincide. In every case, 'we' meant 'all of us at Huta Sendzmira' - we must defend our steelworks.

*...and beyond?*

For these reasons, influence and activity beyond the workplace - in the centres of local and national government - have been central to the function of the workplace unions. As I have already suggested unionists, especially from the two major unions - Solidarity and NSZZ Pracowników - have very strong connections beyond the workplace at all scales of government and in their respective union hierarchies. A string of Solidarity-supported MPs from HTS, including the current union president, Władysław Kielian, have been elected to the Polish sejm since 1990 as have at least two NSZZ Pracowników activists, including their current president, Janusz Lemański. NSZZ Pracowników also sponsors three members of Kraków city council (which also includes the president and vice-president of the regional union branch) and is supporting the SLD candidacy of one of its members in the forthcoming parliamentary elections. The current AWS chair of the city council was one of the union's founding members in Nowa Huta (and national activist) in 1980/1. NSZZ Pracowników also has members on various district councils across the city and is committed to supporting its members political careers from the lowest level upwards. A review of the list of Kraków city and district

councillors highlights a very close intertwining of union and party politics, and a disproportionately important role, furthermore, for current and former steelworkers.

In some ways, these links between workplace unions and local, regional and national political bodies would suggest that the unionists have useful contacts and influence at the level at which decisions regarding HTS and its future are being made. HTS has not yet been privatised - it remains a state-owned enterprise and its future is determined largely by governmental decisions. Both NSZZ Pracowników and Solidarity recorded how they, often together with HTS management, have had over the years a series of meetings with ministers and prime ministers over the fate of the steelworks. However, as Władysław Kielian himself has noted, balancing his two roles of trade unionist and AWS MP by negotiating the needs of workers with the wider demands of a Polish government committed to the privatisation and restructuring of the steel industry is not an easy task (Rainnie and Hardy, 1998, p.309). Furthermore the political strength of the HTS unions is mirrored in other major industrial enterprises. Solidarity '80 persistently bemoan the favouring of Huta Katowice over Huta Sendzimir, which they argue has no economic grounds. Huta Katowice, Poland's other major steelworks, is bankrupt yet still seems to be garnering more attention from potential investors than HTS. This is, Solidarity '80 argue, because the current industry minister is a former shop steward from Huta Katowice.

It would also seem that the involvement of steelworks' unionists in local government has had little impact on the fate of HTS. Repeated applications to the city council for assistance in funding (or raising funding) for modernisation have fallen on deaf ears. The presence of HTS workers and former activists from Nowa Huta has done little to counteract the persistent representation of HTS and Nowa Huta as little more than a thorn in Kraków's side. The city council has been slow to initiate a policy for Kraków-East (where Nowa Huta lies) and has been even slower to commit funds or time to ensuring the district's future. The president of Solidarity '80 was, as usual, particularly vocal on this matter. The city council prejudice against Nowa Huta, he argued, had even led the council to oppose investments in the steelworks which would have significantly improved the city's environmental standards.

The historical strength of labour organisations in Nowa Huta is reflected also in the presence of the branch unions within national union hierarchies. I have already noted that under socialism and then in the Solidarity years, the official union branch and Solidarity unit at the steelworks were respectively the largest branch organisations in the country. Notwithstanding the decline from its mass membership in the early 1980s, the HTS branch of Solidarity remains the largest in the country. NSZZ Pracowników, meanwhile, acts as something of a 'forge' for national union activism. The

branch vice-president suggested that negotiating and surviving the battles and experiences of HTS from its years on the brink of bankruptcy meant that officers were well-prepared for activism in Warsaw. Indeed the last two national Presidents of OPZZ, the all-Poland congress to which NSZZ Pracowników is affiliated, were former HTS steelworkers and branch presidents.

