

THE TRADE UNION MOVEMENT IN POLAND DURING 1918-1939

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the article is to analyse the formation and functioning of the trade union movement in Poland during the period 1918-1939. The main research problem is the activity and development of trade unions as organizations of the mass labour movement, together with a determination of the main factors affecting the organizational forms and rules of functioning of these organizations. The issue of relations between trade unions and political parties and other social organizations is also presented. Another important issue is the presentation of the role of trade unions in shaping the socio-political attitudes of Polish workers, as well as the fulfilment by these organizations of social, educational, cultural and educational functions. The article uses descriptive and analytical methods appropriate for the investigation of social history.

Keywords: trade unions, social organizations, the Second Republic of Poland (1918-1939)

INTRODUCTION

The functioning of trade unions, their size, ideological foundations, significance, effectiveness of impact and implementation of objectives depends on the specificity of a given country, the conditions of its social and economic life, the quality of political life and finally the awareness of ordinary people making choices whether or not to participation in professional organizations.

For the Polish trade union movement in the interwar period, these circumstances were: a lack of an independent state before 1918 and the functioning of Polish society in the three different social, legal and economic systems of the partitioning states, enormous population and material losses related to military operations in the period 1914-1918, by the necessity for a reborn Poland to fight both for borders and against a Bolshevik invasion, weak industrial development of the Polish lands, the highly diversified ethnic structure of Polish society (ethnic minorities accounted for 31% of the population), the unstable political situation and internal and global economic crises.

DEVELOPMENT OF TRADE UNIONS ON POLISH LANDS BEFORE 1918

The establishment of the first trade unions in Polish territories took place in the last twenty-five years of the 19th century. During this period, the territory of Poland was in the hands of three invaders: Russia, Germany and Austria, which was of fundamental importance to the process of creating and developing a trade

union movement. Firstly, because the development of a trade union movement requires full functioning of the sphere of legality. From this point of view, the development of trade unions was possible in the territories controlled by Austria and Germany, where the legal and political system recognized and allowed the functioning of such organizations. In contrast, in the Russian state, in spite of the functioning of the interim provisions on unions and associations from 4 March 1906, the rule was to limit the activities of trade unions and even subject them to oppressive police activities for any activity considered by the authorities as threatening "public peace." The Russian rules also forbade individual trade unions to be combined into central trade unions.

Secondly, the formation of professional organizations of Polish workers in the partitions of Poland was connected with the necessity to cooperate with the professional organizations of the partitioning state, which concerned especially the socialist movement.

The third important issue was the large ethnic diversity of the working class. There were different sized groups of Jewish, German, Czech and Ukrainian workers. Their attitudes to organizations created by Poles varied from examples of full participation in their structures to a strict enforcement of the separation between national organizations.

The fourth issue was the highly diversified process of organizational development of trade unions in individual partitions. In the Austrian partition they arose as local general vocational associations, which later evolved into organizations related to a specific branch of local and/or central production. They were mostly nonpartisan except for the socialist movement [1] [2].

Hostilities in the period 1914-1918 led to the disappearance of the activities of professional organizations in the areas under Austrian rule. However, thanks to the occupation of the former Russian partition by German troops and the introduction of German legislation, there was a revival of professional organizations in this area.

TRADE UNIONS IN POLAND AFTER 1918: CONDITIONS AND RANGE OF INFLUENCE

The shape and size of the trade union movement in Poland in the interwar period was conditioned by many factors. The most important can be considered: the number of employees in the overall structure of employment, the ongoing economic and social processes as well as political phenomena and processes.

The membership numbers of trade unions seem to depend primarily on the size of the workers' population, their economic status, social engagement and the effectiveness of trade unions in the protection of workers' interests.

A reliable source of data on the number and socio-economic position of workers in interwar Poland is the data of two censuses carried out in Poland in 1921 and 1931. According to them, the number of professionally active workers together with the unemployed was 3036 thousand in 1921, and in 1931 over 4228 thousand. These data include workers employed in all sectors of the economy (Table 1).

