

Marek Belka elected new Polish premier

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On June 29, the Polish parliament elected Marek Belka as the new head of government by a vote of 236 to 215. Belka replaces Leszek Miller, who formally stepped down on May 2 in the face of mounting popular pressure against his destructive social policies and poor showings in the polls for his Alliance of the Democratic Left (SLD) party.

Belka had initially put himself forward for the post of premier in a confidence vote in the Sejm (lower house of parliament) on May 14, but this was defeated by a large majority of 262 votes to 188. However, parliament could not agree on a replacement and the Polish president, Aleksander Kwasniewski, used his constitutional powers to again nominate Belka. If this second attempt to secure a new premier had failed, it would have meant the calling of early elections.

The change of heart by the parliamentary deputies highlights one fact above all others: under conditions where opposition within the population to their policies is growing by the day, the political elite in the country are closing ranks in order to push through their agenda of privatisation and ruthless cuts to social programs against every form of resistance. While this development can be seen in many other European countries, it finds its clearest expression in Poland.

In last month's European elections, only 20.7 percent of eligible Polish voters went to the polling booths. The government parties—the SLD and the Work Union (UP)—received barely 9.1 percent of the vote. Hence, less than one in ten Poles voted for the current ruling coalition.

This means that parliament have now confirmed a man as premier whose party and policies have just been fiercely rejected by the population. One could not find a more poignant example of the undemocratic character of the parliamentary system.

In Poland and other countries, the fall of the Stalinist regime 15 years ago was celebrated as a “democratic

turning point.” However, the policies of the new “democratic” regimes have nothing to do with the interests of the general public. One also cannot overlook the fact that the new political parties which today wield power are comprised overwhelmingly of former cadre from the old Stalinist regime. The president, Aleksander Kwasniewski, was a leading functionary from his days in the Stalinist youth organisation, climbing his way to the upper ranks of the party. Ex-premier Leszek Miller was secretary of the Central Committee of the PZPR (United Polish Workers Party) and a Stalinist hardliner. And newly elected premier Marek Belka was himself a long-time member of the former ruling party.

Belka's cabinet is essentially no different from that of his discredited predecessor. The key ministries remain occupied by the same people. Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz remains foreign minister, Jerzy Szmajdzinski is defence minister and Jerzy Hausner the economy minister (all members of the SLD). No wonder then that Belka relied above all on the votes of the SLD, which, with 200 of the 460 seats in the Sejm, is the biggest parliamentary party.

In his government declaration, Premier Belka made clear that he will pursue the policies of Miller more aggressively. He therefore announced his intention to cut the government deficit by 15 percent, in order to swiftly implement the so-called Hausner Plan. The implementation of the austerity measures contained in this plan was the final straw breaking the back of the Miller government. The plan proposes brutal cuts to social programs, above all to slash pensions by 32 billion zloty (6.7 billion euros).

At the same time, Belka also confirmed that Polish troops will remain in Iraq at least until the end of the year. This military intervention was sharply opposed from the beginning by the Polish people. In spite of the American announcement that it would bear most of the

financial burden, the Polish participation in the occupation is expected to cost the government 135 million zloty (28 million euros) annually.

Belka devoted a large part of his government declaration to discuss Poland's membership in the European Union. During the recent deliberations in Brussels over the EU constitution, Belka and Foreign Minister Cimoszewicz abandoned many of their original demands, such as those based on the voting methods first agreed at the EU summit in Nice. Belka now celebrates his behaviour in Brussels as a success and declares that Poland had in the process increased its weight within the EU.

With the election of Belka as head of government, ruling circles in Poland are formulating their response to widespread popular opposition. Polish government support and participation in the war in Iraq is to be continued. Social cuts will be implemented with greater speed. In Poland—in common with countries across Europe—sharp social and political conflicts are on the horizon.



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