Whilst it has been suggested, mostly by Solidarity '80, that these political connections beyond the workplace have done little to halt the processes of restructuring and job loss at HTS, three things should be noted. Firstly, notwithstanding Solidarity '80's complaints, the restructuring of the steelworks has in fact been gradual and, up till now, relatively painless. A mass redundancy programme was only activated in 1999 and there still haven't been any compulsory redundancies. Until 1999, workers were guaranteed jobs in the spin-off firms and since that point all those taking early retirement or voluntary redundancy have been given, in Polish terms, very generous levels of payment. Even Solidarity '80 concede that in no other major Polish enterprise have compulsory redundancies been avoided so successfully. Secondly, that the processes of restructuring have been implemented so smoothly is perhaps a reflection of the support of union activists for market-led reform in the steelworks. In this sense, although Solidarity '80 may have complained about unfair treatment from both Kraków and Warsaw, the restructuring of the plant has, in fact, almost exactly fitted Solidarity and NSZZ Pracowników's desires. Both accepted the management's call for modernisation and hence the inevitability of redundancies and simply hoped that these would be carried out with minimal pain for their members. Even Solidarity '80 fundamentally accepted the market-driven reforms but demanded greater investment in HTS before it was privatised. Thirdly, it has to be considered, as apparently the majority of Poles believe (CBOS, 2000a,b), that, in fact, unionist's involvement in local and national politics was only ever about personal promotion and was never focused on the championing of workers' interests.

#### *After the defence, beyond the workplace?*

The corollary of the first two points - that unionists supported restructuring and focused on controlling its pace and depth - implies that one of the unions' primary functions has been ensuring the welfare of those workers sacrificed in the name of modernisation and the long-term survival of the steelworks and Nowa Huta. The level of this activity is perhaps testimony to contradict the third point. It would seem that although unionists' political involvement at the local and national scales was not successful in halting the radical 'downsizing' of Huta Sendzimira, it was much more successful in guaranteeing a 'soft landing' for workers after the inevitable job cuts. If restructuring was inevitable, and everybody seems to think it was, had we not better be prepared? The clearest, and most formal, example of this is the negotiations over the social packet offered to those workers taking early retirement and voluntary redundancy. It is widely recognised, to the extent of jealousy on the part of other industries and other

steel plants, that the HTS unions managed to achieve incredibly strong redundancy and retirement packages. Those leaving the plant voluntarily receive a one-off payment of up to 30,000zł (approximately £5000 or \$7500)<sup>8</sup> plus financial and other assistance in establishing their own businesses or in retraining for new employment.

This national agreement (which covers the whole of the Polish steel industry but supplemented by additional finance offered by Huta Sendzimira's management locally) is coupled with a very wide range of formal and informal assistance provided by the unions, in cooperation with a range of local organisations.

Each union has, within its branch structure, a social fund which offers financial assistance to members in a variety of ways. Although some of this is financed by regular membership dues, both Solidarity and NSZZ Pracowników also fund their social help through their for-profit activity, on the basis of the firms spun-off from HTS to the unions in the process of restructuring. All profits from these firms are dedicated to the statutory goals of the union, allowing the unions to pay unemployed workers up to 6 months assistance. These social help organisations also offer assistance to both employees and former employees for, for example, the purchase of medicines, the cost of sending children on holiday and short-term loans for weddings, housing renovations and so on.

Solidarity's social fund has however grown well beyond the confines of the union and now exists as a humanitarian NGO offering assistance across the region (see, <http://free.polbox.pl/k/krhhts/tsp.html>). The so-called *Towarzystwo Solidarnej Pomocy* (TSP; literally, the Society of Solid Help, but the name has greater connotations in Poland/Polish - not least because its logo mirrors Solidarity's well-known red paint logo) began its work as a 'subcontractor' to the union providing holiday camps for the children of union members but also administered and redistributed donated medicines to ill people through an *apteka darów*.<sup>9</sup> In the last two years, the redistribution of medicines and medical equipment has completely overtaken any other function and the activities of the TSP have expanded dramatically. It coordinates donations of medicines and medical equipment (such as wheelchairs, walking sticks and hospital beds) from, primarily France and Germany, and loans the equipment for home use for a nominal fee. The Society no longer limits its assistance to steelworkers and their families,<sup>10</sup> but much does still flow to this group. Steelworkers and their families are almost

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<sup>8</sup> One pound currently equals approximately 6zł; one US dollar roughly 4zł.

<sup>9</sup> *Apteki darów*, or gift chemists, which redistribute drugs donated from western countries, emerged in Poland during the 1980s when state supplies failed to meet the needs of patients.

<sup>10</sup> The TSP also sends supplies of medicine, equipment and clothing to Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Belarus and Lithuania.

guaranteed help and the Society's office are located adjacent to the steelworks' health centre.<sup>11</sup> The Society is funded entirely on the basis of donations and the small income from equipment loan and staffed by volunteers from amongst Huta Sendzimira's workers and pensioners. From a birth out of Solidarity, the TSP now sees its role as serving the union, rather than the reverse and receives no income from the union. It also receives no money from the steelworks themselves because its leaders consider it 'unethical' to take money from another organisation in dire financial straits.

