Scientists and education in Poland

Social change in Poland is affecting the country's science and education policies. A **Special Correspondent** reports

DURING periods of heightened social tension, general issues dominate science and education policy, as the present situation in Poland illustrates. The main problems which face the country are political rather than economic. The beginning of a wave of repression against the participants in strikes in June 1976 (*Nature*, 5 August 1976) followed the abortive decision to raise prices significantly. On 23 September 1976 the Workers Defence Committee (KOR) was formed by a small group of courageous people. It made several demands; unconditional amnesty for all sentenced for their participation in strikes and demonstrations; provision of appropriate jobs for all workers dismissed from the factories and restoration of long-service privileges; disclosures of all repressions including beating by the police while in custody, false accusations and confessions coerced by force, unlawful conduct of courts and so on; and the setting up of an independent parliamentary committee to investigate all facts related to infringement of human rights.

Acting openly in spite of the fact that it is illegal, the KOR, consisting of 23 members, enjoys considerable support. It is collaborating with a fairly wide group, mainly students and recent graduates drawn from participants in the student riots of March 1968 and from the Clubs of Catholic Intelligentsia and, to a lesser degree, from the Scouting organisation. It is their devoted work that enables KOR to collect and distribute money (about 500,000 zlotys up to the end of March); to gain access to the people involved

and to monitor the court proceedings; and to publish and circulate KOR's *Bulletin* (nine issues so far) and other documents. KOR's appeal for public support has been answered by many letters of protest to the Polish Parliament, from more than 2,500 people. They include 730 students from the University of Warsaw, 520 from the University of Krakow, and 285 from the Catholic University in Lublin.

KOR is in no sense a political party: it has no political programme and the political opinions of its members and collaborators differ considerably. None of its activities is directly political, and this may be the source of its strength and early immunity. The tactics chosen by KOR have been effective; its very existence has structured internal political life and provided a new pattern of defence of civic rights under the communist regime. This is manifested in the growing self-assertion of diverse social groups in exercising their rights under existing laws. Writers have produced a first unofficial literary journal *Zapis*, a large type-written volume of poetry, stories and criticism. A number of political programmes and groups have appeared, some of them critical of KOR.

Scientists have also been active. Thirty-four professors, most of whom have not raised their voice in public before, sent a letter of protest to Parliament. They included many well-known scientists and members of the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAS): W. Kemula (Chemistry), W. Miemierko, J. Kielanowski, W. Kunicki-Goldfinger, E. Domanski, A. Brzoza, M. Nunberg

(Natural Sciences), I. Chmielewska (Biochemistry). Another letter was signed by about 300 younger scientists and artists. Although these letters are the most visible protestations, others are no less significant. During the General Assembly of the PAS on 17 December 1976, for example, several members of the Academy opposed the established procedure which reduces the role of the Assembly to a purely formal acceptance of candidates proposed by the Praesidium (which in turn is completely dependent on the political authorities). Three recommended candidates were not elected. Among them were Professor J. Szuba (favoured personally by Mr Gierek, the Secretary of the Party) and Professor Z. Rybicki, the Chancellor of Warsaw University.

Teachers' protest

Some letters of protest were signed by school teachers. In Poland the teaching profession is particularly weak because for many years it absorbed weaker graduates unable to find jobs of higher social standing and independence from administrative bodies; also the teaching profession consists almost entirely of women. The teachers' publicly expressed protests were followed immediately by repressions. In the Tadeusz Rejtan secondary school in Warsaw, for example, six teachers were given dismissal notices (three of them are to be transferred to other schools, and three have been asked to retire early; these decisions have not yet been implemented). Ironically Tadeusz Rejtan was the member of Parliament who fought against the first partition of Poland in 1773. The action against teachers immediately provoked a new flow of protests, this time from the school's students and graduates.

No similar case of repression of older members of the scientific community is known to this correspondent,

Miloslav Chojceki, a nuclear physicist, and Piotr Naimski, a biochemist, were recently arrested as part of a new campaign of the Polish Government against the Workers' Defence Committee. In all, some 25 activists were arrested, apparently as a preventive measure. The recent death, in mysterious circumstances, of Krakow student Stanislaw Pyjas has led to renewed agitation against alleged police illegalities, and it is thought that the arrest of the activists was intended to neutralise this opposition. In spite of the arrests, however, the agitation, and demands for a public inquiry into the death of Pyjas, are still increasing.

