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## After Poland's Euphoria

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IN recent weeks Poland has taken a back seat in the spectacular and sudden changes sweeping through the East bloc. But Poland's relative quiet may be the calm before the storm.

In the five months since Poland's Solidarity-led government was formed, it has pushed to reform the old communist economy through free markets and has eliminated subsidies on many basic goods. This means that Poles now pay five to 100 times more for food than before. In July an egg cost 46 to 50 zloty; now one costs 200 to 300 zloty. The price of 1/4 kilo of butter rose from 280 zloty in July to as high as 3,800 zloty in November and dropped to 1,800 to 2,000 zloty in December. This fall the government drastically increased the cost of medicines, which had always been dirt cheap, and upped the cost of energy and communications. Many Poles soon may face unemployment.

To a visitor traveling around the country, indications are that a majority of the people are still willing to give the government a chance. As one retired woman standing in line at a drug store told me, "It's the government that ruled Poland for 45 years that's at fault, not the one in power for two months." But for 45 years, the communist rulers created the expectation that Poland should be a welfare state. And public-opinion surveys show that Poles expect the government - whoever leads it - to provide jobs, housing, and medical care.

Labor and Social Security Minister Jacek Kuron, a well-known oppositionist before Solidarity, once welcomed strikes. Now he urges sacrifices. Mr. Kuron had promised to increase old-age and disability pensions by up to half of the average wage, but in a recent interview explained that "wages have meanwhile raced forward so fast that we may be unable to carry out our promise." Kuron's ministry is said to be expanding the protective measures available to people who may lose their job and to enterprises in financial crisis. But Kuron emphasized that the necessary radical change in the economic structure "is bound to cost us money and sacrifices, all of us, I repeat, all of us."

Sacrifice is not a new experience for Poles. Between 1980 and 1987, the purchasing power of most working families, not great to begin with, fell by nearly 17 percent. Poles may get a taste of austerity like never before in the new year. Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance Leszek Balcerowicz estimates that real wages will drop by 20 percent in 1990. His anti-inflation program, which became effective Jan. 1, provides that wages in state-owned enterprises will be frozen after initial compensation payouts in January. But the prices of many goods are expected to rise as subsidies are eliminated. The cost of coal and power likely will jump by several times, with effects throughout the economy.

In an interview published in the official newspaper Rzeczpospolita, Mr. Balcerowicz justified his program: "Everybody has to answer for himself how he wants to achieve a higher standard of living; under high inflation and increasing chaos, or by agreeing to a burden for a certain period of time in order to live in a country with a normal,

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stable economy later on. We are not keeping it secret that several very difficult months lie ahead of us which will decide about the success or failure of the whole operation and about the prospects of the Polish economy."

How will workers who already are backbone-against-bellybutton respond to a further tightening of their belts? The Solidarity-led government's economic policies have been under steady attack by the Communist Party trade union (OPZZ) and its leader, Alfred Miodowicz. Mr. Miodowicz recently demonstrated in front of Parliament against the reduction of indexed compensation available to workers who face declines in living standards.

The Communist Party trade union may not hold much credibility in the eyes of many Poles, but it does not stand alone in protesting the government's plan of action. Union leader Lech Walesa cautioned in a recent interview, "If this government forgets that it holds society's mandate, there will be a clash and I will be on society's side." Another Solidarity leader, Bogdan Borusewicz, has predicted widespread social unrest in the coming months. If push comes to shove, he says, the Solidarity trade union will back the people against the Solidarity-led government.

Whether Poles will continue to support the new government depends on its ability to deliver social-welfare benefits the people expect while implementing necessary austerity measures.

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