

Polish city council employs goons against striking bus drivers

Tadeusz Sikorski
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Last month, bus drivers in the Polish city of Kielce took strike action against the privatisation of their bus company and closed down the suburban transport network for two weeks. The town council first reacted with threats but then tried to terminate the strike by force. After the bus drivers refused to back down, the dispute ended with a compromise deal.

The conflict over the future of the urban transport network in Kielce had been simmering for two years after the town council announced plans to sell off the suburban traffic enterprise, the MPK. In the autumn of 2006, directly prior to municipal elections, the local mayor, Wojciech Lubawski, promised the bus drivers a deal aimed at moderating the effects of the privatisation.

Lubawski stood in the municipal election as an independent candidate but was supported by the right-wing parties Citizen's Platform (PO), Right and Justice (PiS) and the League of Polish Families (LPR) as well as the trade union Solidarity. The trade union justified its support for Lubawski against a rival candidate from the coalition "Lefts and Democrats" on the basis of Lubawski's promised social pact for the bus drivers. He was eventually elected with 72 percent of the vote.

By the summer of 2007, the privatisation of the MPK had been finally agreed on, but there was no sign of a social pact. On June 20, the town council signed a preliminary agreement for the sale of 85 percent of the MPK to the Veolia (formerly known as Connex), a French company that runs transport companies in 25 countries. In response, the Solidarity trade union organised protests and token strikes, and when these proved to be ineffectual, threatened to strike on August 14.

The head of Solidarity in the MPK, Bogdan Latosiński, said, "We have had enough of this degradation. We have been in dispute with the company for two years. We have voluntarily worked without wages in order to save the company, but the executive committee still does not want to talk about wage increases. Veolia had promised discussions over the social pact for the beginning of August. The chairman of Veolia was in Kielce a few days ago, but he did not bother having a meeting with us."

A bus driver in the MPK currently earns approximately 1,200 zloty gross (€315) per month.

The town council and the management of the MPK reacted to the token strikes with uncompromising callousness. The chairman of the MPK, Krzysztof Chrabszcz, called upon the public prosecutor's office to prohibit a four-hour strike planned for June 22 and demanded 315,000 zloty (€83,000) in compensation from

Solidarity. The public prosecutor's office ruled, however, that the bus drivers' action was legal.

The situation escalated following the strike, with the council attempting to maintain services by employing city officials and scab drivers from other towns. The drivers reacted by occupying bus depots and setting up barricades. Chrabszcz then dismissed three strikers, including trade union leader Latosiński, for breach of discipline.

The bus drivers were not prepared to give way to intimidation, however, and stepped up their demands. Initially, Solidarity had raised the demand of the promised social pact at the beginning of the strike, but now bus drivers also called for improved wages and working conditions, as well as the outright rejection of any privatisation. The mayor reacted to the militancy of the bus drivers by announcing the dissolution of the MPK.

The situation then turned violent when the city council sought to repossess the occupied bus depots in a military-style operation involving employees of the VIS private security company situated 150 km away in Sosnowiec.

In the early morning hours of August 29, around 100 security guards surrounded the occupied depot, where about 30 bus drivers were sleeping. Armed with batons and tear gas and garbed in combat uniforms and helmets, they broke through the barricades set up by the bus drivers. At the same time, they penetrated several entrances to the depot and drove out the surprised bus drivers. Several drivers were clubbed in the process. The guards failed to take over another depot, however, following a warning to the bus drivers of what was planned.

Even this show of force failed to intimidate the bus drivers. Just a few hours later, at 8:00 in the morning, they sought to reclaim the depot with the help of the morning shift and reinforcements. Despite the use of tear gas, the company goons were unable to stop drivers from re-entering the premises. The guards fled into an office building and barricaded themselves in, while the bus drivers took over the remaining area. Police then surrounded the building to protect the guards, and on the afternoon of the same day, the goons were escorted by the police from the building amidst jeering and booing from bus drivers.

Trade unionist Bogdan Latosiński told the media, "This is as it was at the time of martial law; I did not expect such aggression. One day earlier the mayor assured me there would not be any attempt to use force." In 1981, Poland's former Stalinist regime had declared martial law and employed the military to repel a

wave of strikes across the country.

It is not only the use of force against strikers that makes this event so significant. Such use of force against strikers and demonstrators is not uncommon in today's Poland. In June, for example, the Polish government instructed police to violently break up a protest camp set up by nurses in front of the seat of government.

The events in Kielce are notable for the fact that the town council did not turn to the regular police and security agencies, but rather to a private security service from a city some distance away. The local police were not even informed in advance of plans to evict the strikers, although the situation at the bus depot had been known for weeks. A police spokesman said that the police only learned of the storming of the depot from a call by a bus driver.

The city authorities obviously feared that local police would not follow their instructions and might instead solidarise with the bus drivers. In light of the profound social and political antagonisms in Poland, this could have easily led to a national crisis. It is no secret that, in particular, lower ranks within the police sympathise with the bus drivers.

One policeman told the *Gazeta Wyborcza*: "They told us to drive there because there was trouble. But it was not like being deployed against football fans at a match. What am I to do if the father of my colleague works there? I would have simply preferred to go home."

Several bus drivers told reporters the police were on their side. Over the radio, a police spokesman told bus drivers who had been beaten to register with the local police who would then bring criminal charges against those responsible.

The head of the security service from Sosnowiec complained, "Everything would have gone okay were it not for the attitude of the police who did not support us when the crowd attacked and defamed us.... I have never been in a city where the police have ignored what had taken place and did not support us."

These events reveal the profound crisis confronting the Polish ruling elite. They are isolated from the mass of the population, and if it comes to an open confrontation, they can rely less and less on the loyalty of the police and security forces.

A further interesting aspect is the reason given by the mayor for storming the bus depot. When earlier attempts to criminalise the strike failed and the public prosecutor's office declined to declare the strike illegal, the council needed a pretext. At a press conference, it justified storming the depot with the allegation that it had word the bus drivers planned to ignite fuel and blow up the depot.

The absurdity of such a claim is apparent, bearing in mind that the council did not even inform the police of such an allegedly acute danger. Instead, days passed until a security company could be found that was ready to implement the risky task of re-conquering the bus depots. In addition, the claim was rebuffed by the drivers, who pointed out that fuel tanks at the depots were empty and that they would have never contemplated such a futile action in any case.

The Kielce town council was following a procedure that is becoming more common in many countries: social protest is equated with terrorism as a pretext for repression. Whether it is the

policing of critics of the G8 summit in Germany in June 2007, or the surveillance of government critics in the US, the "war on terror" is being increasingly used to legitimise strengthening the state apparatus against its citizens, curb democratic rights and justify the suppression of strikes, protests and demonstrations.

Following the re-occupation of the bus depot, the town council could no longer afford any further escalation. Just two days later, on August 31, a deal was struck between the trade union and the town council, and the next day the strikers returned to work.

The council promised to retract the dissolution of the MPK, permitting it to remain the only transport company in Kielce. In addition, the MPK is to be converted into a cooperative run by employees of the MPK. The dismissed strikers are to be reinstated, and Krzysztof Chrabszcz is to resign from his post as chairman of the MPK.

What appears at first to be a victory, however, proves on closer inspection to be only a partial success, and a dubious one at that. The demands for higher wages have been completely ignored and there are dangers bound up with the transformation of the company into a cooperative. It is unclear how such a cooperative will be able to raise the finances necessary for the urgently necessary modernisation of vehicles and depots.

There is also the danger that the council can withdraw funding from suburban transport and leave the MPK to foot the bill. The resulting drop in the quality of the suburban transport could then provide the pretext for a renewed attempt at privatisation. Taking these factors into account, it is clear that despite the courageous resistance by bus drivers, the resulting compromise does not even guarantee their status quo.

It demonstrates once again the inability of the Solidarity leadership to defend the interests of workers. Although the city council had manoeuvred itself into a very vulnerable situation, the Solidarity union was all too ready to extend its hand and strike a rapid deal. This is a direct consequence of the union's support for right-wing parties and collaboration with the government. The entire affair demonstrates the necessity for an independent mobilisation of the working class based on a genuine international socialist perspective.



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