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and the authorities try not to create martyrs. The situation for younger scientists, however, is different. The case of Mr Chojecki, who was dismissed from the Institute of Nuclear Research, has already been mentioned in *Nature*. More recently Mr J. Celinski, who was dismissed from the University of Warsaw, brought his case to court. The court upheld the decision of the university because, as formally stated in the judge's justification,

Each department and its chief is responsible for the results of work and is free to choose employees with appropriate professional qualifications. These qualifications include sometimes . . . political criteria . . . and the political convictions of the plaintiff disqualify him from being a member of staff of the University of Warsaw.

These actions against teachers and scientists are of course relatively mild. Under present international circumstances, however, it is precisely the activity of KOR that makes the escalation of repression difficult. Each country has its own scale of values and measures of tolerance which form an ethical frame in which the political repressions in Poland should be judged.

Another major determinant of the situation is the plan for a new educational system. Parliament passed a curious bill describing the general shape of future changes but without specific decisions. The ten-year school, the basis of the new system (see figure), is not a secondary school in the ordinary sense, because entry to the university is guaranteed only for the winner of school olympics (a special type of competitive examination) and for those who have a record of "two years of excellent professional work or two years of impeccable military service".

The most striking feature of the new system is that most future students will have to complete military service before entering university. However, there will be other options for students leaving the ten-year school, ranging from six-month professional courses to two years of further general education. One can expect therefore a highly differentiated level of readiness for university studies which must impinge on the performance of the universities. The further feminisation of the universities would also follow. The fraction of women in institutions of higher education is about 52%; arts faculties have 77%; education 74%; medicine, with some measure of preference for men, has 64%; engineering, the least feminised faculty, has 34%.

Implementing the plan

Preliminary steps for introduction of the new educational system have

already been taken. About 70,000 acting teachers are being taught in special schools or special faculties of universities. It is commonly accepted that the courses they offer are poor, but they are entitled to confer masters degrees.

No one can deny that the present schooling system has serious shortcomings and does not serve the social needs of Poland. However, it is also true that discussion of the new system was deliberately channelled on to such problems as curricula, teacher training, availability of buildings and so on, and was made to bypass the evident political motives underlying the reform. The first of these is the failure of the schools' ideological influence; both teachers and students have adopted a sort of newspeak understood by both sides to be meaningless. Second, the schools do not provide appropriate political filters; in spite of some incentives, the number of students from workers' and farmers' families is not increasing and these students are in no sense more loyal to the party than other students. The authorities hope that the new system will provide more effective social indoctrination and more reliable political filters.

It is still unclear when implementation of the new system (planned for 1978) will begin. The system is very costly and its social price—the loss of experience accumulated by the existing system—is even higher. Postwar social changes in Poland opened the possibility of study for all who desired it, so making possible the social promotion of all gifted people from the working class. The byproduct of this process, however, was a significant decrease of the working class's own intelligentsia, a group which contributed most to the 'striving for education' within its class. Those gaining education often break their ties with their previous social environment (formally too they are not considered as members of the working class any longer) and constitute a very conservative group of people who, as they see it, have nothing to win and everything to lose.

There are additional reasons for the declining attractiveness of university studies for young people from the working class. Nowadays students who cannot rely on their families for support are in a worse position than their colleagues in the 1950s, because of a decrease in the real value of scholarships. More importantly, graduate prospects are not very bright: it is not easy to find appropriate jobs, salaries are relatively low, and there are serious difficulties in getting a flat (formally graduates have a high priority in the queue for flats, but the overall short-

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The Palace of Culture, seat of PAS

age makes this privilege of negligible value). Usually the new graduate is worse off than his less gifted friend from the primary school.

The political control of universities is exercised primarily by the careful selection of staff. No one can be engaged without the consent of the party organisation and without a good record from the police. The admission to postgraduate studies is similarly controlled, and several people who pass the examination are not admitted because of their or even their parents' political attitudes. In the recent enactment of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education (December 1976) it is openly stated that to be admitted to postgraduate studies the candidate has to "display proper ideological and civic attitudes". The chosen faculty has little relevance in this regard and candidates in social sciences and, say, medicine are treated on the same basis.

The fate of the new movements which are changing considerably the pattern of internal politics in Poland and, more generally, the immediate future of this country, are closely related to the whole human rights issue. This makes the proceedings and the results of the Belgrade Conference vitally important for Poland. At best one can expect some softening of the political line, and a more elastic and realistic approach to the needs and demands of people which could lead to a better economic performance. At worst one can foresee a partial return to cold-war policy with the rise of police power and a further widening of the gap between the rulers and the ruled. But even in this case the experience gained during the last few months could play an important role: Polish society has learned a lesson which it will be difficult to erase. □