The TSP still fulfils many of the original roles of a union social fund. It subsidises school meals, provides Christmas and Easter dinners and other hot meals for those in need in the winter, donates Christmas presents, clothing and food packages, and will also pay bills for those in desperate need. It however tries to avoid direct cash donations "because money may be used it two ways"<sup>12</sup> and on the very rare occasions when it does give cash, the recipient has, for example, eight hours to return with proof that the bill has been paid. This is just one example of the 'morality' which surrounded the activity of the TSP.<sup>13</sup> The TSP does recognise that it is not well-placed to assess need and cooperates with the city's Centre for Social Help in identifying 'deserving' recipients. The Society was however adamant that it offered help to all those in need, and did not discriminate between union members and non-members. "We're not", the Society's president maintained, "in the business of dividing society into us and them."

The work of these union organisations is complemented by the activities of the so-called *Fundacja Ochrony Zdrowia i Pomocy Społeczności* (loosely translated, the Foundation of Health Protection and Social Help) established at the end of 1992 by Solidarity, NSZZ Pracowników and the steelworks' management. The initial aim of the foundation was to establish a medical centre for employees, pensioners and their families in the light of the reform of health service in Poland. It could not however ensure long term funding for such a venture and has since 1993 focused its activity on 1) buying specialist medical equipment for hospitals and clinics in Nowa Huta and 2) offering workers and their families individual financial help in the purchase of special medical treatment and expensive medicines. The Foundation is financed through voluntary donations from workers' pay, donations from the steelworks and fundraising events. In its early years over 5000 workers donated regular amounts from their monthly pay packets, though this has fallen to 2000 as employment in the steelworks has fallen. Since 1993, the Foundation has given individual assistance to 360 people (in

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<sup>11</sup> Following the restructuring of the steelworks and the reform of the Polish health sector, the health centre is no longer formally attached to the steelworks but current and former workers still receive free health care. Their families no longer do (*Gazeta Wyborcza*, 19.7.96).

<sup>12</sup> Although it was not actually spoken, the very clear inference of this was that money might be spent on alcohol.

<sup>13</sup> The TSP president also described his society's holiday camps as 'not ordinary'. When asked to expand, he explained that there was 'a spiritual element', that is the camps are Catholic, which differentiates them from the socialist-era camps, characterised by 'cold upbringing'.

amounts ranging from less than 100zł to 2000zł) and purchased a considerable range of medical equipment for Nowa Huta's hospitals, mostly for the above-mentioned health centre, located adjacent to the steelworks. The Foundation repeatedly turns down applications through lack of funds.

In addition to these sources of tangible financial assistance, the unions offer ex-employees, pensioners and their families the use of professional services, such as lawyers, at the union's disposal in order to deal with problems with, for example, the payment of pensions and unemployment benefit. Whilst pensioners are entitled to life membership of the union, on payment of annual dues,<sup>14</sup> ex-employees are only entitled to union membership and assistance for the first six months of unemployment. During this six months, the unemployed are given advice and assistance in retraining and in seeking new employment. Solidarity and NSZZ Pracowników have negotiated with the management that all new employers in Nowa Huta<sup>15</sup> manage the recruitment process through the steelworks' personnel division in order to facilitate ex-steelworkers' applications for new jobs. That unemployed workers are only entitled to six months assistance from their unions (and not much more from state authorities) suggests problems. As I have already suggested, redundancies are a relatively new phenomena in Nowa Huta and it is only now that problems relating to unemployment are beginning to emerge there. Those who took voluntary redundancy earliest tended to be those with qualifications and concrete opportunities for new employment. The most recent phases of redundancy have however been characterised by more difficulty in finding new work, not least because the Kraków labour market has worsened in recent years (and not simply as a result of HTS redundancies). Moreover, Solidarity '80 claim that many of those who left in the last eighteen months for new jobs are once again facing unemployment. Polish labour law states that three short-term (9 month) contracts must imply a permanent contract thus employees are often laid off after two nine-month contracts. This leaves a group of workers, unemployed, without money (having spent their redundancy payments in the last eighteen months) and reluctant to ask unions for assistance for fear of being judged for taking the pay-off. As compulsory redundancies become a reality in the next few months, the question of assistance and support for the unemployed will become critical.