The large share (49.0%) of agricultural and forestry workers indicates a weak level of industrialization, and even economic backwardness of the country. It was attempted to change this situation both through free market activities, but also undoubtedly state economic initiatives (e.g. the construction of a new port and the city of Gdynia, the construction of the Central Industrial District and many others) favoured the development of the working class.

Specification	1921		1931	
	thousands	%	thousands	%
Total	3036	100.0	4228	100.0
Agriculture, forestry	1486	49.0	1337	31.6
Industry, crafts	700	23.1	1039	24.6
Trade	71	2.3	118	2.8
Transportation (except railways)	28	0.9	51	1.2
Railways	133	4.4	143	3.4
Administration, education, culture	109	3.6	206	4.9
Home caretakers	20	0.6	36	0.8
Others	446	14.7	570	13.5
Unemployed	43	1.4	728	17.2

Table 1. Workers professionally active in Poland in 1921 and 1931

The increase in the number of workers was also conducive to the increase in unionization of workers. The unionization rate underwent significant changes during the period from 1918 to 1939 (Fig. 1). The highest value, more than 40%, was obtained at the beginning of the 1920s in the period of Polish state formation, battles for the state border, repulsion of the Soviet aggression and strong social conflicts, and the lowest in the middle of the great economic crisis, when the index of membership dipped to less than 15 %.

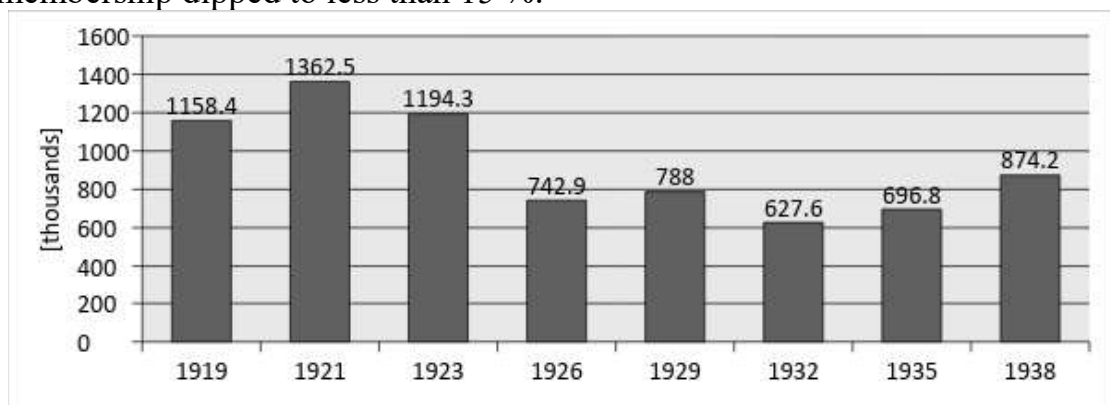


Fig. 1. Membership of trade unions in Poland in the period 1918-1939 [3] [4].

Another factor that strongly influenced the membership numbers of trade unions was migration processes. They were of both a seasonal nature (mainly to Germany and France) as well as permanent emigration (European countries, USA, Canada, Argentina and Brazil). This process was accompanied by a significant re-emigration, especially of seasonal workers, but the overall balance for Polish migration was negative: the balance for the period 1918-1925 amounted to -

208,328 people, for the period 1926-1930 it was -253,270 people, and for the period 1931-1938 the migration balance was -32,410 people [8].

Despite the significant fluctuation of the number of members, the number of trade unions was relatively constant. According to the Central Statistical Office, the number of trade unions in Poland oscillated around 300 unions [8].

Factors strongly influencing the functioning of trade unions in interwar Poland were economic and social processes. Particularly negative phenomena were the great inflation in the early 1920s and the great economic crisis of the early 1930s. The latter brought Poland deep and long-term negative consequences (in many industries in 1939, the production volume of 1929 had not been reached).

