

# Polish healthcare workers discuss their strike

WSWS reporting team  
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Five of the nurses who are protesting outside the offices of Polish Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski are currently on hunger strike. One of them, Agata K., a nurse from the John Paul II Hospital in the southern Polish city of Krakow, is on the sixth day of her hunger strike. Despite this, she was quite willing to tell a *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team of her and her colleagues' plight.

When asked why she was on strike, and what had motivated her to go on a hunger strike, she responded by saying, "The government isn't doing anything." There were negotiations on July 2, but the government insisted "no money, no money."

"I voted for the Kaczynskis [in 2005]," she said, "but this situation is impossible, terrible. How long can it last? Today I won't vote in Poland at all."

When asked about other parties in Poland, she responded, "It doesn't matter. Political 'left' and 'right' doesn't matter." Such disillusionment in the Polish population is nothing new, as not a single government in post-Stalinist Poland has been re-elected to a second term. Parliamentary elections, moreover, are characterized by turnouts as low as 40 percent, the percentage recorded in the 2005 parliamentary election, which brought the now-hated Law and Justice Party to power.

The WSWS asked about the 30 percent pay raise that Prime Minister Kaczynski granted in 2006, to which she replied, "This is not true. Some got 30 percent, some got 1 percent, and even if someone had received 30 percent, this only amounts to around 300 zloty or so [per month]."

Plus, she added, "The 30 percent pay raise wasn't necessarily just for nurses and doctors. It went to hospital directors," who distributed it as they saw fit. Some of the money went for roads and infrastructure, and some eventually found its way to healthcare workers.

"Most nurses in Poland make 1,500 zloty net working 168 hours per month," she said. "This includes nights and weekends. Some make 3,000, but this is very high for a nurse in Poland. I have eight overnight shifts per month. Sometimes I feel very, very bad, but I must go to work."

She told the WSWS that after deducting necessities, such as food and utilities, from her monthly payment, she has nothing, and is forced to rely on her family for financial assistance.

When asked about the violent police assault on the nurses on June 20, she said, "We were on the street and waiting [to hear about the] negotiations that were going on inside the main government building. Police came up and began pushing against us." She pointed to an injury that she acquired from the encounter, then said, "Two women I saw had to go to hospital."

She spoke of the emigration of workers to Western Europe, notably countries such as England and Ireland, which opened their labour markets to countries that had entered the European Union in 2004. "There were 25,000 nurses in the [southern] Malopolska region last year. Now there are only 17,000-18,000 nurses. Many are either going to England or retiring. My friend left for Ireland, and said she will never come back."

Nurses are demanding that their wages regularly be adjusted in line with inflation. "Prices are going up and up, but our wages are not," she said.

The WSWS asked if Agata thought this was only a Polish problem, to which she replied, "In other countries, nurses have problems like mine. Three days ago, a nurse came from South Africa and said she is facing similar problems. Nurses in South Africa are forced to clean," something which Polish nurses are exempt from doing.

Agnieszka, a 27-year-old nurse from the eastern city of Bialystok, said she made 700 zloty (US\$252) per month before she received a 30 percent pay raise in

2006. She now makes only 1,000 zloty (US\$360) per month. “I was lucky enough to get an increase, but it’s so small not to matter anyway.”

After expressing a negative opinion about the Kaczynski brothers, she said, “They are a country within a country. They do anything they want.”

When asked about other parties, she said that she didn’t vote in 2005. “No other parties are satisfactory for me,” she said.

“I don’t want to leave Poland,” she added. “I have friends and family here, but I think about leaving often.”

“This isn’t only about money. This is also about a change in the system. For example, patients are often required to wait in lines for doctors, and some even die because of this.

“This isn’t only a Polish problem. Many countries have healthcare problems. In Poland, this problem has been hidden for too long. It has come up once again.

“Poland has the money. In Poland, there are very few rich people, but very many poor people. Under *Komuna* [the Stalinist regime], people had jobs. People might have been poor, but they had more security in their lives.”

Concluding, she expressed her satisfaction at helping to bring the plight of nurses and doctors in Poland to an international audience through the WSWS.

Marta Haskey-Wonzechowska, a doctor from the main hospital at the Warsaw Medical University, spoke with the WSWS.

“A lot of things that are happening right now could have been avoided if some representatives of the government had started talking to us earlier. For the first four weeks [of the strike], nothing happened. Nobody talked to us; nobody even suggested to have a meeting with us.

“Our representatives had asked for a meeting, but what we heard in return was that we are doctors, that it’s unethical, that it’s immoral, that we should work with patients.”

Speaking of the miners who joined the nurses’ protests, she said, “Miners are a very strong group here in Poland, and they’re known for very radical methods of protesting. The miners came here on the second day when the nurses were here.

“In the morning, the police intervened because the nurses were on the street, and they pushed them

somehow to the grass. So the miners said this should not be the way things are done, that if there were men and they were more aggressive, the police would probably have never intervened. After that altercation, some of the girls landed in hospital, so the miners came here to join the nurses.”

On the political situation, she said, “Every four years there’s a radical change in the government, about 180 degrees, from the left to the right and from the right to the left. I don’t think that right now I would point to a certain person. I voted for the [opposition pro-business party] Citizens’ Platform, but I try to choose the best things from both sides.”

On the evacuation of 30 patients from the general medicine ward of a Warsaw hospital on June 30, she said, “That was a point where we lost much, where society had up to that point generally agreed with us. But here on the media they saw the patients being taken out of the hospital.... Nothing really happened to the patients. It’s difficult to tell public opinion that, however. They have already seen the images on the television, the media.”

She added, “There is no country that doesn’t have a problem with its public healthcare sector. There has to be some public healthcare in every country, because there are people who cannot afford the services of a private system. Besides, there are many procedures private hospitals will never be able to cope with for financial reasons, such as oncology and chemotherapy. An 80-year-old person who has many diseases and takes much medication cannot go to a private clinic. There is no way he or she could afford it.”



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