

Poland: Winter of death for impoverished

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A gruesome social precedent has been set in Poland, a country that for the past seventeen years has witnessed a dramatic attack on the living standards of the working class. At last count more than 240 people have frozen to death since October 2005.

The past several months have witnessed Poland's coldest winter in twenty years. The winter of 2005-2006 has recorded temperatures as low as -35 degrees Celsius (-31 degrees Fahrenheit). The social consequences, meanwhile, have been devastating.

Just over the weekend of January 21, 2006, for example, 27 people died, bringing the total at that time to an amount that far surpassed previous years. In the entire winter of 2004, for instance, 180 people perished. "This [amount of 2005-2006 winter deaths] is an exceptionally high number," police spokeswoman Grazyna Puchalska told the *Associated Foreign Press*. "And the winter is not over yet."

The deaths in Poland are part of a wave of cold weather fatalities, in Eastern Europe in particular, with hundreds also losing their lives in Russia, Ukraine and Romania.

Who are the individuals succumbing to these frigid temperatures? The vast majority are Poland's homeless, whose number has increased rapidly since the official reintroduction of capitalist property relations in 1989. In an attempt to survive the extreme temperatures, many of these individuals seek refuge, often in vain, in unheated or makeshift shelters. Mostly between the ages of 35 and 50, 90 percent freeze to death after becoming drunk, falling in the snow, or falling asleep at bus stops.

Poland's homeless population is composed of many different elements: divorced husbands and fathers, alcoholics, drug addicts, ex-prisoners, the long-term unemployed, and elderly people abandoned by their families because of expensive health care. Also included are those with psychiatric disorders,

unmarried mothers rejected by their families and closest friends, women ill-treated by alcoholic husbands—in short any and all of those thrown overboard as Poland destroyed social protections and embraced the free market.

Children have particularly been hard hit as the unemployment rate, now officially 18 percent (2,867,000 people), has placed unbearable financial problems on a third of the country's families. Approximately three million or 30 percent of children in Poland live in poverty and malnourishment, and 12.7 percent live on the streets. They too have suffered due to the recent cold. Schools, for instance, many understaffed and lacking central heat, have had to close due to the extremely low temperatures. According to *Radio Polonia*, this is especially damaging for many students in the poorer areas of Poland, such as the southern mining and industrial region of Silesia, as these schools frequently offer pupils their only full and warm meals of the day.

According to official government statistics, the total number of homeless numbers around 300,000. The European Federation of National Organizations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA) says this figure can be multiplied by three because of the country's strict eviction laws for renters and apartment dwellers. Also, official statistics are prone to underestimation, as the Polish government has a long history of under-reporting unpleasant facts.

A severe lack of space in shelters and halfway houses has exacerbated this crisis, as only 10-15 percent of homeless people are able to find accommodation provided by advocacy organizations. The rest are discarded, often finding themselves with no options for shelter or rapidly-evaporating social welfare provisions. Some have even resorted to living in the wild, whether in caves, forests, or abandoned coal mines.

The government, now dominated by the far-right and

nationalist Law & Justice (PiS) Party, has done little or nothing to alleviate the situation—only 1.3 million euros a year have been allocated to the homeless problem. These funds go largely into Poland’s miniscule and deteriorating network of short-term urban homeless shelters, which rely on private assistance as a secondary source of support. But since the country embarked on its road of capitalist “reforms” and “integration” into the European Union, these funds have been gradually diminishing.

Meanwhile, habitable space exists in the old *kolkholz*, or collective farms, but the state subsidies that provided for their continual maintenance were withdrawn after 1989. Many have since fallen into disrepair, with an overwhelming number having no reliable electricity or telephone service. Some have simply been abandoned.

The opening up of the Polish economy to private capital after the fall of the Stalinist regime in 1989 has resulted in disastrous consequences for vast segments of the population, whether it has been caused by substantial job reductions, the destruction of domestic industries, or cuts to food and fuel subsidies. This has been a consistent phenomenon in all of the post-Soviet countries after 1989. Every single Polish government since, whether the Social Democratic (SLD) “Left” or the Election-Action Solidarity (AWS) “Right,” has pursued these “market reforms” unabashedly and unreservedly. *Not a single one* has been re-elected, despite glaringly low voting turnouts.

Whereas previously Stalinist Poland had an extensive system of social welfare funded from the national budget, with both health care and social security benefits being both free and comprehensive, after 1989 this sector underwent substantial “restructuring” and “decentralization.” Poles now have to pay much more directly for health care and other welfare provisions. For example, exorbitant fees are now being charged for medical care in hospitals.

Beggars and homeless people became common sights after being virtually nonexistent during Stalinist rule, even though, as a response to the large increase in the unemployment rate after 1989, jobless benefits were expanded. These were quickly eviscerated, however, as laws passed shortly afterward drastically reduced the scope of the unemployment program.

Now, whatever remains of unemployment benefits in Poland is insufficient even for survival. The majority of

the working population barely makes ends meet and many young adults are compelled to work two jobs. Some have even found an extra source of income in collecting scrap metal from rubbish heaps or searching for lumps of coal in abandoned pits.

The average Polish wage has dropped from 625 euros per month in 2001 to 536 in 2003. At the same time, a ruling elite in Poland has emerged, which has been able to enrich itself through “restructurings” and privatizations of virtually every economic sector. Political decisions at all levels are characterized by corruption and nepotism.

The introduction of a revised constitution in April and May of 1997 led to a further deterioration in living standards for vast segments of the Polish working class, explicitly committing the country to “a market economy” and “private ownership of enterprise.”



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