One group of ex-workers who receive, necessarily, considerable levels of assistance through the unions and other local organisations are Huta Sendzimir's pensioners. Because the steelworks were founded in 1949 with a predominantly young and new workforce, recent years have seen a large cohort of workers retire. The promotion of early retirement as a means of reducing the workforce and relatively high levels of invalidity in such heavy industry have increased this flow from the

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<sup>14</sup> In the case of NSZZ Pracowników, union dues equal 0.5% of a member's pension.

<sup>15</sup> The steelworks are surrounded by a 'protective zone' in which, until recently, economic activity was prohibited. This zone is now managed by the East Kraków Development Agency and a special economic zone which are supposed to be actively attracting new employment.

steelworks. In 1998, HTS had 24,000 registered pensioners (both old-age and disability) and in the last three years this is likely to have grown. Thus, today Nowa Huta supports three times as many retired steelworkers as employed. Most pensions are tied to average wages so, though low, do provide for a bearable standard of living. Those who retired before 1995, and particularly before the early 1990s, are much worse off, and it is not unusual to find pensioners with an income of just 400zł (around £66/US\$100) a month after 30 years of employment.

The focus of help to pensioners is the Centre for Old Age and Disability Pensioners [*Ośrodek Emerytów i Rencistów*] funded by the steelworks through its Social Fund<sup>16</sup> but managed jointly with Solidarity, NSZZ Pracowników and a third union, the Autonomous Steelworkers Trade Union. The Centre exists to provide a variety of services to pensioners and their spouses - it has funds to distribute to pensioners in need, it acts as a collection and redistribution point for in kind benefits, it acts as an advocate for pensioners and employs a lawyer to assist pensioners in their pension claims and, perhaps most importantly, acts as a social centre for pensioners. The President of NSZZ Pracowników's pensioners' section who sits on the board of the Centre felt that this final aspect, though a sideline to their main activities, was absolutely critical for pensioners who often find themselves alone after years of working with a collective. The Centre occupies a number of rooms in a workers' hotel in Nowa Huta (owned by the steelworks) and board members are always available for consultation three afternoons a week. In addition to these regular meetings, the Centre organises Christmas and Easter parties for those most in need.

Within the framework of the Centre, each union also offers a range of activities and services. In a continuation of its socialist era practice, NSZZ Pracowników arranges low-cost, or free, excursions, parties and summer holidays (to the mountains, the coast or abroad). It has however also established a network of assistance and support which appears to play a critical role within the community. The union board is supported by 40 elected activists, known as *męża zaufania* which translates literally as 'husbands of trust' but would be better interpreted as something like 'a point of contact'. Each neighbourhood of Nowa Huta<sup>17</sup> is served by one or two of these *męża zaufania* who visit the union's pensioners on a regular basis to offer assistance and advice and to feedback to the union board on the conditions of pensioners and their families. The board and the *męża zaufania* also coordinate, through this regular contact with pensioners and their families, a kind of second hand exchange market. The union will collect old TVs, radios etc. from members, will have them repaired and reconditioned by

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<sup>16</sup> This is a compulsory fund, stipulated in Polish labour law, which is related to the size of the workforce and administered jointly by the unions and management.

<sup>17</sup> Nowa Huta, as a planned town, is structured around distinct neighbourhood units.

workers and will redistribute them to needy families. It also redistributes donated second-hand clothing and food parcels bought with union funds.

All of this activity is supported by a range of other organisations. NSZZ Pracowników's weekly feedback meetings are attended also by representatives of the city and district council, the health service, the social insurance organisation and MPs, who, it is said, willingly attend and respond to the union's requests and queries. Although the initiative in assistance rarely comes from these actors, the relationship between the union and the wider organisation works well. The Pensioners' Centre also received considerable support from the steelworks' management. Not only do the steelworks fund the Centre itself but frequently when the enterprise's social division finds itself with excess funds or vouchers [*bony towarowe*] it gives them to the pensioners. HTS is seen to really care about its pensioners - the relationship, according to the President of NSZZ Pracowników's pensioners section, is not simply a formal acknowledgement. The Social Division of HTS is in constant cooperation with the unions and the Pensioners' Centre.

