

Poland: protesting miners clash with police as elections approach

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Angry miners fought fierce battles with police and security forces on the streets of the Polish capital Warsaw at the end of July. Poland's Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) government, led by an unaffiliated finance expert, Marek Belka, had announced proposals to do away with a traditional scheme allowing miners to retire early. According to Polish law, every miner is entitled to full pension rights after 25 years of work.

The government planned to raise the pension age for miners to 65—the age generally set for all workers. However, the arduous work carried out by miners means that many do not live to see their 65th birthday. Others are so ill or debilitated that they are unable to enjoy their retirement. It is not surprising then that the government bill met with broad indignation. The mining trade unions felt obliged to organize a public petition, which was signed by 150,000 people.

On July 26, as the government's "Social Policy Committee" met in Warsaw to discuss the proposals, over 7,000 miners demonstrated in front of the parliament building. Their chants of "Give us our pensions back!" could be heard across the city center. According to press reports, the mineworkers initially remained peaceful when confronted with special-police units. Upon hearing rumors, however, that discussions between the trade union and government representatives had broken down, miners became angry. Street battles developed with police using water cannon and tear gas against the demonstrators. About 60 miners were arrested.

In order to prevent the unrest spreading and the miners being joined by discontented workers from other industries, the media reported tales of violent behavior by partially drunken miners who allegedly went on the rampage and pounced on police. Pictures of injured police and scenes of violent confrontations

accompanied the reports.

At the same time, the government made a climb down. Trade union representatives and a speaker for parliamentary president Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz (SLD) said the committee had decided to retain the old pension system for miners and make an appropriate recommendation to parliament.

This tactical retreat by the government will do little to resolve the problem. Government representatives are unwilling to intensify their conflict with the miners when two elections are looming—parliamentary elections due on September 25 and presidential elections on October 23. This is particularly so because Cimoszewicz is standing for the presidency as the desired candidate of the current president, Alexander Kwasniewski.

The government is simply trying to win time. There is no indication that the forthcoming elections will achieve anything by way of improving the situation for the bulk of the population—quite the opposite. All the parties involved have already announced their intentions to rigorously pursue the existing policies of cuts and privatization, i.e., the same agenda that has provoked a series of protests and demonstrations this year.

During the 15 years since the collapse of Stalinism, coal mining in Poland has been hit hard. Under Stalinist rule, the industry played a leading role in the Polish economy and miners had a relatively privileged position compared to the rest of the population. Since then, however, 250,000 jobs have been slashed in the industry, wages have been cut and working conditions broken up considerably.

Whole regions of Silesia have been plunged into poverty and there are no prospects for any improvement. State support for the unemployed is

insufficient to live on and many are forced to eke out an existence gathering scrap metal from dumps or scavenging for coal from abandoned pits and slag heaps.

According to official data, unemployment in Poland is around 20 percent and among young people it is twice as high. Privatization of the health service has also led to catastrophic conditions. Any initial hopes that Polish membership of the European Union would bring about improvements have been quashed after more than a year of membership.

For numbers of years, the ruling elite in Poland and the entire political situation have been characterized by extreme instability. Every government since 1989 has had one main aim: the reorganization and privatization of industry, agriculture and the health service. This has meant mass redundancies, impoverishment for broad layers of the population and at the same time lucrative posts for former representatives of the Stalinist bureaucracy and stalwarts of the Solidarity movement.

None of these governments, which have all been embroiled in corruption scandals, has been reelected. In order to retain power, the ruling Polish elite has regrouped itself again and again. Parties and election alliances have sprung out of the ground and then dissolved with the same faces, however, reemerging and taking up ministerial posts in the most varied of governments.

The present SLD-led government stands completely in line with its predecessors. Its aim in 2001, at that time under then Prime Minister Leszek Miller—a former Politburo member of the Stalinist PZPR and later chairman of the SLD—was to lead Poland into the European Union. Brussels' directives required a radical eradication of the country's social security systems and this became the government's program. The restructuring and privatization of industry and agriculture were continued at huge costs for working people. In the field of foreign policy the government supported the US war against Iraq and sent Polish troops to consolidate the American occupation. It soon became clear, however, that this government was more deeply involved in a swamp of corruption than any of its forerunners.

On May 1, 2004 Poland became a full member of the EU and one day later Miller resigned. He was replaced by Belka, who had been active in the US civil

administration in Baghdad. The SLD government became so hated that opinion polls registered less than 5 percent support, which meant it had little chance of reentering parliament in new elections. Leading members of government, including Belka, decided to quit the sinking ship once again.

It is now widely expected that an extreme right-wing-conservative government could take power after September's parliamentary elections. The "Citizen's Platform" (PO) and "Law and Justice" (PiS) are leading in media polls with a combined tally of about 40 percent. Both parties have declared their determination to pursue the pro-market agenda and thereby intensify the assault on the social and welfare fabric of the country. At the same time, they espouse Polish nationalism and close co-operation with the US. The PiS calls for the introduction of the death penalty.

The increasing gulf between the population and the political elite is indicated by polls showing that an ever-growing number of people intend to boycott the elections altogether.



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