

# Report to ISSE meeting in Warsaw: Nationalism and internationalism in Poland

Marius Heuser  
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*The following contribution by Marius Heuser, a member of the executive committee of the Socialist Equality Party (Germany), was delivered at the first meeting of the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) in Poland on May 19 in Warsaw.*

We meet here today to discuss the war in Iraq, the preparations for war against Iran and above all the need for an internationalist and socialist perspective against war. I will concentrate my remarks on the latter issues, and in particular the experiences with nationalism in Poland, because this question has played a central role in the discussions I have held at universities here.

The Iraq war is a brutal and cruel war. An estimated 655,000 Iraqis have been killed up to June 2006 as a result of the war and occupation. In addition, more than 3,400 American soldiers have died. The names Fallujah and Abu Ghraib have become international synonyms for torture and contempt for human rights. At the same time, all the reasons stated for the war—the allegations of weapons of mass destruction and Iraq's supposed links to Al Qaeda—have turned out to be absurd lies fabricated in order to provide a pretext for the war. There can be no talk of a struggle for democracy under such conditions.

In reality, the Iraq war represents the attempt to strengthen the supremacy of the US and its allies in the Middle East and the Caspian region through military means. These regions have the world's largest oil fields and will therefore play a crucial strategic role over the next several decades in the struggle of the great powers for the redivision of the world.

The ruthless actions of the US arise directly from its economic weakness. The former linchpin of world capitalism now rests on unstable and fragile capital inflows from other countries, has an unprecedented level of indebtedness, and increasingly relies on various forms of financial speculation and manipulation. Washington is using its military superiority to compensate for this weakness and strengthen its position against its competitors.

This driving force is also the reason that the disaster in Iraq has not diminished the danger of an escalation of violence. On the contrary, the danger is increased. The US cannot reconcile itself with a defeat in Iraq under any circumstances. It plans to pre-empt this through a possible military strike against Iran, in an attempt to bring the entire region under its control.

Only a few weeks ago, US Vice President Dick Cheney made clear threats against Iran when he spoke aboard an aircraft carrier stationed in the Persian Gulf. He said that the US would use all means possible to prevent Iran from developing an atomic bomb. The claim that Iran would soon be able to build an atomic bomb inevitably recalls the lies with which the Bush administration justified the war against Iraq. The aircraft carrier from which Cheney made his speech is a component of the military threat the US has assembled against Iran and was only stationed in the Persian Gulf together with other forces in December last year.

The attack on Iraq brought the American elite into fierce dispute with its European and Asian competitors. A military strike against Iran, however,

poses a much more serious threat to the vital interests of China, Russia and Europe. These powers have close trade relations with Iran and fear they might completely lose their influence in the Middle East. The conflicts that might result could unleash a new world conflagration and inevitably presage an international arms race.

Mankind is threatened by a worldwide outbreak of military violence such as has not been seen since the bloody events of the First and Second World Wars. The fundamental cause of war lies in the geopolitical and economic tensions resulting from the reactionary system of capitalist nation states. The United States is not the only country that is pursuing its broad expansionistic interests around the globe. The race for control of resources between the various capitalist powers—the US, Japan, Australia, Russia and the European powers—is seriously aggravating inter-imperialist contradictions.

The Polish government of the Kaczynski brothers unreservedly supports Washington's war policies, even against the will of the vast majority of its own population. With 900 Polish soldiers already in Iraq, some 1,188 Polish soldiers will be stationed in Afghanistan by the end of May. Further Polish troops are fighting in Lebanon against Hezbollah. The decision to approve an American anti-missile defence system being stationed on Polish soil again shows the government's loyalty to the US. When in February of this year, the then-Defence Minister Radek Sikorski spoke out somewhat too harshly against his American negotiation partners, he was immediately suspended from office.

Solidarity with the US enables the Polish elite to push through their own interests in Europe. The country, however, faces a dilemma: On the one hand, since 1989 the Polish economy has been closely tied to the European Union, which accounts for 75 percent of all imported goods and 60 percent of exports. In order to meet future energy requirements, Poland is dependent on gas and oil that largely comes from Russia. On the other hand, the EU and Russia threaten Polish efforts to become an eastern European regional power. The Warsaw elite fears that a united Europe partnered with Russia would condemn Poland to insignificance.

