

New pro-business government takes office in Poland

Cezar Komorovsky, Stefan Steinberg
20 November 2007

On Friday, November 16, a new cabinet headed by Prime Minister Donald Tusk, leader of Civic Platform (PO), was sworn in by President Lech Kaczynski. The coalition partner of the PO is the Polish Peasant Party led by Waldemar Pawlak, (PSL). In the new cabinet, the PO takes over 15 ministries, while the PSL coalition partner takes three. Pawlak and Grzegorz Schetyna, the PO secretary general, have both been appointed deputy prime ministers with Pawlak also taking over as economics minister and Schetyna the post of Interior Minister. Radek Sikorski, who was driven out of his post as defense minister in the former government, takes the post of foreign minister.

The PO came to power following elections on October 21 in which Polish voters, and in particular large numbers of young urban voters, swept out of office the widely despised Law and Justice (PiS) Party led by Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski. After serving only two years in power, the PiS had called the election following a series of scandals and the emergence of a wave of popular opposition to the government.

In the absence of any credible opposition, and in particular the complete discrediting of the post-Stalinist Democratic Left Alliance (SLD), the fervently pro-big business and right-wing Civic Platform, led by Tusk, was able to gain a majority of votes in the election. It won 41.4 percent of the seats (209 out of 460) in the Parliament (Sejm).

The new coalition will openly serve the interests of big business, and market analysts have already applauded the party's ascent to power. The credit analyst Kai Stukenbrock from Standard & Poor's claimed that Poland's credit rating will now get an upgrade given the fact that the PO has won the elections.

Already in October, Stukenbrock told the Reuters Central European Investment Summit in Vienna, Austria, that Poland's current A-minus foreign and local currency debt rating has been constrained by "political instability" and "delays to reforms." The latter is a euphemism used by ruling elites to signify policies that transfer social wealth from the working class to the wealthy and super-rich.

"One of the main constraints [of the outgoing PiS government] has been the political outlook and the lack of reforms ... for tackling the systems of social security," Stukenbrock spelled out. He reiterated further that Kaczynski's government has failed to "push ahead with the cuts in welfare spending that international institutions say are needed to ensure the long-term security of Poland's public sector."

Polish and European big business interests are now urging Tusk to implement policies that will wipe out what remains of the Polish welfare state. The pro business bias of Tusk's politics is made clear by even the most cursory examination of his party's main demands,

which include:

- * A flat tax (15 percent for personal income tax, corporate income tax, and value added tax), which will relieve the tax burden on society's wealthiest individuals.

- * Privatisation of the remaining public sectors of the Polish economy, a move favoured by the EU and international investors, who are anxious to make quick profits from the expected fire-sale prices offered by the government.

- * Privatisation of health care, a demand of private health insurance carriers and pharmaceutical companies.

- * Decentralization through allocating a larger portion of the budget for local governments, a move that will offload the austerity policies of the central government in Warsaw onto local communities.

- * Higher education "reform," which will lead to a rise in the quality of private universities at the expense of public schools.

- * Halving the number of MPs in the Sejm from 460 to 230, an anti-democratic move that will result in fewer parties represented in parliament.

- * First-past-the-post electoral system instead of proportional representation. First-past-the-post is the system of elections followed in Britain, which deliberately favours larger and more established political parties at the expense of smaller parties.

- * A labour law "reform" aimed at reducing the power of Polish trade unions.

In a recent commentary the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on November 19 welcomed the appointment of the new Tusk government as a step towards a "world-open" regime in Poland and a break with the nationalism associated with Lech and Jaroslaw Kaczynski. While many voters undoubtedly cast their vote for Tusk and the PO in protest at the utterly backward nationalism of the PiS, Tusk's orientation is to European and American big business and finance circles. Such an orientation will inevitably be at the expense of the Polish working masses.

Tusk is expected to improve relations between Poland and its biggest western neighbour, Germany, as well as Polish relations with the European Union. In comments to the newspaper *Rzeczpospolita* on November 6, Tusk stressed the pro-EU orientation of his new government. "Poland's priorities in its relations with its neighbours and with the EU have remained stable since 1989," Tusk said. "The past two years (under the Kaczynskis) did not really change these priorities, but the way of doing things was not very effective in achieving Poland's goals."

The PO has taken a different approach to the contentious EU Reform Treaty in comparison to its predecessors, the Kaczynski brothers. Whereas the latter had antagonized the EU bureaucracy by

insisting on an inordinate number of votes for Poland in the new European Council, and had beat the drum of nationalism by condemning Germany as a whole for the murderous actions of the Nazis during World War II, the PO seeks to tread a more conciliatory path.

