

RESEARCH REPORT IREX STG

Grantee: Paul Kubicek

Grant Year: 2002

Activities Section

The primary purpose of this trip was to gather materials on trade unions in Poland, one of four cases for my book-length project on labor in the region. My chief goal was to contact union offices in several Polish cities and speak with trade union representatives at the national, regional, and enterprise level. I selected four main cities for research: Warsaw, Katowice, Poznan, and Gdansk. In addition to meeting with trade union officials, I also contacted leading Polish academics on trade unions and labor relations (these individuals were primarily in Warsaw). My interviews focused on questions of privatization/economic reform, globalization and the role of foreign capital, and inter-union competition between the main two union confederations in Poland, Solidarity and OPZZ. An outline of my trip is as follows:

June 23-June 28 Warsaw

June 28-July 1 Krakow (a weekend, no research conducted)

July 1-July 4 Katowice

July 5-7 Poznan

July 7-July 10 Gdansk

Overall, I would rate my trip as a success. I met with over twenty trade union officials and academics, acquired Polish-language publications useful for my work, and made some contacts that will no doubt prove useful for my future research. Among the highlights of the trip were

- meetings in Warsaw with Juliusz Gardawski of the Higher School for Economics (gardawski@yahoo.com) and Wlodzimierz Pankow of the Polish Academy of Sciences (pankow@ifis.pl.org), both of whom have published extensively on trade unions in Poland.
- A meeting in Katowice with representatives of mining and steel workers, organized by a group of US labor leaders from Pennsylvania, headed by Charles McColleston of Indiana University of Pennsylvania (charles@iup.edu). I ran into this by happenstance, but it allowed me to meet several Polish unionists.
- A meeting at the Volkswagen plant in Poznan with Solidarity officials. This was my only plant visit, and I learned a lot from conversations with unionists there.
- Meetings in Gdansk at Solidarity headquarters with representatives from the International Department (zagr@solidarity.pl.org), who were very knowledgeable and helpful.

In addition, I met with Ryszard Lepik, vice-chair of the OPZZ in Warsaw; Zdzislaw Tuszyński, former MP and head of Metalowcy (OPZZ) in Warsaw; Arkadiusz Silwinski, vice-chair of Solidarity for the Mazovia (Warsaw) region; Jan Budkiewicz, chair of the

OPZZ cultural and arts union; Eugiensz Somner, chair of the OPZZ steelworkers union (in Katowice); Adam Ditmer, chair of the Solidarity steel workers union; Henryk Nieczarny, head of Solidarity coal miners union; Ewa Tarnowska, head of the Katowice health workers (Solidarity) union; and Frank Hantke of the Freidrich Ebert Foundation in Warsaw, who speacializes in trade union development work.

I did not use libraries or archives, although they are available to researchers in both OPZZ and Solidarity offices. Compared to my previous research in Russia and Ukraine, work in Poland was much easier---people were far more willing to meet with you and point you to other people who might be helpful. Of course, more material was also available on the Net, which helped me make some arrangements in advance. I actually met with more people than I expected to, and the only person that I wanted to speak with but were unable to (Solidarity Energy Workers' Chair in Katowice) was on vacation.

One difficulty for my research in Poland is that branch-level unions in Poland are much more spread out than in Russia or Ukraine, where virtually all the unions are headquartered in Moscow or Kyiv. In Warsaw, there are important unions (textile workers in Lodz, autoworkers in Lublin) that I was unable to visit because I did not have time to go to those cities. Another was that my Polish was barely adequate to allow me to conduct interviews without a translator. Were I to do this work again, I would hire a translator (a student at a university would work) for a few days in each major city. The costs would be small, but the pay-off would be immense.

Again, however, overall the trip was a success. My one comment about the administration of this program is that IREX could try to reach an arrangement with local hotels and/or at least provide people with a list of decent places to stay. I made my arrangements over the Internet, which did work out OK, but IEX could provide some information on this score.

Let me add as well that grants of this type are crucial for social scientists studying the region who need to get into the field. The costs are not large---these grants are for do-it-yourself field work, which (in my view) is done far too little. IREX's small grant program is one of the very few that caters to this need, and by all means needs to be continued to enable scholars to produce original works based upon actual fieldwork in the region.

Project Results for Paul Kubicek, Short-Term Travel Grant, Poland, Summer 2002

IREX funding allowed me to complete a four-country research project on trade unions in post-communist countries. My award from IREX supported the final leg of the project, research in Poland. My main research question is how organized labor is responding to fundamental economic changes such as privatization and the growth of foreign capital and globalizing forces. My project thus aims to link the experience of labor in the East with that in the West, which has been subjected to similar forces for several decades now and has seen a decline in its political and economic position.

This project builds upon the debates and arguments made about civil society in post-communist Europe. Civil society has been lauded as fundamental for democratization. Yet, the largest groups in civil society, trade unions, have seen their position substantially decline with the on-set of economic reform. Thus, there is an obvious tension between economic reform and democratization, revealed clearly in the Polish case when the architect of “shock therapy” essentially declared war on the trade unions. Now, of course, unions in Poland (and elsewhere) are far weaker than they were a decade ago. My research aims to look at what future role trade unions can carve out for themselves in this new and radically changed political economy, and what the consequences may be for democratization more generally.

In sum, my research finds that privatization and globalization have, on balance, been harmful to union development in the region. However, the picture is far from black and white, and most unionists profess support for reform, if it would be conducted better. Obviously, slack labor markets and a weak legal environment hamper the ability of workers to assert their rights. Of most interest to me, however, is how a more decentralized economy is breaking up any vestiges of a union movement in the region, leaving unions to focus on local/enterprise-level concerns, but impeding any sort of mass collective action. What this means is harder to demonstrate, but I would submit that a weak, unfocused union movement has contributed to feelings of dissatisfaction with democracy (widespread even in “successful” states such as Poland) and has opened the door for the rise of “oligarchs” in countries such as Russia. Lest one doubt that union weakness matters, imagine what the region would look like if unions were strong. Yes, there would be some disadvantages to this, but enough research has been done in other contexts to suggest that strong labor movements can contribute to democratization and consensus-building on vital questions of economic reform.

My study will be published as a book, and it will soon be sent for review to Cornell University Press. In the near future, I hope to build on my work with trade unions and ask why citizens in general in these states have not embraced undemocratic, radical politicians, on either the right or the left. In other words, just as unions have been quiescent, so have voters—there is no repeat of Weimar Germany. The fact that democracies endure—true, they are troubled in several states—is remarkable, and one that needs further study and elaboration.