This is why Poland has tried to develop its influence in eastern Europe since 1989. The massive support given to the so-called Orange Revolution in Ukraine and the constant attacks on Belarus are examples of this. The energy conference held last weekend has again made clear this dilemma. President Putin's invitation on the same day that was extended to the Kazhak president Nazarbayev made clear that Russia will not accept Poland's plans for a pipeline that circumvents Russia under any circumstances, and that it also has the means of preventing such a development.

The gulf between the desires of the Polish ruling elite and its material influence in Europe drives Poland into the arms of the US. It humbly goes along with every step of the world power in the hope that this will increase its weight in respect to its neighbours. Against a background of intensifying international contradictions, the Polish government hopes to secure more room for manoeuvre in Eastern Europe.

Its simultaneous economic dependence on the EU explains the incessant zigzag course of Polish policy, which swings back and forth between European unification and aggressive demarcation.

With the Kaczynski brothers, extremely nationalist forces from within the Polish elite have now taken over the helm. Like Putin, they strive for national consolidation, to prevent the sell-off of Polish enterprises and pursue an aggressive foreign policy. The victims of such a policy are not only the Iraqi, Afghani and perhaps soon Iranian civilians, but also the Polish workers themselves.

The Kaczynskis have often compared their politics with those of the brutal dictator Jozef Pilsudski and thereby express their contempt for fundamental democratic principles. When the constitutional court recently declared unconstitutional their so-called “lustration law” (in post-Stalinist Europe this term generally signifies a process of vetting those in public life to see if they had collaborated with the former regime), the prime minister rushed to denounce the judges themselves as ex-informers, and then proceeded to change the constitution. The Kaczynskis are using the law to reorganise the entire state apparatus and control the media.

Attacks on democratic rights are always aimed at breaking the resistance of the masses. The pro-war policies of the Polish elite can only be financed through harsher attacks on workers’ social rights. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the Kaczynskis are essentially maintaining the austerity measures of the previous government, despite various reformist appeals.

In the preparation for this meeting, I held many discussions with students in Warsaw, the result of which made me decide to place the emphasis of my contribution on the Polish question. Many students were very open towards our internationalist perspective. However, there were also very many who argued from a very nationalist point of view. A student from the Politechnika expressed this very clearly; he told me that he was for the Iraq war because it was good for Poland. He explained: “I am a Pole. What is good for Poland is also good for me.”

He could not be more wrong. Polish history has repeatedly shown that this nationalist orientation has proved to be a dangerous trap for workers. More than once, the Polish population has had to pay a bitter price for the grandiose fantasies of the Polish elite.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, a fierce debate consumed the Polish and international socialist movement concerning the programme of Polish socialism. The newly formed Socialist Party of Poland (PPS) held the position that it was the task of Polish socialists to support the national bourgeoisie in their fight against Russian Czarism and for an independent Poland. Only such a struggle, the PPS explained, can push back Czarism, ensure capitalist development takes place in Poland and so create the basis for socialism and the liberation of the workers.

In contrast, the Polish Marxists—and above all, Rosa Luxemburg—held the view that economic developments left no room for the bourgeois-democratic emancipation of the Polish nation. Since the Polish economy was inseparably bound up with the Russian, Poland’s national bourgeoisie had no interest in independence from Czarism. It could not resolve the tasks of the bourgeois-democratic revolution. From this fact, Luxemburg concluded that the allies of the Polish workers in the fight against Czarist suppression were not the Polish bourgeoisie, but the Russian workers.

In her doctoral thesis on the industrial development of Poland in 1898, Luxemburg closes with the sentence: “The capitalist fusing of Poland and Russia is engendering as its end result that which has been overlooked to the same degree by the Russian government, the Polish bourgeoisie, and the Polish nationalists: the union of Polish and Russian proletariats as the future receiver in the bankruptcy of, first, the rule of Russian Czarism, and then the rule of Polish-Russian capital.”

Thus, two completely different outlooks confronted each other in Poland’s socialist movement: The social patriots in the PPS wanted to establish a bourgeois Polish nation state, while the Marxists understood

that for the workers there could only be progress in a common struggle of the Russian and Polish workers’ movements.

How deep these differences were could be seen in 1905, when revolution broke out in Russia, and Poland was also shaken by violent mass strikes. After the great Russian general strike in December 1905, Daszynski, the chairman of the PPS in Galicia, wrote an open letter in the Cracow edition of the social democratic newspaper *Vorwärts* in which he turned angrily against any general strike on Polish soil: at a time when Czarism is crumbling, the Poles should concentrate on their own goal, national independence. In this situation, he wrote, it would be an error to weaken one’s own bourgeoisie. For its part, this bourgeoisie certainly did not deviate one moment from its support for the Czar.