Positive economic and social phenomena include primarily the expansion of the Polish defence industry in the second half of the 1930s in the form of the Central Industrial District, a large industrial complex built in the second half of the 1930s in the Vistula and San River basin. These investments were based primarily on far-reaching state intervention.

Issues conditioning the functioning of the trade union movement in the sphere of politics can be reduced to two areas. The first one concerns the interdependence of trade unions with party organizations and, more broadly, their affiliation to particular social movements, the second is the area of relations between trade unions and state authorities, particularly significant after May 1926, when in Poland an armed coup took place and Józef Piłsudski and his political camp seized power in the state.

In the Second Republic of Poland, one can speak about the appearance of three models of trade union activity taking into account the influence of the political sphere. The first two of them were a derivative of natural social processes. In one of these models, the political party was the main factor in the integration of the social movement. It was their activists who established professional organizations that were generally heavily dependent on the decisions of the party authorities. This model of cooperation occurred especially in the class (socialist) and communist movement.

In the second model, professional organizations became the main driving force. It was on the basis of their human resources and finances that political parties representing their interests were formed. In this model, trade union officers carrying out propaganda activities for trade unions often conducted a simultaneous propaganda campaign for a selected political party. This model was in force in Poland, especially in the solidarist and Christian-social movement.

The third model of the functioning of professional organizations appeared after Józef Piłsudski's coup d'état in May 1926. The coup took place under the slogans of the repair of the state and, in particular, the ending of party independence, which, according to the coup leaders, was the main cause of the pathology of the democratic system. Aversion to political parties resulted in the passing of the constitution and electoral law that excluded the active role of political parties in the socio-political system (April 1935). The creative role was entrusted to other social and professional organizations. They were to replace the political parties in determining the list of candidates for election to the parliamentary bodies. In pursuit of the implementation of this system, non-party

program trade unions were established, while governing bodies associated with the ruling elite camp were formed. In this model, the unions were often used as a tool of governance and influence over attitudes and social behaviour in accordance with the indications of the supreme authorities of the state.

PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS IN POLAND IN THE PERIOD 1918-1926

The processes that were initiated in the area of the operation of professional organizations in the rebirth of Poland after 123 years can be seen as a reflection of the general processes taking place in Polish society and the state. The first direction of activities of professional organizations in the period 1918-1926 was the initiation of integration processes aimed at the connection of unions with a similar worldview and ideological profile in nationwide union headquarters covering not only individual partitions, but the whole country.

The basis for such activities was the "Decree of 8.02.1919 on temporary provisions on employee trade unions", which defines the rules for the functioning of professional organizations in the state, together with defining what organizations can be considered to be trade unions. It was stated that trade unions are structures whose goals include "defending and supporting the economic and cultural interests of workers in a given branch of work or related or similar branches" [5].

This decree was in force in the central provinces and somewhat later in the Vilnius region, in other provinces, the legislation from the time of the partitions was in force. This legal status lasted until 1932, when all provisions regarding the functioning of associations and unions in the area of the Polish state were unified.

The second goal was to adapt professional organizations to the massification of structures. In the period after World War I there was a large influx to professional organizations, not only of industrial workers, but also agricultural workers and craftsmen who wanted to create and participate in trade unions.

The consolidation processes taking place in the early 1920s led to the emergence of several nationwide union headquarters. The most numerous of them belonged to the Union of Professional Associations (UPA) and the Polish Professional Union (PPU). The Association of Professional Associations was an emanation of the socialist (reformist) movement onto professional ground. It was headed by activists of the Polish Socialist Party (PSP) Jan Kwapiński and Zygmunt Żuławski, and in 1926 it had almost 270,000 members. The Polish Professional Union was a union headquarters derived from the territories annexed by Germany, established in 1902 in Bochum among Polish emigres in Wesfalia. It proclaimed the principles of social solidarism, was based on Christian values and was moderately nationalistic. After moving its headquarters from the Ruhr area to Poznań and consolidating the unions in the Wielkopolska and Upper Silesia regions, and then consolidating with the Polish Workers' Unions "Work" from the Russian Partition, it commenced organizational operation in the former Austrian Partition. In 1926, this headquarters had almost 380,000 members [9].

