

A special report from Poland

Part 1: social misery in Silesia

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WSWS reporters travelled to the city of Zabrze in upper Silesia at the end of last year and filed this on-the spot report, the first of a two-part series on Poland. The second part, on the Opel factory in Gliwice, will be posted tomorrow.

Poland has undergone an unparalleled social decline over the last 15 years. When the Stalinist regime collapsed at the end of the 1980s, the country became an oasis for private enterprise—initially at the hands of the old bureaucrats, who changed overnight into avid neo-liberals, and then later under representatives of the opposition trade union, Solidarity. State enterprises were first “restructured,”—i.e., surplus personnel removed—and then denationalised, which was accompanied by mass redundancies. Those in power ensured it was they who landed the top positions inside the new enterprises and accumulated outrageous fortunes. This policy was driven forward by various governments as they made preparations for joining the European Union.

At the end of October of last year, the official unemployment rate in Poland stood at 18.7 percent. More than 250,000 jobs have been lost in coal mining since the reintroduction of capitalism. At the same time, enterprises are enjoying enormous profits. In 2003, the gross domestic product rose by around 3.8 percent, and this rate was expected to reach 5 percent the following year. The year 2004 was the first in which all five of Poland’s remaining mining enterprises expected to realise a profit. Nevertheless, the social situation has worsened.

As a former centre of mining and steel, Silesia was particularly affected by the restructuring wave. Under the Stalinist regime, miners were considered a “working class elite” and were rewarded with higher wages and better social benefits. However, they have been hardest hit by the sackings of the last 15 years.

In January 2004, the population of Zabrze in upper Silesia was 192,000. But the city has been undergoing a population decline for years; in 1996, some 201,000 still lived there. In December of last year, 14,318 people were officially unemployed, or 22.9 percent of the workforce. The restructuring and pit closures affected many miners. Only 11.1 percent of the registered unemployed are entitled to unemployment benefits, the rest being dependent on social security handouts. This welfare assistance, however, is too meagre to survive on.

One family of six we spoke to, who asked us not to use their real names, lives in a subsidised low-rent housing unit close to Zabrze city centre. Mr. and Mrs. “Maciak” and their two grownup sons are unemployed. Eight years ago, their mother worked in retail and their father in the building trades. Lacking any specialised skills, when most of the pits and industrial enterprises closed, they had hardly any chance of finding regular work.

“My husband was not apprentice-trained and only had a basic school education. Now, when all the factories have been liquidated, one needs proof of a high school diploma,” explained the 45-year-old mother “Sofia.”

According to official figures, the Labour Office only provided some 467 zloty (approximately 117 euros) for each registered unemployed person

for retraining programmes between January and November 2004. Furthermore, these programmes are only available to those who can demonstrate that an employer will give them a job afterwards. For Sofia’s two sons it is even more difficult, since neither has a driver’s licence.

The Maciak family home consists of just two rooms and a kitchen. There is a toilet in the yard. There is no gas supply, and the family have only a cold-water tap. Despite such inhuman living conditions, the rent of 210 zloty (52 euros) consumes nearly their entire welfare support. Just 15 zloty (barely 4 euros) remain for all the family’s other monthly expenditure. Sofia told us: “There are additional welfare payments; for example, I received 40 zloty (10 euros) for shoes. But I didn’t know which of the children I should buy new shoes for. These are ridiculous amounts. There’s nothing else to do but sit down and cry.”

Officially, more money is available to the Maciaks, but in reality it is almost impossible to claim it. Those who do not declare some auxiliary income at the Labour Office are put under enormous pressure. “We get 86 zloty in child benefits,” the father said, “and I declare two to three hundred zloty income from collecting scrap iron. One has to declare something, even if it’s not at all correct. Otherwise, they intimidate you by threatening to throw you out of your home and put you in a homeless shelter, or that the children will be taken away because you don’t have money to look after them. Previously, we only received 50 zloty for the whole family.”

Like tens of thousands of families, the Maciaks must find other ways to make ends meet. Sofia used to make a little money moonlighting, doing seasonal work. Since the birth of her daughter, who is now four, Sofia must remain at home. The sons bring in some additional income, by looking for scrap metal on rubbish tips and scrap heaps or by digging coal from waste dumps and spoil heaps. Sometimes, a family member strikes it lucky, and has the opportunity to work for a few weeks in the “grey economy.”

Sofia Maciak does not see any future in Zabrze. “I can’t see things changing politically. I don’t know how we can get away. For two weeks, my son has been in the West, cleaning hotels. My younger son has no hope. Perhaps he will get some work through family relations, because someone knows someone else.”

Beata Dabrowska looks after families like the Maciaks. She is chair of the non-profit organisation, the Democratic Women’s Union in Zabrze. When it was founded, the organisation stood close to the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) but has since distanced itself from the party under the impact of government policies.

In Zabrze, Dabrowska and her colleagues initially helped women, men and children who were confronted with domestic violence. Later, they expanded their work to providing general legal advice. Now, they help families in the courts and with authorities, accompanying them during trials and trying to arrange work for them. “We look after those people who otherwise nobody helps,” is how Dabrowska summed up the concerns of their group.

For Dabrowska, the situation in which many families find themselves cannot be separated from the social conditions in Silesia. In the past, the family structure was very clear-cut. The man worked down in the pit and was the head of the family. The woman looked after the house and the children. If the man lost his job, the family's reputation also sank; this is why many began drinking. This is how the traditional Silesian miner's family broke apart.

