

Polish workers oppose government plan to restrict right to strike

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The following statement will be distributed in Polish at a demonstration being held in Warsaw this Friday to oppose plans by the conservative government to restrict the right to strike.

The enormous level of social polarization in Poland has led to a wave of industrial disputes and strikes. Currently public service workers are engaged in tense disputes with the conservative government led by Donald Tusk. The country's main trade unions, however, are doing all they can to prevent strikes, isolate the industrial conflicts and suffocate any independent action by workers. Now they have gone so far as to support the government with its plans to undermine the right to strike as part of preparations for a much more aggressive assault on the working population.

The frequency and intensity of industrial conflicts have markedly increased in Poland over the past two years. Those who hoped that Poland's entry into the European Union would bring some improvement of the social situation have been disappointed. Instead, membership of the EU has only served to widen the gap between rich and poor. While wages in some sectors of industry have risen because of the substantial shift of specialists and technicians to other European countries, any increases in salary have already been eaten away by a dramatic rise in inflation—particularly in the prices of food and energy.

The cost of living has increased considerably since Poland's entry into the EU. The prices of many basic foodstuffs have increased by between 50 and 100 percent, in some cases even by 200 percent. The price of electricity and fuel has also soared along with huge increases in rents and the housing market. In the meantime, home prices and rents in major Polish cities such as Warsaw, Krakau, Breslau or Danzig are now on a par with western European cities—although the strong position of the zloty in relation to the euro or the US dollar should have served to depress price increases. Should the value of the zloty fall in the near future, then further dramatic price increases will be inevitable.

In light of this inflation, even those workers in some industries who have received increased wages have suffered a real loss in income. Other broad layers of the population, in particular public service employees, have failed to benefit at all and are forced to live at, or near, the poverty level. While a small, super-rich layer are able to enjoy lives of luxury and a small middle class has developed, particularly in the major cities, for the large majority of the population life is becoming increasingly difficult.

According to the Polish office of statistics, 66 percent of all children live in families subsisting below the poverty level. Around a third of all children in Poland are insufficiently nourished, and in 2005 12 percent of the population had to survive on less than the official subsistence level of 387 zloty (approx. €100) per month. In 1996, this total was just 4 percent.

So far, the much lauded economic miracle promised by the Tusk government has only benefited the rich, while life for the population at large is deteriorating. In this situation, the governing Citizens Platform (PO) is planning further attacks on workers' rights. Over the course of the next three years, the government plans to privatise no less than 740 state

enterprises. The sales of these industries are expected to net 30 billion zloty (approx. €8.82 billion). Half of this sum is to be returned to the original owners of the private enterprises whose factories were nationalized after the war by the country's Stalinist regime.

The waves of privatisation already carried out in Poland since the overthrow of the former Stalinist regime have invariably led to dramatic surges of unemployment and cuts in wages.

Under the pretext of "dismantling bureaucracy" the government is also planning to change the country's industrial law. Restrictions on working times are to be loosened, the rights of pregnant women and mothers are to be limited and redundancies made easier to enforce. In the longer term, the government is intent on introducing a so-called flat tax—a uniform tax rate on all salaries, big or small. This will lead to a further enrichment of the rich and super-rich at the expense of society as a whole.

Workers are now expressing their anger at such policies. They are no longer prepared to accept the subordination of every aspect of life to the profit principle. In recent weeks, post workers and teachers took strike action demanding an adequate wage. Before them, miners, doctors, nurses and customs officials had also carried out protests and strikes. Transport workers are currently planning their own action. But the fact is that none of these has led to a successful conclusion or wage increases that would at least compensate for inflation and rescue workers from a life of poverty.

The principal obstacle confronting workers are the main trade union federations. Both the former Stalinist state trade union, the OPZZ (All-Poland Alliance of Trade Unions), and the Solidarity trade union movement regard their main role to be the stabilization of the Polish state rather than fighting for the rights of workers. The Solidarity leadership played an important role in implementing the reintroduction of capitalism over strikes and protests by workers, and the OPZZ has never represented the true interests of the Polish working class. Both trade unions apparatuses share close links with the state apparatus and have even participated on several occasions in recent governments. In the current strike conflicts, the trade unions are doing all they can to isolate the individual strikes and sell them out step by step. Most of the strikers are public service workers and share the same employer—the Tusk government.

The close cooperation between the trade unions and employers has already led to a drastic loss of their influence among workers. During the past 20 years Solidarity has lost 90 percent of its membership and the situation is similar with regard to the OPZZ. Workers are increasingly organizing independent strikes and actions or following the lead of smaller trade unions. This was the case for the Silesian tram drivers and the workers who occupied the Budryk pit at the end of last year.

In the latter case, workers took strike action independently of the OPZZ and Solidarity and occupied their pit in order to achieve a wage increase bringing them in line with the average miner's salary. OPZZ and Solidarity turned to the public prosecutor's office and denounced the strikers and even went on to organize strike-breakers in order to break the

strike.

The miners at Budryk, however, showed all Polish workers that they can fight independently of the big trade unions. In light of the social situation this conflict won considerable public attention—despite its limited success. In particular, the struggle clarified the stance that would be taken by the trade unions in forthcoming confrontations.

OPZZ and Solidarity reacted to the dispute by moving closer to the state and offering their services as a force to ensure public order. Thus the leaders of the two trade unions are supporting—at least in part—a draft bill by the government which would effectively do away with the right to strike. Currently 25 percent of a company’s employees must vote in favour in order to proclaim a legal strike. This figure is to be raised in the new legislation to 50 percent. At the same time the trade unions will only be allowed to enter into wage negotiations if they organize at least 33 percent of the workers in a company.

Currently, only 15 percent of the Polish workforce is organized in a union and this level of organisation is spread between different trade unions. This means the new law amounts to a virtual ban on strikes. Any future strike action would only be possible in future under the auspices of the two main federations. Occupations, such as that which took place in Budryk, are to be completely proscribed.

The main trade unions are openly opposing strikes and cooperating with the state, police and public prosecutor’s office in order to re-establish control over those workers organised in smaller unions as well as disorganized layers of workers. The OPZZ has expressly supported the reforms as a measure that will prevent the “splintering of trade unions” and strengthen “representative trade unions”.

In the current social climate, the plan to ban the right to strike amounts to a declaration of war on the working class. Donald Tusk is preparing an offensive against working people in which his government is quite prepared to use the full force of the police or even harsher measures. Tusk is ready to use all of the power of the state apparatus built up by his predecessors in power—the Kaczynski brothers—to take on the population with the OPZZ and Solidarity bureaucracies standing alongside him.

Everything depends on workers being adequately prepared for this confrontation. The history of Poland is replete with cases of militant and heroic struggles by workers. But it is also full of instances where the ruling elite was able to disarm the workers movement and secure their own power. In 1981, based on the theory of Jacek Kuron’s so-called “self-limiting revolution,” the Solidarity leadership refused to challenge the Stalinist bureaucracy and opened the way for the introduction of martial law. In 1989 the same forces were able to divert a movement by workers calling for democracy and social equality into the channel of capitalist restoration and an unceasing series of attacks on workers’ rights.

In light of these experiences, many workers have turned their backs on the old bureaucracies and are looking for alternatives. Small trade unions such as “August 80,” which were founded in the 1990s on an extremely nationalist and right-wing basis, have undertaken a certain swing to the left recently and have been able to gain some influence. But it is not enough merely to change trade unions. The politics of Solidarity and the OPZZ cannot be explained merely on the basis of their corrupt leadership or bureaucratic structures. The transformation of the trade unions is an international phenomenon and has deep roots.

The re-emergence of war and militarism and the looming financial recession precipitated by the sub-prime mortgage scandal in the US is indicative of the depths of the crisis of the capitalist system. Under such conditions a purely trade union perspective is doomed to failure. Every dispute between workers and their companies immediately assumes a political dimension. At the root of such conflicts is the issue of whether society be organised on the basis of profit maximization, or on the basis of the rational planning of the economy in the interests of the population at large. Because trade unions are based on the principle of increasing the

value of workers’ labour-power within the capitalist system, they automatically take sides with this system in a period of crisis.

At the same time, the globalisation of production has broadly eliminated the basis for national regularization of the market. Workers are directly dependent on their colleagues in other countries in their struggles for higher wages and better working conditions under conditions where employers can shift production across national borders at short notice. For their part the trade unions are organically anchored in the nation state. Their goal was to guarantee workers a larger share of the national income and thereby reduce the antagonisms between labour and capital. With the nation state increasingly-unable to determine the fate of the national income, the trade union bureaucracies have responded by moving closer to the state.

This demonstrates above all the necessity of an international strategy for workers. At the same time, it is just as necessary to draw the lessons from Polish history. What workers lacked in previous struggles was a political perspective, which challenges both Stalinist rule and capitalist restoration from the standpoint of a genuine socialist program. In the postwar period, the Stalinist bureaucracy viciously abused socialist principles and established its own dictatorship over society. The only solution was a political revolution based on socialist principles to overthrow the bureaucracy. The political crises of both 1981 and 1989 called for a program to defend socialised property under genuine workers’ control instead of handing it over to capitalist interests for re-division on the basis of securing the profits of a tiny minority.

The struggles emerging with the Tusk government revolve precisely around this question. They cannot be won simply with union militancy or with a national perspective. The catastrophic consequences of capitalist restoration and the subordination of all aspects of society to the iron law of profit maximization can be countered by building an international socialist party. This is the goal of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and the *World Socialist Web Site*. We encourage our readers to establish contact with our editorial board and help build a section of the ICFI in Poland.



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