Thereafter, the social patriotic movement, led by Pilsudski, assumed ever more reactionary forms. The socialist movement, however, grouped itself increasingly around the thought of Luxemburg.

After the First World War, the situation fundamentally changed. The October Revolution in Russia had swept away Czarism and with it Russian capitalism. The unexpected war defeat of both Germany and Russia offered the Polish nationalists an opportunity to reconstitute Poland as a nation state.

Did this mean that Luxemburg’s analysis had been disproved? Did it show that the Polish state was viable?

The opposite was the case. The events that followed completely confirmed the core of Luxemburg’s ideas. The social patriots had always proceeded on the basis of the impossibility of a socialist revolution in Russia. Therefore, they regarded the Polish bourgeoisie as their natural ally. Now, after this revolution had arrived, their leaders turned not to the Russian workers’ state, but instead supported the bourgeoisie to prevent the spreading of the revolution to Poland.

Pilsudski became the leader of the Polish state and endeavoured primarily to repulse the influence of the Soviet workers’ state and establish an eastern European federation under Polish supremacy. To this end, he forced Russia into war. He did not stand alone but was able to rely on substantial support from the Western powers, in particular France and England. The fact that this support proved relatively limited was largely due to the resistance of the workers’ movement in these countries.

The development of the Polish nation state was thus closely linked with the Russian revolution. From the beginning, this shaped its character. There can be no talk of a progressive bourgeois democratic development of Poland in the interwar years. The country did not develop as an independent capitalist power, nor did the population enjoy fundamental democratic rights. Pilsudski fought not only against the first workers’ state in Russia, but also against the workers’ movement in his own country. After leading a military putsch in May 1926, he brutally suppressed all serious political opposition. The Polish Communist Party had to operate under conditions of illegality. Finally, Pilsudski established concentration camps for political opponents and collaborated with Hitler from 1933 onwards.

In view of this history, one naturally asks oneself, why 80 years later, do the Kaczynskis seek to revive Polish nationalism with express reference to Pilsudski? In view of the barbarism of Pilsudski’s state, could not the Polish Communists have won the masses, educated in the spirit of Luxemburg, easily to an internationalist perspective?

It was the increasing nationalism of the Soviet Union that saved Polish nationalism. With Stalin, a bureaucratic layer had taken power in the Soviet Union, which was absolutely hostile to socialism and in particular to internationalism. The interests of the bureaucracy were not bound up with the world revolution, but rather with the stabilisation of its own privileged position. Successful socialist revolutions in other countries would have inevitably placed a question mark over the power of the bureaucracy, which owed its influence to the economic backwardness of Russia and the temporary isolation of the Soviet Union.

Via the Comintern, the bureaucracy tried to control the Communist Parties of all countries and to subordinate them to the interests of Russian foreign policy. In Poland, the Stalinist interventions were particularly violent, culminating in the dissolution and physical destruction of the Polish Communist Party in 1938.

The support for Pilsudski's May putsch by the Polish CP was a direct result of Stalin and Bukharin's "two-stage theory," which was now Comintern policy. According to this theory, in underdeveloped countries the communist parties had to support the national bourgeoisie in the struggle for independence and relinquish any socialist demands for the time being. This was nothing more than a return to the positions of the social patriots.

In the following years, the Polish CP was victim of numerous purges. Starting from the mid-1930s, as part of the politics of popular frontism, it was obliged to subordinate itself to the nationalist bourgeois forces around Wincenty Witos in the struggle against Pilsudski. This development was only possible after the heritage of Rosa Luxemburg had been destroyed and every critical voice had been removed from the CP. The CP, which was dissolved in 1938, was finally just a shadow of its former self. The Stalinists had smashed the internationalist traditions of the communist movement in Poland.

The state that was established after 1945 under Stalinist control was just as nationalist as the Soviet Union. The bureaucrats placed in power in Eastern Europe were a miniature version of the Soviet bureaucracy, to which they were completely subservient.

The numerous crimes committed by the Stalinist bureaucracy against the Polish people—the liquidation of the CP leadership on charges of so-called Trotskyist deviation, the lingering of the Red Army at the gates of Warsaw until the Nazis had suppressed the workers rebellion, the redivision of Poland and the brutal resettlement of the population, and much more—laid the basis for anti-communism and the convoluted nationalist resentments against the Soviet Union. Above all, however, it resulted in the growing influence of the Catholic Church.

