

**XII National Session of Delegates of NSZZ Solidarnosc
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THE INTERVENTION OF EDMOND MAIRE
General Secretary of the CFTD
(the Confederation of French Trade Unions)
from 1971 till 1988

Gdańsk, August 1980, the dawn of the “Solidarność” history was soon to become an important event in the world’s history.

The strikes in the shipyards were well justified. We had already watched together with Polish emigrants, and the Poles who were in France only temporarily, the events of 1956, the repression of 1970 in Gdańsk, and the persecutions in Ursus and Radom in 1976. What is more, we identified ourselves with the values like justice, truth, and liberty which stirred our actions. And we could find ourselves in your choice of the trade union’s freedom as the way for the future progress: your demand of the right to exist, of the freedom of speech, and the right of collective Solidarity.

As early as in August 1980 we sent our plenipotentiary, Claude Sardais, an activist of CFTD to support symbolically your actions. Then the Polish social movement developed. Deeply asleep for decades of dictatorship and bureaucracy, under the ashes of burnt-out ideals, merely glowing flare of freedom burst into flames. We had never dared to expect that.

The persistence of everyday propaganda did not manage to suppress the relentless aspiration for emancipation, present in the heart of every person, and every nation, in Poland in particular. Sooner or later the oppressed peoples get their freedom and express their deep aspirations.

From the very beginning we felt very close to that independent Union which emerged that early in eastern Europe, in the zone of the Soviet influence. The Union took up a great risk, and its weaknesses seemed enormous when compared to the power of the Polish communist authorities. The stakes were high.

If the Polish social movement were able to survive, it would be the beginning of the collapse of the communist world based upon the rejection of pluralism and party dictatorship.

We watched closely the Hungarian revolution of 1956, the Prague Spring in May 1968, and earlier strikes in Poland. Each time they ended with persecutions, and the subsequent ‘normalisation’ suppressed further attempts. And once again the flame of freedom and hope burst out in the east, in the country of limited sovereignty. We were feeling deeply the hazard threatening our friends from the Polish trade unions. We were trembling with hope during that Polish summer, and in the following months we shared the difficulties of the country, as close to us as our family, encountered on their way to freedom.

The stakes were really high, and further historical events confirmed that. This was the beginning of the collapse of the so called ‘peoples’ democracies. These were the stakes in the game that awakened the great historical break-through. But the odds were not decided upon yet, and the trade union movement was threatened with dispersion.

The strength of “Solidarność” during those initial eighteen months lied within the Union’s will to maintain absolute independence from the communist party and state authorities, rejecting any violence, and opening towards diversified points of view. It also consisted in its exceptional way of tightening ties between the worker and the intellectual,

in its unshaken will of fighting for independence and the possibility of putting oneself at the disposal for the benefit of the Polish nation.

CFDT is proud to be the first trade union organisation to support the Polish workers and the Polish social movement. In December, 1980 we came to articulate these mutual aspirations, addressing Lech Wałęsa, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, Bronisław Geremek and the other leaders of “Solidarność”. We promised our first, modest material aid: just a few duplicating machines, a few tons of paper. Later there were more transports with more concrete support from the regional and branch organisations of CFDT, and other trade union organisations. When after our participation in the 1st Congress of NSZZ “Solidarność” in October 1981 Lech Wałęsa came to Paris, I told him on behalf of all the French unionists that we “bear “Solidarność” in our hearts”.

As early as in the autumn of 1980 we sent detailed information about “Solidarność” to the unions from Italy, Japan, Spain, Netherlands, and to the ETUC – the European of Trade Union Confederation; we sent it also to the international trade union centres. International solidarity spread, which can be proved by the triumphant welcome of Lech Wałęsa and “Solidarność” at the annual International Labour Office conference in June, 1981 – an event which, actually, forced the Poland of Jaruzelski to back off from the institution.

The coup d'état of was received by us as the stab with a knife to “Solidarność” and the whole Polish nation. Trade unions from all over the world reacted violently against it. Informed at night, I watched with pleasure how well co-ordinated all the French trade unions were – but for the communist one: they violently reacted, and a few days later took up a decision of organising a solidarity strike in support of “Solidarność” and the Polish nation.

On 19th December, during our first meeting in Paris which preceded hundreds of meetings in various enterprises in the years to come, I used the following words: “I am appalled at the merciless persecutions which hit our Polish friends. We are anxious about the fate of the tens of thousands of activists detained in prisons, we are outraged by the cold strategy of the totalitarian authorities aimed at destruction of liberty.”

At the same time CFDT managed to invite a significant group of prominent intellectualists; Michael Foucault was responsible for the “Solidarność Support Fund”. We addressed our government to stop treating the coup d'état as an internal issue of Poland only.

Thanks to the pressure from the trade unions, the public opinion of western Europe became more aware; this led to numerous initiatives, such as freeing the prisoners and restoration of trade union freedom in Poland. Several million people in France were wearing “Solidarność” badges. These actions and exerted pressure were voiced all over the world by ICFTU and WCL.

The European Trade Union Confederation send its appeal to more than 40 million of its members in enterprises, in Polish embassies, and to governments.

As I said at that time, for us – citizens of Europe – was enough to put the ear to the ground to hear the patter of the boots of totalitarianism.

And later, during the whole period of the Polish winter, till the moment of re-legalisation of NSZZ “Solidarność”, which took place on 5th April 1989, the international trade union movement carried on its moral support, material aid, without suspending it even after Lech Wałęsa had been released from detention. The dictator plans to suppress “Solidarność” and its ten thousand members was an insult to the whole trade union movement. That is why the final success was perceived as catching a gulp of fresh air by all the people in the world who fight against injustice, to make the world more humane. For some – in China for instance – it meant keeping up the glow of the future liberation.

Of course, this exceptional mobilisation occurred outside Poland and could not play any determining role. It was “Solidarność” as such, in its exceptional unity, and universal activities that succeeded. But it was your fight, and it is you in particular who have the right to mention it on this solemn occasion.

Today you are living in a democratic country, together with its bright and dark sides. You are facing internal contradictions in the deeply changed political, economic, and social environment. There are still many issues to be solved, and you must know – I am sure – that your strength depends on the number of your members, on the convictions of your leaders, and on freedom of thought and operations of your Union.

The events lying ahead of you, i.e. your accession to the European Union – irrespective of the role of the State in this matter - take the mobilisation of the whole Polish society, and the ability to establish social dialogue with the authorities directing your policy and economy. The full engagement of the Polish nation into the process is a pre-requirement of the successful reforms on the way to modernisation of Poland and its accession to the European Union.

The fight of “Solidarność” was significant in the context of opening the EU structures to the East. Tomorrow Poland – strengthened by its history and the revitalising actions of “Solidarność” – is going to construct inside the Union the new social and cultural Europe, the Europe of peoples.

Just to finish, I would like to express the friendship and solidarity of CFDT and other unionists from all over the world, who found their own identity in your fight. You were a perfect example of courage, stamina, and persistence, and the word “Solidarność” is the only Polish word the meaning of which and importance is well known all over the world.

One hundred years ago one of the French union leaders, Fernand Pellontier, used to say: “We want a society of proud and free men and women”. Being always faithful to the basic values of unity, you shall build in your new circumstances the society of freedom and responsibility.

Long live “Solidarność”!