NORDSCI CONFERENCE

The third professional association was made up of Christian trade unions based on the social teaching of the Catholic Church and, above all, on the encyclical of Leon XII "Rerum Novarum" referring directly to the so-called worker question. These unions evolved in each of the former partitions, and the consolidation processes were much slower in this branch of the labour movement. The establishment of a nationwide headquarters was preceded by the creation of several local headquarters. In 1926, Christian trade unions comprised about 120,000 people.

In the mid-1920s, another national centre of trade unions was established, the causative factor being the nationalist People's-National Union. Later, the headquarters became the trade union "Polish Work". Before 1926, it comprised up to 15 thousand members.

The main objectives of trade union activities in this period include, first of all, caring for the development and subsequent protection of the labour legislation. In the first period of reconstruction of the Polish state, in the years 1918-1920, there were two situations that had a particular impact on the development of labour legislation. The first of these was the high activity of the masses of workers, connected with the aspirations to introduce democratic, equality foundations into the state system. The second was the threat of a Bolshevik invasion and the pursuit of political spheres to draw workers away from their possible support. Both of these situations influenced the adoption of normative acts constituting broad workers' rights. The Polish social legislation in this period should be regarded as one of the most progressive in Europe at the time. However, already in 1921-1926, social reforms slowed down considerably, and the main concern of professional organizations was to ensure that there was no regression in this area. In particular, legislation on working time, the law on leave and the act on the protection of women and young people and unemployment insurance were under attack.

In addition to activities related to shaping the labour legislation system, trade unions performed daily tasks related to the protection of employees in specific places of employment. The basic tool of pressure was a strike. The number of strike actions undertaken in individual years was dependent on macroeconomic and local conditions.

Trade unions carried out both economic strikes as well as political, demonstrative and solidarity strikes. The main reasons for the strikes were: an increase in earnings (this is the most frequent cause of strikes, generally about 70%), issues of food supply (this reason for strikes played a special role in the first years of Polish state formation), demand for recognition of a trade union, admission of workers to work, non-compliance with the 8-hour working day, the issue of collective agreements, medical assistance, improvement of working conditions [8].

Trade unions also undertook a number of other areas of activities related to raising workers to a higher level in terms of culture. This goal was achieved through the creation of libraries, reading rooms, choirs, readings on political and social issues, publishing and cooperation with workers' cultural and educational organizations (for the socialist movement it was the Workers' University Society,

for the national-solidarist direction it was the National Workers' University, for the Christian-social movement it was the Christian Workers' University) [6].

PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS IN THE PERIOD 1926-1939

The coming to power of the Pilsudski camp (the so-called Sanation) led to significant changes in the functioning of the trade union movement. Their source was two processes. The first concerned activities undertaken as part of the Sanation that caused splits in political and professional organizations that opposed the new government. In this way, the Polish Trade Union "Work" reappeared, which in 1926 separated as an independent organization from the PPU structures and the Central Association of Class Trade Unions appeared, which was the result of a split from the unions directed by the PSP in 1928 [7].

The second process initiated by the May Coup in 1926 was the emergence of new trade unions in terms of professed ideology related to the Sanation camp. These were syndicalist relationships, based on the ideology of Georges Sorel and Stanisław Brzozowski. Syndicalism assumed the primacy of economic over political targets in the struggle of workers for their rights. The main tool for this fight were to be trade unions, not political parties. Syndicalism manifested itself especially in the activity of the General Labour Federation (GLF) established in 1926, and then in the Union of Trade Unions established in 1930 (UTU). GLF and UTU belonged to the reformist trend, they were patriotic and pro-state in nature. The leading theoreticians of Polish syndicalism were: Kazimierz Zakrzewski, Jerzy Szurig and Janusz Rakowski [10].