In contrast to the former PiS government, the PO has said that it will adopt the EU Charter on Personal, Political, and Economic Rights. PO leader Bronislaw Komorowski has described as ridiculous reservations that outgoing Foreign Minister Anna Fotyga had voiced about the EU Rights charter. Fotyga had told a Polish television station that the charter may open the way to German compensation claims for Polish property confiscated immediately after the Second World War from German hands.

Tusk, on the other hand, has promised to mend relations with Germany and took the opportunity in *Gazeta Wyborcza* on November 5 to describe German Chancellor Angela Merkel as “the best German politician from the Polish perspective.”

While the PO is generally more receptive to the demands of the EU bureaucracy than the PiS, this policy comes at a time when changes of government in a number of major European countries has served to tilt EU policy more into line with its neighbour across the Atlantic, the United States, and away from Russia. The coming to power of Nicolas Sarkozy in France and Angela Merkel in Germany, both open admirers of the US, clearly represented a step in this direction.

For his part, Tusk has made clear that Poland will continue to maintain its close links with the US government. Prior to his election, Tusk made a point of referring to the US as “our closest ally and greatest friend.”

At the same time, Tusk has been exploiting popular indignation in Poland over the Polish military’s presence in Iraq by seeking a “quick” withdrawal of Polish troops from the country, and has called for a more “balanced” partnership with Washington, in contrast to the Kaczynskis’ open toadying behind the Bush administration. Defence Minister Bogdan Klich told the press on Saturday that Poland would withdraw all of its troops from Iraq in 2008. Poland currently has 900 troops stationed in Iraq.

While the PO has made this concession to appease popular opposition to Poland’s pro-US orientation, Tusk told *Rzeczpospolita* on November 6, “The PO and the future government are going to very consistently continue the Polish strategy of close ties with the US. There aren’t going to be any surprises.”

On the same day, November 6, Tusk met with President Kaczynski for talks that focused on the negotiations between the US and Poland to place components of the US’s controversial anti-missile shield on Polish territory. According to *Rzeczpospolita*, Tusk played down any differences on missile defence between himself and the President.

“I am perhaps more sceptical and the President a more declared supporter of missile defence,” said Tusk, “but I am almost certain that we will reach a common position on the issue.”

The PO’s coalition partner the small Polish Peoples Party (PSL) has been involved in nearly every ruling coalition since 1989, but has frequently quit, or been forced out of government whenever its major coalition partner was in the midst of a political crisis and on the verge of a massive loss of popular support.

This strategy of damage control has served the PSL well over the years, and it is precisely how this right-wing conservative party has managed to survive each electoral crisis in Poland, while other parties and organizations have reassembled countless times under different names and programmes.

The PSL has 8.9 percent (31 out of 460) of the seats in the Sejm, and its leadership has stressed that it has broad agreement with the PO on its economic programme. The party favours the rapid adoption of the Euro monetary unit, which will lead to a rapid increase in prices throughout the country and also wants less “bureaucracy” in the public sector, a code word for fewer jobs. Pawlak, for his part, replied, “We have a common view of many things.”

The recent election campaign assumed a very bitter form with personal attacks and the use of the Polish secret services by the Kaczynskis against Tusk and the PO. Yet since his victory Tusk has taken a markedly conciliatory stance towards his opponents.

On a number of basic social issues there are no principled differences between the PiS and the PO. In its own commentary on the perspective of the PO and Tusk, the German *Tagesspiegel* noted: “The Kaczynski party PiS and Tusk’s PO differ less with respect to program but more in terms of their political style”.

Like the PiS Tusk also seeks to make considerable adaptations to the influential Catholic Church in Poland. In line with the Kaczynskis, his party has also made clear its hostility to homosexuality and opposition to a woman’s right to reproductive choice. Both parties share the same opposition to abortion, gay marriage, euthanasia, and fetal stem cell research.

Like the Kaczynskis, Tusk also began his political life in the Solidarity movement. While the Kaczynskis maintained an opposition to the former ruling Stalinist bureaucracy on the basis of support from the Catholic Church and conservative social layers based in the countryside, Tusk represents the layer of the most fervent advocates of the free market among former Solidarity supporters.

The collapse of the PiS government took place under conditions of a growing mobilisation of the Polish working class, including health and public service workers. Tusk was able to exploit widespread hostility to the Kaczynski brothers in order to take power, but there can be no doubt that such social opposition will re-emerge in a short period of time when the real nature of Tusk’s program of “reforms” becomes clear. Under such conditions Tusk can be expected to make full use of the repressive measures introduced by the PiS regime to confront the working class and appease his backers in US and European finance circles.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact