

Lech Wałęsa

Overview

Lech Wałęsa (born 29 September 1943) is a Polish elder statesman, pro-democracy activist and union organizer who served as the first democratically-elected **President of Poland from 1990 to 1995**.

He was the **leader of Solidarity** (NSZZ "Solidarność"), one of the first oppositional and freedom-oriented social movements in the communist bloc, for which he was awarded the **1983 Nobel Peace Prize**.

His nonviolent struggle as the leader of the democratic opposition resulted in **Poland's successful transition to democracy in 1989**, bringing the end to communist rule in the whole Eastern Europe.



Photo: Lars Møller

Full biography

Lech Wałęsa was born on September 29, 1943 in Popowo, Poland. The first mentions related to his activity date back to 1968, when he urged his colleagues in the shipyard to refuse participation in the artificial demonstrations condemning the strikes of students. During the strike in December 1970, he participated in the work of the Strike Committee. After the tragic incidents and massacre of the protesters, he joined the work of Free Trade Unions with full commitment. He organized shipyard workers, distributed leaflets, and organized meetings on labour rights and self-education with other activists.

A breakthrough in the life of Lech Wałęsa took place in 1980 with the demonstrations in the Lenin Shipyard in Gdańsk. Wałęsa, then unemployed after being fired from work for “subversive activities,” returned illegally to the shipyard, jumping over her fence to lead the strike. After two weeks of strikes that had spread throughout Poland, Lech Wałęsa, as chairman of the Inter-Enterprise Strike Committee, signed the August Agreements with the communist government, ending the nationwide turmoil and giving the Poles the right to organize trade unions.

Very soon Wałęsa was elected the chairman of the “Solidarity. During the first year of its existence, “Solidarity” evolved into a nationwide movement of 10 million Poles, seeking a fundamental change in the realities of the political and economic system in Poland towards freedom. The “Carnival of Solidarity” ended on December 13, 1981, when the communist government introduced martial law in Poland, arresting and interning all Solidarity leaders, including Wałęsa, and brutally breaking up the reborn Polish civil society. In 1983, in recognition of his leadership role in the Solidarity, Wałęsa was awarded with the Nobel Peace Prize, returning to the headlines all around the world.

Dramatic economic situation and the outbreak of the strike in Gdańsk Shipyard in 1988 gave the opposition another chance. The Round Table Talks began in 1989. The so-called June elections, which took place on June 4 the same year proved to be a total victory for the opposition led by Wałęsa, who became an undisputed symbol of the Polish struggle for freedom.

In 1989, Lech Walesa, as the third private person in history, spoke to the Joint Session of the US Congress. “We the People” – the words with which he began his speech won the hearts of the American authorities and provided liberated Poland with Washington’s support in the difficult task of political and economic transformation.

As a result of his great popularity, in 1990 Lech Wałęsa become the first democratically elected President of Poland in post-war times. His presidency took place in a breakthrough period for Poland, Europe and the world. Its achievements laid solid foundations for Poland’s economic success, which made the country the fastest growing country in the OECD developed countries zone in the last thirty years, as well as gave Poland a membership in NATO and in the European Union.



August 1980 - Lech Wałęsa speaks to people gathered in front of the Gdańsk Shipyard after signing the August Agreements.

Lech Wałęsa Institute Foundation

The Lech Wałęsa Institute Foundation is a non-political, non-governmental and non-profit organisation, founded by Lech Wałęsa in December 1995 as one of the first of this kind in Poland. The Institute aims to:

- preserve the heritage of President Wałęsa,
- promote the principles of democracy, freedom, and peace around the world,
- educate young generations about the historic role of Solidarity,
- enhance new forms of global solidarity in a rapidly changing reality under the Lech Wałęsa’s idea of “The Solidarity of the 21st Century”.

Recently, the Institute held a large conference on the topic of climate protection. The event gathered in the European Solidarity Centre hundreds of politicians, experts, climate activists, and entrepreneurs, seeking to express global solidarity in the issue of climate protection. More about the conference: <https://konferencja.ilw.org.pl/en/>