At the end of the 1920s, there was also an attempt to build a legal communist headquarters of trade unions. Communists were present at all times in the trade union movement in Poland. They were mainly active in the structures of class (socialist) unions, often taking over the authorities in individual trade unions at the local level. Communist organizations in interwar Poland were treated by state authorities and institutions as subversive organizations acting on behalf of the Soviet Union, therefore every attempt to legalize such an organization, whether political or professional, was denied. It was no different in the case of the establishment of the initiative by activists of the Polish Communist Party (PCP) of the Organizing Committee of the Trade Union of the Left.

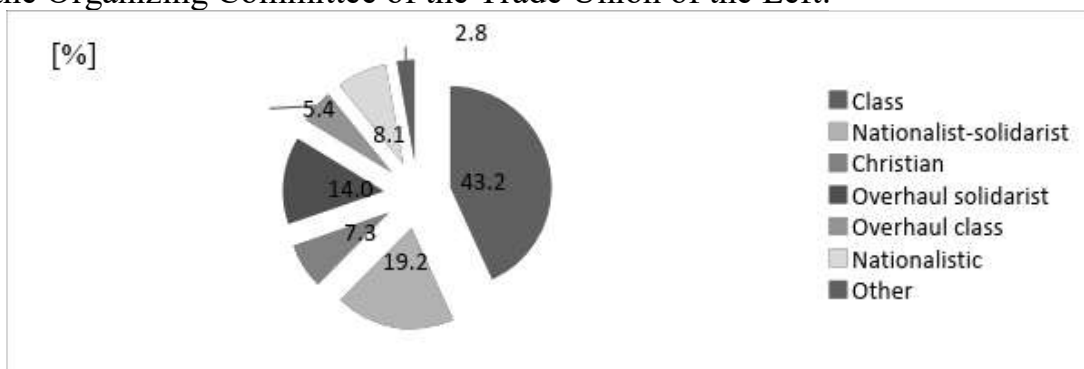


Fig. 2. Social and political orientation of trade unions in Poland in 1938.

NORDSCI CONFERENCE

In 1935, Józef Piłsudski died, which became the source of a far-reaching break-up of the Sanation camp and the creation of new centres of political integration. This process took almost two years and ended with the establishment of the Camp of National Unity (CNU). The basing of CNU's activity on nationalist ideology discouraged it from cooperation with the trade unions that had so far been supporting the Sanation camp, especially UTU. Therefore, under the auspices of CNU in 1937, a new trade union centre was established under the name of the Union of Polish Trade Unions (UPTU). In a short time, the UPTU achieved great organizational success, the basis of which was the support of the state administration and the development of the Central Industrial District and the involvement of workers employed in newly established enterprises in the ranks of the UPTU trade unions (Fig. 2).

The ruling camp treated the UPTU as a platform for the unification of the trade union movement in Poland. An example of an attempt to implement this trend were talks with other trade union headquarters, especially PPU and Christian Trade Unions. As a result of these talks, a joint declaration was published, titled the "Agreement of the Polish Workers' World". It provided the basis for the creation in August 28, 1939 of an Inter-organizational Workers' Council as a joint governing body. Further consolidation processes were interrupted by the outbreak of World War II.

In 1937, trade unions were formed that were associated with the extremely nationalistic formation of the National Rehabilitation Camp "Falanga" (NRC). Initially, they adopted the name of the Provisional Committee of National Trade Unions, and then they were transformed into the National Labour Organization. They preached anti-capitalist slogans combined with anti-Semitic and anti-Communist slogans. However, they did not manage to obtain more serious influence and after a short period of operation it was decided to include them in the UPTU.

CONCLUSION

Trade unions played a very important role in Polish social-political life of the interwar period, both in the dimension of shaping the living conditions of the masses of workers and in the area of shaping their social and civic awareness.

The trade union movement in Poland in the interwar period was a pluralist movement, both ideologically and organizationally. Its achievements were the introduction and then protection of the social legislation system, participation of representatives in institutions responsible for health protection of employees, conducting activities for workers in the form of a cooperative movement (consumers, housing, etc.) and broad ideological and cultural-educational activities contributing to raising the standard of living of the mass of workers crowds and their families.

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