She thinks that the official unemployment statistics are not accurate. Since many receive no financial support from the state, they are also not registered as unemployed. "My clients tell me that they have not kept their appointment [with the Labour Office] because the person for whom they are moonlighting would not let them go on this day. Moreover, many women don't even bother to register as unemployed. They don't see why they should stand in a queue for three to four hours for just 20 zloty in support payments. This is why unemployment is much higher than the statistics indicate."

Then there are also those who have already lost their homes and live on the streets. In the past, every day, one could see people being carried out of the railway stations on carts. Lately, the homeless have been driven out of the city centre, so they do not appear in the unemployment statistics.

The situation confronting the Maciak family is not an isolated case. Most unemployed try to keep their heads above water by working off the books. They are thus utterly dependent on the dictates of the employer and have no security. If the police or authorities notice them moonlighting, then the employee faces a 5,000 zloty (1,200 euro) fine.

"Those who moonlight have nothing, nothing except a few cents and the uncertainty whether they will still work the next day," noted Dabrowska. "Those who moonlight are robbed of their liberties, because in Poland, having a registered address and proper job is the basis for everything. Then you count as somebody. You can request a municipal dwelling, you are covered by health and social security insurance and can go to the doctor; you can take out credit. Those who moonlight cannot even rent an apartment from someone privately, because landlords always ask for proof of your income."

She said those working in the "grey economy" are constantly at risk. "If, for example, there is an accident at work and the person's hand is badly hurt, then the employer will not pay anything. The health insurance scheme will not pay anything. They can't tell the hospital it was an accident at work, because the Labour Office would immediately know that it had happened at work. Then, both the worker and the boss would have to pay a 5,000 zloty fine and the worker would lose his or her entitlement to unemployment benefits. Moreover, the worker could also face criminal proceedings for attempting to obtain health insurance benefits by deception, since the unemployed have only minimal insurance. The employer would then no longer hire them. In cases of lasting injury or disability, there is no entitlement to an invalidity pension."

Beata Dabrowska knows about the other strategies that her clients have developed to put some food on their plates the next day. Like the Maciaks, many families scavenge in dumps and in the garbage to collect scrap metal or other usable materials. In some districts, the different streets are divided up between various families. Others dig on the slag heaps of the now-shut collieries looking for lumps of coal.

Women skilfully manufacture goods at home, like oven cloths or baskets, in order to sell these at the market. Others sell vegetables they have grown in their own allotment or collected from the forest. They must pay high fines if they are seen by the authorities selling their wares. Begging, scams and theft are part of everyday life in Zabrze.

For some young women and girls, the last possibility is often prostitution. If a woman gives up looking for work, she may then get many offers, but none of them are respectable. "That is the only jobs market where nobody asks about your training or whether you can talk properly," Dabrowska commented. "For many families, prostitution is the

only secure source of income. In some cases, men force their wives, and sometimes even parents force their children into it. I have had clients whose husbands rented out their own dwellings where their wives were supposed to carry out prostitution. The man had a younger woman, but his wife was forced to continue to work for him, because he was extorting her, threatening to take the children away from her if she didn't do what he told her."

Catholicism, which is widespread in Silesia, and conservative morals make the situation even more precarious. Many boys and girls are not very personally enlightened, and look for any way of financing their schoolbooks and supporting the family. In this way, accidental pregnancies and serious psychological problems develop. "Some think that it is easy for a woman [to become a prostitute], Dabrowska said, "But when I speak with my clients, I notice that they find it very difficult and they suffer greatly psychologically." Very few prostitutes are able to enjoy any sort of regular family life.

There is rarely any way out of poverty: "Very few social workers would tell a family of eight living in a single room without electricity and with no money for cleaning supplies that the parents should take up this or that training course. They have no way of their predicament. They don't have any sort of training."

Children are also condemned to poverty. Every child gets a one-time payment of 100 zloty (25 euros) for school materials. Parents must then provide everything else. Dabrowska added: "In school, there are IT lessons, but only three computers for three to four hundred children. Of course, the computer science teacher has high demands. But where are children to do their homework on a computer? I myself went through a phase when I was financially at rock bottom, and my child got low grades in school because I couldn't afford to pay for the Internet café. People at the bottom have no opportunities. There are many obstacles in the way of their children's education."

Former policeman and private detective Wojtek Wob (name has been changed) explained how hopeless the situation is for most poor families. Frequently, he is asked to get family members out of the criminal milieu or prostitution, but the chances of success are very slim. People are driven to extremes by their poverty. When he was a policeman, he once arrested a car thief, who then justified what he had done by explaining he simply had no money to feed his family. Wojtek secured the car, but let the man go. He tries to help people, but it is unemployment that is the cause of criminality. With proper jobs, according to the private detective, there would be no criminality.

For his part, the deputy director of the social security office in Zabrze, Edward Orpik, proved to be completely ignorant of and indifferent to the poverty confronting many people. In his oversized and well-furnished office, he explained his Confucian conception of the world: "You cannot change the world; change yourself, then the world changes. Decades of communism meant that people had forgotten to take responsibility for their own lives. Fundamental social essentials, like work, access to training and the health system were assured on a minimum level. As a result, people forgot how to determine their own fate."



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