The Trotskyist perspective, which expressed the interests of the workers, remained completely suppressed. At that time, the Fourth International called for the Polish workers as well as the workers of the Soviet Union and the other Eastern Bloc countries to overthrow the bureaucracy in a political revolution, in order to construct socialism on the basis of the social ownership created by the October Revolution. Such a political revolution was only conceivable as part of and directly linked to the fate of the socialist world revolution.

Polish workers paid dearly for the absence of such an internationalist perspective. They continually came into violent economic and political conflicts with the ruling bureaucracy, but their leaders led them time and again into a national dead-end.

These conflicts found their greatest expression in the strike movement of 1980-1981. The workers' demands went far beyond economic questions and included the right to strike, the freedom of the press and the abolition of the privileges of the bureaucracy. The workers of the other Eastern Bloc countries were called upon to show solidarity. However, cut off from the Marxist tradition, the workers were unable to develop these demands into a political programme for the overthrow of the bureaucracy.

Nevertheless, this movement essentially threatened Stalinist rule. Not only were the bureaucrats themselves anxious, but also the intellectuals and the church, which had gathered around the movement as leaders or advisors. These forces, which included the Kaczynskis at that time, had no interest in the workers' egalitarian demands. They only wanted to ensure they got their own slice of the national cake. From the beginning, their perspective was nationalist in orientation and opposed the interests of the workers.

The more violent the conflict between the workers and the government, the closer these middle layers moved to the bureaucracy. The advisors

feared an independent movement of the workers more than the prisons of the Stalinists. They wanted to prevent the movement spreading to the other Eastern Bloc countries and thus endangering not only Stalinist rule but also their own ambitions.

The imposition of military rule by General Jaruzelski was only the logical consequence of these politics.

Only eight years later, the Stalinists and the Solidarity leaders and advisors sat at a round table, in order to restore capitalism in Poland and establish themselves as the new ruling class. The consequences of these policies are well known to you all. Poland experienced a tremendous social decline in the following years. Vast parts of the country today experience bitter poverty, the health system is in ruins and Polish soldiers are fighting everywhere in the world for profits and oil.

Today, the interests of Polish workers are even more directly linked with the interests of the international working class than in Rosa Luxemburg's times. The international interdependence of the production process has undermined any attempt to defend workers' rights on a national basis. In all countries in the world, the old national workers' organisations have been transformed into open opponents of the workers.

If a Polish worker wants to fight today for higher wages, he or she is immediately confronted with the need to fight for higher wages in the Ukraine, in Russia and in China because otherwise the manufacturing plants will simply be moved there. To defend even their most elementary rights means workers today are dependent on an international perspective. This is certainly the case for a movement against war, which must be international at its core.

The policy of the Kaczynskis stands in the opposite tradition and shows once more the logical consequences of Polish nationalism. In a situation in which the capitalist world system, and in particular its former powerhouse the US, is in a deep crisis, in which the inter-imperialist tensions are appreciably intensified and in which social contradictions are increasing in every country, a democratic development in Poland on a capitalist and national basis is impossible.

Since 1989, no government in Poland has been able to stay in office for an extended period of time. From one legislative period to the next, the workers have said no to the government and increasingly stay away from the elections. The government's extreme social attacks cannot be reconciled with democracy. In the last elections, turnout sank to 40 percent, and as the strongest party the PiS received the support of barely 10 percent of the electorate. Now, following the logic of this development, the Kaczynskis are seeking to change the rules and establish authoritarian forms of rule.

Workers are confronted with increasingly right-wing politics but at the same time see no alternative within the political system—because there is no alternative to these right-wing policies on a national and capitalist basis!

It is a ridiculous venture that politicians from all camps like Kwasniewski, Walesa and Borowski are now seeking to form a "democratic" bloc in order to oppose the Kaczynskis. The present government is the product of the politics of these same people. It is the logical consequence of a policy that for 18 years has stood completely contrary to the interests of the masses. Poland's greatest problem is not the Kaczynskis, but the complete absence of a political alternative.

But this fact confronts workers in every country in the world. While ever more people find themselves directly opposed to social cuts, to attacks on democratic rights and brutal wars, they see themselves confronted with an absolute lack of any alternative.

Our task consists of developing this alternative. And as should have become clear from my talk, this can only proceed on the basis of a close study of history and an analysis of contemporary capitalism. The Polish workers must understand themselves to be part of the European and international working class and revive the best traditions of the pre-

Stalinist Polish Communist Party by taking part in the building of a European section of the Fourth International. This demands above all a conscious reckoning with Polish nationalism.



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