Solidarity began in September of 1980 at the Gdansk shipyards, Solidarity was a labour union which helped in the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union, and would transform Poland from a repressive communist satellite to the EU member democracy it is today. The Solidarity movement received international attention, spreading anti-communist ideas and inspiring political action throughout the rest of the Communist Bloc.

The emergence of Solidarity as a political force in Poland was inspired by political and economic difficulties that had continued to deepen over the course of an entire decade. Poland's 'shortage economy' put stress on the lives of everyday people who were unable to purchase daily necessities, such as bread or toilet paper, and faced endless queues for which there was rarely a reward. In July of 1980, the Polish government - facing economic crisis - was again forced to raise the price of goods while stopping the growth of wages, strikes spread almost at once across the country.

In Gdansk, at the then 'Lenin Shipyards', the shipyard workers were unified by the additional outrage of Anna Walentynowicz's firing. The dismissal of Walentynowicz - a popular crane-operator and activist, combined with the previous firing of Lech Walesa - an outspoken electrician, led to the workers into taking action. A strike began on August 14th, led by Walesa, who gave voice to the workers' demands for the legalisation of independent labour unions, the raising of a monument to the 80 workers brutally murdered in a 1970 labour dispute in Gdansk, and the rehiring of both Walesa and Walentynowicz. Despite nation-wide censorship and the cutting of all phone connections between Gdansk and the rest of the country, several underground papers covered the story and spread the shipyard workers' message throughout Poland and the Eastern Bloc. On August 16th, several other strike committees joined the Gdansk shipyard workers and the following day 21 demands of the unified strike committee were put forward. These demands went far beyond local concerns, calling for the legal formation of independent trade unions, an end to media censorship, the right to strike, new rights for the Church, the freeing of political prisoners, and improvements in the national health system. The movement's news-sheet, *Solidarnosc*, began being printed on the shipyard printing press at a run of 30,000 copies.

On August 18th, the Szczecin shipyard joined the Gdansk shipyard in protest, beginning a wave of strikes along the Polish coast. Within days, most of Poland was affected by factory shutdowns, with more and more unions forming and joining the Gdansk-based federation. With the situation in Gdansk gaining international support and media coverage, the Gdansk shipyard workers were able to hold out longer. Poland's Soviet government gave in; sending a Governmental Commission to Gdansk, which on September 3rd signed an agreement passing many of the workers' demands. This agreement, known as the Gdansk Agreement, became recognised as the first step in dismantling Soviet power. Achieving the right to form labour unions independent of Communist Party control, and the right to strike, workers' concerns would now receive representation; common people were now able to introduce democratic changes into the communist political structure.

With growing support and Walesa as the leader a national labour union was formed on September 17th and Solidarity ('Solidarnosc' in Polish) was born. The first independent labor union in the Soviet Bloc, Solidarity's existence was remarkable to people the world over who had previously thought such an organisation could never exist under communism. In Poland, millions of people hopeful for change rallied around the union and in the 500 days following the Gdansk Agreement, 10 million people - students, workers, intellectuals - joined Solidarnosc or one of its suborganisations (Independent Student Union, Craftsmen's Union, Farmer's Union, etc.). A quarter of the country's population bravely became members, including 80% of Poland's workforce, marking the only time in human history that such a percentage of a country's population voluntarily joined an organisation. With the country behind them, Solidarity slowly transformed from a trade union to a full-on revolutionary movement, using strikes and other acts of protest to force change in government policies. The movement was careful, however, never to use violence, for fear of giving the government excuse for revenge attacks.

As quickly as December 1980, the Monument to Fallen Shipyard Workers was erected, and the following month Walesa and other Solidarity delegates met with Pope John Paul II in Rome. After 27 Solidarity members in Bydgoszcz were beaten by the state police during a state run National Council meeting on March 19th, news spread throughout the underground press and nation-wide strike was planned. This action, involving over half a million people, brought Poland to a standstill and was the largest strike in the history of the Eastern Bloc. The government was forced to promise an investigation into the Bydgoszcz beatings and allow the story to be released to the international press.

After the Gdansk Agreement, [Moscow](http://www.moscow-life.com/) stepped up pressure on its Polish government, which continued to lose its control over Polish society. The Soviets put General Wojciech Jaruzelski in the driver's seat, expecting a crackdown on the Solidarity movement. On December 13th, 1981, Juruzelski delivered, declaring martial law and arresting some 5,000 Solidarity members in the middle of the night, Walesa and other Gdansk leaders among them. Censorship was expanded and police filled the streets. Hundreds of strikes taking place throughout the country were put down harshly by riot police, including several deaths during demonstrations in Gdansk. By the end of 1981 strikes had stopped and Solidarity seemed broken. In October of 1982, Solidarity was delegalized and banned, its leaders were arrested.

Upon the arrest of the Solidarity leadership, more underground groups began to form, including Solidarity Radio and over 500 underground publications. Solidarity managed to continue throughout the mid-80s as an underground movement, gaining extensive international support which condemned Jaruzelski's actions. No other movement in the world was supported by such a diverse group: Reagan, Thatcher, the Pope, Carrillo (head of communist Spain); NATO, Christians, Western communists, liberals, conservatives, and socialists - all voiced support for Solidarity's cause. US President Ronald Reagan imposed sanctions on Poland, which would eventually force the government to soften its policies. The CIA and Catholic Church provided funds, equipment and training to the Solidarity underground. And the Polish people still supported what remained of the movement, demonstrating through masses held by priests.

By November of 1982, Walesa was released from prison; however, less than a month later, the government carried out an attack upon the movement, arresting 10,000 activists. On July 22, 1983, martial law was lifted, yet many restrictions on civil liberties and political life remained, as well as food rationing which would continue until the late 80s. On October 5th, Lech Walesa was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, despite the Polish government's attempts to discredit him and their refusal to allow him to leave the country and accept the award.

When Mikhail Gorbachev assumed control over the Soviet Union in 1985, he was forced to begin a series of reforms due to the worsening economic situation across the entire Eastern Bloc. These reforms included political and social reforms which led to a shift in policy in many Soviet satellites, including Poland, and led to the happy release of hundreds of political prisoners connected with Solidarity. However, Solidarity members continued to be persecuted. By 1988, Poland's economic situation was worse than ever due to foreign sanctions and the government's refusal to introduce more reforms. A new wave of strikes swept the country after food costs were increased by 40%. Finally on August 26, the government announced it was ready to negotiate with Solidarity and met with Walesa, who agreed to call an end to the strikes. In preparation for an official negotiating conference with the government, a hundred-member committee was formed within Solidarity, composed of many sections, each of which was responsible for presenting specific demands to the government at the forthcoming talks. This conference, which took place in [Warsaw](http://www.warsaw-life.com/) from February 6th to April 4th, 1989, came to be known as the 'Polish Roundtable Talks.' Though the members of Solidarity had no expectation of major changes, the Roundtable Talks would forever change the political landscape of Poland.

On April 17, 1989, Solidarity was again legalised and the party was allowed to field candidates in upcoming elections. With its members immediately jumping to 1.5 million after legalisation, the party was restricted to fielding candidates for only 35% of the seats in the new parliament (sejm). Despite aggression and propaganda from the ruling party, extremely limited resources and pre-election polls that promised a communist victory, Solidarity won every contested seat in the Sejm and 99 of 100 Senatorial seats: the new 'Contract Sejm' as it was called would be dominated by Solidarity. As agreed beforehand, Wojciech Jaruzelski was elected president, however the communist candidate for prime minister now failed to rally enough support to form a government and the Sejm elected Solidarity representative Tadeusz Mazowiecki as Prime Minister of Poland. Mazowiecki became the first non-communist prime minister in Poland since 1945 and the first anywhere in Eastern Europe for 40 years. Under Mazowiecki a Solidarity-led government was formed, and only Jaruzelski remained of the old regime. Communism had collapsed in Poland and within months the famous [Wall in Berlin](http://www.berlin-life.com/berlin/wall) would do the same.

The fall of communism in Poland thrust Solidarity into a role it was never prepared for, and in it's life as a political party it saw much infighting and a decline in popularity. Walesa decided to resign from his Solidarity post and announced his intent to run for president in the upcoming elections. In December 1990, Lech Walesa was elected president of Poland and became the first Polish president ever elected by popular vote. The 1990 elections in Poland, which scored astonishing victories for anti-communist candidates, set-off a string of peaceful anti-communist revolutions throughout Central and Eastern Europe which led to the fall of communism is these regions. In the Baltics people were joining hands in solidarity, and the cry for freedom could be heard in the [Estonian Singing Revolution](http://www.tallinn-life.com/tallinn/estonian-singing-revolution) and its Lithuanian and Latvian counterparts. The example of Solidarity had inspired the oppressed peoples of the entire Eastern Bloc to stand together and demand their independence. By Christmas of 1991, the USSR had ceased to exist, and all the former communist territories across Eurasia became sovereign entities once again.

Today Solidarity's role in Polish politics is limited and the organization has again gone back toward the role of a more traditional trade union with a membership that currently exceeds 1.1 million. Summer 2005 marked the 25th anniversary of the historic Solidarity movement, remembering the hardships of its humble beginnings and celebrating the changes those hardships inspired across the continent.

