

## Poland and the ILO: History, again

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Though it may seem apocryphal today, the story of an unemployed electrician named Lech Walesa scaling the walls of the Lenin Shipyard in the Polish Baltic port of Gdansk 25 years ago still resonates despite the passing of a quarter century. Why? Because he led a strike that launched the first independent, self-governing trade union in the then Eastern bloc.

The birth of the Solidarnosc (Solidarity) trade union federation in Poland on 31 August 1980 not only illuminated the vital role played by the trade union movement and the ILO in promoting freedom of association – it was also a history-changing event.

That event was marked in August of this year at the Gdansk shipyards where it all began – where several thousand delegates, including the former presidents of Solidarnosc, the general secretaries of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and the World Confederation of Labour (WCL), as well as representatives of the European Trade Union Confederation and the ILO gathered to acknowledge the role of Solidarity and Poland in changing European history.

From there, the road first opened in 1980 ultimately led to a parliamentary democracy, European Union membership and Poland's new role in the international arena. But the basis for Solidarity's actions reaches back even further, to the adoption of ILO conventions on freedom of association and collective bargaining over 50 years ago.

Today, the large round table where representatives of the Government and Solidarnosc met in 1989 to negotiate the relegalization of Solidarity under ILO principles and agreed to the first free elections since the Second World War is still set as if to welcome their return. Among the name cards is that of Jacek Kuron, one of the most prominent dissidents of the Solidarity era and an embodiment of freedom of association in action.

A long way from the shipyard wall in Gdansk, but the concept of freedom of association that fired the strikes in 1980 remains the same – the most fundamental of all ILO principles everywhere.