Chapter Ten
The Solidarity Offensive

Zbigniew Bogacz: Though we told people we were fighting for free trade unions, I knew it was a fight against communism. Solidarity wasn’t only a trade union movement; it was a movement for independence.

Lech Wałęsa: My role lay in appropriately feeding the flame, tossing in the right ingredients, merging ideas, and maintaining unity, while at the same time not allowing a conflagration to break out... The communists had to believe that our actions and aspirations did not threaten the foundations of the system. They could not know that after taking one finger we would reach out in a moment for the entire hand under the right circumstances.¹

The establishment of Solidarity was the beginning of a broad-based assault on the status quo. In the period after Solidarity was established, many battles broadened the power of the social movement at the expense of the Party/state. During the strike negotiations, the workers made it plain that they intended to challenge the nomenklatura system and its privileges. In the final negotiating session in Gdańsk, Jagielski insisted that the demand for a large wage increase was impossible as there were no funds to pay for it. Wałęsa responded:

¹ Wałęsa 2007, p. xv.
‘Prime Minister, we realise that money can’t be produced without something to back it. But we would like to suggest where the money is: in the swollen state apparatus. It can be taken from them’. Here was a clear threat. If the union had the power to control the money, what power would it lack?

Many beneficiaries of the status quo saw the union as a threat. During the negotiations, Bogdan Lis brought up point 12 of the demands, which went straight to the heart of the nomenklatura system: namely, ‘that people in leading positions be chosen on the basis of qualifications rather than party membership. To abolish the privileges of the militia, security service and party apparatus’. When the holders of the privileges denied they existed, Wałęsa responded: ‘We’ll investigate… We’ll get to the bottom of it. Our journals will publish whatever is found’.2

Aleksander Krystosiak said that after the strikes the Party leaders were told: ‘You can sit and do nothing, but draw the money for your salaries from the Party dues. We won’t support you anymore’.

Workers challenged the power and the specific decisions of the nomenklatura, and they questioned their abilities. This trend escalated early in 1981. In mid-January, in the town of Kolbuszowa, the mayor was in jail and the Party Secretary wanted to resign,3 while the region of Bielsko-Biała successfully struck to unseat corrupt officials. In February, workers in the Jelenia Góra region began a general strike, demanding the resignation of the Minister for Trade Union Affairs and insisting that a luxurious sanatorium (used for employees of the Interior Ministry) be handed over to the Public Health Service. They were successful.4 Meanwhile, farmers began to agitate for their right to form a union, and they began to conduct sit-ins. Students and prisoners made their own demands.5

The many independent papers, journals and other publications to which Solidarity had given birth began avidly exposing corruption, starting with Gierek. It was revealed that he had a huge villa amid 4,000 acres of park, with a dining room for 40, a billiard room and a cinema,6 while the former prime minister’s son, according to Ryszard Brzuzy, ‘lost a lot of money gambling in Monte Carlo’.

Zbigniew Bogacz: We learned that the mine engineer was building a dacha for himself, using men who were supposedly working in the mine. The mine director had an orchard with 140 cubic metres of an endangered tree which