

Poland: demonstrations on eve of EU entry

Our reporters
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A demonstration was held in the Polish capital of Warsaw on April 29 as part of an “Alternative Summit” called to protest the European Economic Forum taking place in the city.

Since the 1999 Seattle protest against the World Economic Forum, a number of similar events—in Genoa, Italy, and to a lesser extent in Copenhagen and Paris—turned into mass protests against social cuts and war, much to the surprise of their organisers.

This was not the case in Warsaw, where only 1,000 to 2,000 demonstrators took part. The participants represented a fairly homogeneous group of young people active in radical politics. The political isolation of this protest was bound up with the failure of its organisers to offer any proposals for dealing with the problems confronting broad masses of the Polish population. Though various meetings were held in different parts of the city during the “alternative summit,” the discussion was limited to describing existing social problems.

In the appeal made for the demonstration—held just two days before Poland was due to join the European Union (EU)—the various anarchist and social-democratic groups that called it had not a word to say about this decisive development, which will have serious consequences for the people of Poland, the largest of the 10 countries entering the EU.

As the demonstration assembled, members of the German Socialist Equality Party distributed copies of the SEP European election manifesto in Polish. It was the only analysis of the EU’s expansion to be found at the protest and met with considerable interest. Reporters from a number of radio stations approached the team to enquire about the aims and demands of the SEP. Passersby stopped and listened to discussions, which took place in English and—with the assistance of a translator—Polish.

One young man, Jędrzej Szymanski, who lives close

to Warsaw, reacted to reports that Polish authorities had set up checkpoints on the border to bar demonstrators coming from other countries. He stated: “This cannot be right. It is not democracy when people are prevented from crossing the border or expressing their opinions, irrespective of what they think. For me the issue is democracy. It is being lost in the EU.”

Arkadiusz Młonek, in his mid-thirties, also expressed his disgust with the media, which had unleashed a huge campaign attacking the planned demonstration. “Workers no longer have any influence; capital controls everything. Big business determines the course of the government.” Arkadiusz spoke with satisfaction of the demonstrations held in February of last year against the Iraq war, when thousands took to the streets of Warsaw: “Before, people only demonstrated over bread-and-butter issues, but the response was different with the Iraq war.”

Krzysztof Jusienicz, 55, an unemployed print technician, travelled from outside Warsaw to attend the demonstration. He spoke of his break from the Solidarity trade union movement. “Its policies were short-sighted and led to the introduction of a brutal form of capitalism,” he said. “Today we only have people in power who serve their own interests.”

Krzysztof said he was “totally opposed” to the Iraq war. “Bush is crazy. The Polish troops should be withdrawn. In my youth I protested against the Vietnam War and would never have dreamt that we, the Polish, would be occupying Iraq. It is insane. We, especially, have no right to occupy another country.”

The gulf between establishment politics in Poland and the broad masses of the population could not be wider. The ruling SLD (Democratic Left Alliance) and its coalition partner, the UP (Union of Labour), are currently polling 5 percent popular support. In preparation for entry into the EU, the SLD/UP coalition under Leszek Miller has dismantled social programmes

and intensified both the privatisation of industry and the restructuring of Polish agriculture.

Official unemployment is estimated at 20 percent. The government has also been the object of contempt and mistrust following corruption scandals and the unpopular decision to send Polish troops to Iraq.

In late summer of last year, popular discontent boiled over and tens of thousands of miners protested against the privatisation and closure of the pits. The protest took a violent form when thousands of miners marched through Warsaw to besiege the headquarters of the SLD and clashed with police. Small farmers and health service workers have also repeatedly protested against government policies.

However, even though the appeal for the demonstration referred to “radical alternatives,” no significant sections of workers were drawn to it.

Among the main groups participating in the protest were the Falken, the youth organisation of the German SPD (Social Democratic Party), and some members of the Federacja Młodych Unii Pracy (FMUP), the youth organisation of the Union of Labour, as well as Nowa Lewica, (the New Left), which, under the leadership of Piotr Ikonowicz, recently split from the Polish Socialist Party (PPS). All of them have expressly supported Poland’s entry into the EU.

Although the Polish ruling elite had nothing to fear from these groups, its sensitivity to the threat posed by a new eruption of working class militancy expressed itself in hysteria over security in the run-up to the demonstration.

Large parts of the city centre were barricaded off, and the windows of virtually all shops and department stores were boarded up with wooden or plastic panels. Just a few shops remained open, while a total of 13,000 police were involved in extensive security operations in the capital. Heavily armed police in military-style uniforms were stationed at every corner. Police helicopters circled over the city centre while armoured cars and water cannon were positioned in nearby streets. This operation cost the Polish taxpayers around 2.3 million euros.



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