

Demonstration in Warsaw to defend the right to strike

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On Friday, June 20, more than 2,000 workers and youth demonstrated in central Warsaw against plans by the Polish government to limit the right to strike and other basic workers' rights. Participation in the protest was considerable when one bears in mind that the major Polish trade union federations had refused to support it. Both the conservative Solidarity and the former Stalinist state trade union, the OPZZ, are cooperating closely with the government to implement the new labour law.

The demonstration on Friday had been called by smaller trade unions such as August 80 and Solidarity 80. In their speeches to the demonstrators, representatives of these organisations together with spokespersons for social initiatives called for an increase in the minimum wage to 50 percent of the average income, and a stop to the privatisation of the health system and housing associations. Speakers at the rally also declared their opposition to the government's plans to smash up workers' rights.

The conservative Citizen's Platform government led by Donald Tusk plans to abolish the right to early retirement for workers with a heavy workload. In addition, Tusk plans to eliminate the right to strike. Workers are only to be allowed to take up contract negotiations with management when at least 33 percent of the workforce is organised in a trade union. In a country where barely 15 percent of the entire workforce is unionised, this amounts to a virtual ban on the right to strike.

The broader background to these laws is the huge level of social polarisation in Poland. While the wages paid to workers in state-owned enterprises are stagnating, the cost of living has risen to a par with western Europe following Poland's entry into the European Union.

WSWS reporters spoke to 27-year-old Marek about this development. He works as an engineer in a factory in Katowice. Work at the factory is organised in a four-shift system and is physically demanding and dangerous. Nevertheless, the young worker receives just 1,800 zloty (about €540) per month. In the last three years, workers at the factory received wage increases totalling 180 zloty (about €50). "During the same period, prices have exploded, however," said Marek, "so my colleagues and I never have anything in our pockets."

A miner from Klodawa attended the demonstration with five workmates. Burdened with hard work underground, he receives just 1,500 zloty (about €450) per month. He said, "In light of rising prices, that is much too little, and now the government wants to take away the right for workers doing heavy work to take early retirement."

The pit where he works is to be privatised within the next three years along with 740 other state-run enterprises. The miner added, "This will only lead to a worsening of our situation, and our wages will continue to sink."

A number of students also attended the demonstration to express their solidarity with the workers. Bartek Grucela studies public relations. In his opinion, the attacks on the right to strike should be met with resistance by the whole population. He is indirectly affected by the measure. His father is unemployed, and his mother is a teacher. For her job involving a high degree of responsibility, she receives just 2,000 zloty (about €600) a month and must feed the entire family. "My own fate is closely connected with the fate of the workers as a whole," Bartek told WSWS reporters.

Andrzej Boris works at in Swidnik. The Tusk government wants to privatise the factory in a probable deal with the Italian company Agusta. Andrzej said, “They would then try to cut our wages substantially, but we want to fight for Italian wages in our factory and in doing so, establish links with our Italian colleagues.”

“The militancy of workers is increasing in line with the price increases” he added. “Many workers earn not much more than 1,000 zloty (about €300) per month and do not know how they will pay their rent, food and heating costs. Therefore, they are ready to protest.” Andrzej is convinced that the plans of the government will be met with considerable resistance on the part of Polish workers.

The social decline suffered by broad layers of the population has led to a rise in the rate of strikes and protests. For their part, Solidarity and the OPZZ have worked closely together with the government and done all they could to prevent strikes or lead them to a dead end. In response, workers have begun to organise strikes and protests within smaller unions. The two main union federations have reacted by closing ranks even tighter with the government and have given their support to the measures to ban the right to strike.

Andrzej Boris explained this development: “OPZZ and Solidarity have done nothing to oppose the plans of the government. Instead, they support the government and take part in three-party discussions, which also include the main employers’ associations. They want to smash the smaller trade unions because they articulate the militancy of the workers.”

Despite the role played by the main trade unions, speakers at the demonstration last Friday avoided any pointed criticism of these organisations. August 80 even went so far in the run-up to the demonstration as to call upon Solidarity to take part in the protest. The latter rejected this appeal and instead organised its own parallel demonstrations in Warsaw.

The Solidarity demonstration involved a few hundred dockworkers from Gdansk protesting against the closure of their factory, together with a delegation of workers from the state-run medical service Sanepid.

One day previously, miners had protested against the abolition of the early retirement regulation. With almost military precision, OPZZ and Solidarity ensured that all protests remained separated from one another. a state-owned helicopter works August 80 and the other smaller trade unions have no principled criticism of the large union federations. Instead of drawing a political balance sheet and soberly analysing the role of the trade unions, they merely call for more militancy. The only serious analysis of the transformation of the trade unions was provided in the leaflets handed out by representatives of the WSWS, which put forward a socialist perspective. Hundreds of leaflets were distributed and found a keen audience at the demonstration.



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