### ***Discussion***

There are a number of themes which can be drawn out in discussion to link the experiences of Nowa Huta to the wider patterns of trade union activity in Poland and beyond. Perhaps one of the most obvious and recurring issues is the tight connection between unions and management at Huta Sendzimira. In every sphere - fighting for the plant's survival, negotiating redundancy terms for the steel industry, providing assistance after redundancy and retirement - it is incredibly difficult to ascertain where the unions stop and the management starts. Most of the most important initiatives are co-funded and co-managed by management and at least the largest unions and the steelworks' Social Fund finances a variety of complementary services. The steelworks' Social Division fully acknowledges and tries to meet the needs of its workers, pensioners and former employees. This cooperation, and the overall level of social assistance offered in Nowa Huta, is rooted in, and reflects, a recognition of the absolute centrality of HTS and the welfare of its 'dependents' to the economic and social situation of Nowa Huta as a whole. Many of the town's actors (within the steelworks and beyond) are proud of the absence of what Poles call 'social pathologies' - crime, visible and crippling poverty and other social problems - which are beginning to afflict other parts of urban Poland (see, for example, *Krakowskie Forum Rozwoju*, 1994; Sadecki, 1994) and still fear the 'catastrophe' that could result from the steelworks' restructuring (see, for example, *Gazeta Krakowa*, 24.9.94). Although neither the unions nor the management have been able to fight off the 'downsizing' of the steelworks in terms of both production and employment, their alliance testifies to a considerable commitment to the Nowa Huta community.

Nevertheless, these activities and the collusion with management does raise questions concerning the role of unions. In Nowa Huta, each of the unions acts more as a social movement, almost a social worker, rather than a traditional trade union. NSZZ Pracowników's pensioner president described the union and the Pensioners' Centre as a 'social cell [socjalna komórka]' at the centre of a network of assistance, advice and financial help. This social work is coupled with party political activity at the urban and national scales. David Ost argues that Polish trade unions have been weakened by their loss of focus on workplaces (Ost, 2000), yet though their collusion with management can easily be criticised, it is clear that the unions in HTS are fulfilling vital roles in the community, and not just amongst workers. Whilst UK unions are seeking to broaden their attraction by representing non-traditional workers in traditional communities (Tufts, 1998; Kent, 2000; Sadler and Thompson, 1999), Polish industrial unions are creating a 'community unionism' by supporting as many (if not more) members beyond the (any?) workplace as within. This 'community unionism' is not however entirely new. As I have already outlined, both the state-sponsored unions and Solidarity have long histories of providing (access to) social services, financial assistance and crisis help. Trade unions in Poland have long since fulfilled roles beyond that of the traditional defence of workers.

Notwithstanding the clear necessity of the social assistance provided by unions in Nowa Huta, there are undoubtedly a range of problems with the unions fulfilling these roles. Many of the services provided by the unions are provided in the absence, or inadequacy, of state provision. The state, for instance, should be financing essential medical equipment for hospitals and patients, it should be paying subsistence pensions and providing unemployment benefits adequate to pay for school meals, utility bills and Christmas presents. That these services are having to be provided by non-governmental organisations is not only scandalous but also allows service providers to impose conditionalities and tie assistance to union membership or religious belief, for example. The reform of government expenditures and the public sector imposed by 'the international community' and the demands of EU accession clearly hinder the state's ability to respond to social needs. What is perhaps still more disturbing is that in Nowa Huta and in many other similar industrial communities, real hardship is yet to bite. Mass redundancies have only just been implemented and have coincided with the reform of the health sector, which is creating confusion and appears to be limiting access to state services still further (Kolarska-Bobińska, 2000). Any further redundancies, which will be compulsory, threaten to end Nowa Huta's avoidance of 'social pathology'.

In this context, the unions' reactive responses to restructuring have left the community vulnerable. Although the unions negotiated the passage of restructuring within the steelworks, they have been less active in demanding, from local and national government or from the steelworks themselves, a proactive response to the needs of Nowa Huta, through, for example, the creation of new workplaces,

infrastructural developments to support investment or the formation of an economic and social policy for Kraków-East. Paradoxically, despite the critical importance of labour organisations in Nowa Huta at every stage in its history, shaping and contesting the community's form throughout Polish socialism, and the strong role of national unions in shaping political and economic priorities under post-socialism, Nowa Huta's unions have in recent years failed to act as "an active and conscious participant" (Sadler and Thompson, 1999, p.7) in shaping the future economic development of the community.

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