

Social crisis in Poland at the breaking point

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Widespread protests have sprung up as a result of drastic cuts in social services, by means of which the Polish government seeks to meet the conditions for joining the European Union. Farmers, miners, steelworkers and hospital employees have taken to the streets.

At the beginning of October there was a demonstration of 30,000 people in Warsaw against the economic and social policies of the government of Jerzy Buzek, who heads a coalition of the AWS (Election Campaign—Solidarity) and the UW (Freedom Union). Both of these organisations consist almost entirely of ex- members and leaders of the trade union Solidarity.

In 1997 the AWS/UW coalition came to power with the aim of reorganising the economy. Today the social situation is more explosive than ever and the government is more despised than any of its predecessors since 1989. Recent questionnaires show that 45 percent of the Polish population would like Buzek to resign. His alliance, which received 33.8 percent of the votes in the last elections, would only obtain 17 percent today. The UW would only get 10 percent of the vote, down from 13.4 percent at the last elections.

Poland was considered the most likely of the candidates wanting to join the EU, but now there is growing scepticism. During a visit to Poland two weeks ago by former Italian Prime Minister Prodi, who is now president of the EU commission, Poland's chief negotiator with the EU, Jan Kulakovsky, declared that Poland no longer necessarily aimed at joining the EU before the year 2002. Poland would be satisfied if, during the EU summit in Helsinki in December, a fixed date would be set. Unnamed Western diplomats were quoted as saying the reason for this turnabout was the growth of domestic tensions within Poland, following the attempt to meet the criteria for joining the EU.

An examination of the situation in the farming, steel, mining and public sectors reveals that the economy confronts an abyss. For the largest part of the Polish population the situation is anything but rosy. What predominates are unemployment, low wages, a collapsing health service, a deteriorating school system and a growing social disaster in the rural areas.

In nearly every branch of the economy there are insuperable problems. Poland is incapable of producing competitively and each attempt to modernise the economy to meet the demands of the world market sparks powerful social conflicts.

Because of continuous protests by broad layers of the population, Buzek has been forced to make concessions. This is why the reorganisation of the mining industry, demanded by the World Bank, has proceeded so slowly, leading the World Bank to declare it would temporarily stop credits to Poland.

The World Bank is demanding massive layoffs, something the Polish government has held back from implementing up to now, fearing the reaction of the miners. From the original 67 pits, 53 are still in operation.

In June of this year the government announced a compensation plan. Miners prepared to leave their jobs voluntarily were offered 44,000 zloty (about US\$12,200). By accepting this premium, which was declared to be a first step to becoming self-employed, miners lost all claims to unemployment benefits. Nevertheless 17,000 miners registered. This led the authorities to abruptly halt the programme on the grounds that there was not enough money to pay the compensation. Many miners received shares in the pit instead of the promised money.

A considerable part of the Polish economy consists of farming. Some 18.5 million hectares of land are used for farming, i.e., 59.1 percent of the country's land mass. More than one third of the population live in rural areas and depend on the agricultural sector. This does not mean, however, that there is work for these people. The opposite is the case. Unemployment is growing most rapidly in rural areas.

The social situation facing agricultural workers and the farmers themselves is basically the same. Millions of Polish farmers are living on or below the poverty line. The average income in rural areas is 60 percent lower than in the cities. Even the 10 percent of farmers cited in the statistics as "good earners" have an average profit of only \$1,500 a year.

At first many farmers supported the perspective of joining the EU, hoping thereby to obtain financial support. Many

went into debt to modernise their farms. Now they face bankruptcy because they are unable to pay their debts.

Half of the farms are no more than one hectare of land. They produce potatoes or cabbage, with a cow and a few pigs. No decent water supply exists. In the villages only the priest and mayor have a telephone. With neither enough schools nor workplaces, there is no perspective for children and young people. The result is growing hopelessness, despair and alcoholism.

Now, 46 percent of farmers oppose Polish membership in the EU. They fear it would mean the end of their farms. This is a realistic point of view.

The EU is not prepared to continue financial aid for farmers in the older member states; it will certainly not be willing to introduce such support for eastern European states seeking to join. At the same time the EU is flooding eastern Europe with cheap agricultural products. This has led to the loss of the Ukraine and Russia as important export markets for the Polish agricultural industry. As a result Polish farmers can hardly sell anything. Prices are falling and they are no longer able to cover their expenses.

At the start of the year discontent erupted when farmers blocked roads and border checkpoints and fought with police to demand an improvement in their social situation. These protests were organised by Rural Solidarity, the farmers union, and *Samoobrona* (Self Defence). They demanded a ban on meat and milk imports as well as higher prices for their products. To get the farmers off the streets the government was forced to buy enormous amounts of pork and promise a reform of the agricultural sector.

In trying to establish himself as the spokesman for the protests, a certain Andrzej Lepper adopted an extreme nationalist posture. Before 1989 Lepper was a member of the United Polish Workers Party (the ruling Stalinist party in Poland) and responsible for two agricultural production communities. In 1991, with other indebted farmers like himself, he founded the farmers' alliance "Samoobrona".

Since then he has sought to extend his influence not only over the farmers, but also the miners, steelworkers and dockers. He agitates against foreign influence over Poland and the country's "sellout" at the hands of the present government. He has declared: "The concept of Poland returning to Europe means nothing else but the degradation of Poland to the status of the EU's backyard.... What Bismarck and Hitler were unable to achieve by force—Poland—is being handed over to the Germans with velvet gloves."

His programme, entitled "The Third Way", is strongly orientated towards China, where, despite privatisation, industries are still nominally in national hands, i.e., foreigners can only possess 49 percent of the shares. Over

the past year Lepper won some support from the farmers. Samoobrona reportedly has 500,000 members and Lepper wants to take part in the next presidential election.

The Buzek government has been in deep crisis for many weeks. The bankruptcy of the government poses the danger that figures such as Lepper can emerge and increase their support.

The ruling alliance is falling apart. This has initially taken the form of scandals involving the Polish secret police. The entire leadership of the Ministry of the Interior has been replaced.

Minister of the Interior Janusz Tomaszewsky (AWS) had to resign in September after it was revealed that he had connections to the secret police (SB) before taking office. Janusz Palubicky (AWS), who had been imprisoned several times under the former Stalinist regime, took over the post temporarily.

Palubicky immediately sacked the deputy minister of the Interior, Wojciech Brochvicz, as well as General Slavomir Petelicky, the commander of the special military unit "Grom" (Thunder). Leading politicians from the Freedom Union called Palubicky "an anticommunist fanatic who has lost touch with reality" and become a danger to stability. The press is revealing new details of those who used to have contacts to the secret police on a daily basis.

In the face of unfavourable opinion polls and continuing public demonstrations, the Freedom Union has issued an ultimatum, demanding a change of government and the resignation of the chairman of the office in charge of social affairs, Stanislav Alot, who is supported by the AWS. The Freedom Union maintains that if this doesn't take place within a week, Buzek will have to be replaced.

The plunge in the government's fortunes has inevitable repercussions for the Solidarity movement. Leaders of the former trade union, which organised the protests and strikes against the Stalinist regime in Poland, have participated in nearly every government since 1989. The Minister of the Exchequer Leszek Balcerowicz (UW), for example, held this office under four different governments, including the first government led by Solidarity under Tadeusz Mazowiecki, whose "shock therapy" policies reduced large parts of the population to poverty, in order to pay outstanding debts to the Western banks.

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