

Besancenot in Poland

Polish PPP congress marks lurch to the right by the new European left

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22 May 2009

Last Saturday, the Polish Labour Party (Polska Partia Pracy, PPP) held its European election congress in Katowice. The PPP is part of the grouping formed by the New Anti-capitalist Party (Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste, NPA), which is also supported by the British Socialist Workers Party (SWP). The spokesman of the NPA, Olivier Besancenot, who had travelled to Katowice, described the meeting as an important step in the “building of a European party of the left”.

Filmed by the NPA’s own camera team, Besancenot spoke about the foundation of this new party, whereby he not only omitted any reference to Trotskyism but also avoided even using the term socialism. Instead, he ruminated about a “third model”, which differed both from capitalism and from bureaucratic rule, saying that central for the European party of the left was the demand that the capitalists should pay for the crisis.

Several times Besancenot stressed the broad agreement between the NPA and PPP. In the struggle, both stood on the side of the workers, which is what constituted anti-capitalism, he claimed. What was necessary now, according to Besancenot, was to combine the struggle of workers on a European level and develop the new party in this way.

In a speech devoid of principle, the chairman of the NPA justified the alliance with a group that has no connection with socialism and that even contains right-wing forces. The PPP was formed in 2001 out of the small trade union August 80, which had been established in 1992 on a purely syndicalist basis. At that time it openly advocated nationalist positions and cooperated with the right-wing party “Confederation of Independent Poland” (KPN). The KPN followed in the right-wing, pro-fascist traditions of Marshal Pilsudski.

In terms of their foreign relations, the PPP and August 80

were oriented to right-wing extremist groupings. In 2002, functionaries of the National Front (Front National, FN) of Jean-Marie le Pen supported a campaign in the upper-Silesian coal district against Poland’s European Union accession.

In the following years, when the social democrat-led government stabilized the right-wing political camp, which was organised in several parties (“Law and Justice”, “Civic Platform” and the “League of Polish Families”), the PPP and August 80 carried out a “turn to the left”.

Today they have taken on the task of channelling the growing rage of Polish workers with the government and the large trade unions back behind a union perspective.

In Poland, the questions confronting workers throughout Europe are coming to a head. While social polarization is taking on extreme forms and millions of workers live in poverty, all the official parties and the two large union federations stand openly on the side of the ruling elite. As soon as workers take up a struggle for their own interests they are confronted with this power bloc. Only about 10 percent of Polish workers are presently organized in a trade union.

Under these conditions, radical protests by angry workers have become an everyday occurrence in Warsaw and the industrial cities. August 80 and PPP have reacted to this development by placing themselves at the head of the protests and actions, espousing radical union demands, while at the same time pushing questions of political perspective and the political lessons from past struggles into the background.

During the entire congress the term socialism was used only once, in a speech by the party’s lead candidate in Wroclaw, Ewa Groszewska. She spoke feebly about how men and women would develop a socialist Europe together, but avoided any reference to the concrete situation or any criticism of the previous speakers.

Apart from this one occasion, the word socialism was not

featured at the congress. A candidate from Lublin stressed expressly that she was not a communist, but only wanted a fair society. The chairman of the PPP, Boguslaw Zietek, told the WSWS that what concerned him was not socialism, but “freedom, equality and fraternity”.

There is a reason for this fear of using the word socialism: The PPP contains a whole number of forces for which even a verbal reference to socialism would be going too far. One of the main speakers at the congress was Bogdan Golik, vice-chairman of the Polish Chamber of Commerce. Golik is the PPP’s lead candidate in Lodz and has previously stood on the list of candidates of the pro-Stalinist SLD. When in government, the SLD implemented a policy of aggressive social cuts and prepared Poland for entry into the EU. In 2004, he was elected to the European parliament on the list of the right-wing populist Samoobrona, representing small farmers. Since cooperating with the right-wing conservative government of Jaroslaw Kaczynski, Samoobrona has lost all support and has little chance now of winning a seat in the European parliament.

In his speech, Golik made clear that all he had changed since the last election was the name of the list on which he was standing, but not, however, his political conceptions. He explained that he was the only European parliament deputy who stood for Polish interests, defending Polish agriculture and Polish fishing. His pro-Polish outlook led him to demand EU subsidies for the liquefaction of Polish coal, which could be used as an alternative fuel source.

Almost all speakers stressed that what concerned them was the need for a “dialogue between the ruling elite and society”. Zietek also underscored that this had been the goal of the occupation of the EU parliamentary delegates’ offices of the governing Civic Platform (PO), at which members of the PPP had drawn attention to themselves recently. “We wanted to talk with [head of government] Tusk about the situation of the workers”, he said.

Instead of an election programme or political statement, the congress merely discussed a paper containing “21 demands”. In contrast to the historic “21 demands” that the striking shipyard workers of Gdansk has posed to the Stalinist bureaucrats in August 1980, the PPP’s list of demands are purely economic and contain no political demands. Where the Gdansk workers had called for freedom of the press, access to the mass media and disclosure of all information concerning the social and economic situation, the demands of the PPP read like a trade union wish list.

The authors were obviously struggling for ideas, since the list contains the same demand for an increase in the legal minimum wage in three different formulations. The 21st

demand calls for a dialogue between the government and society.

The congress never tired of making references to the history of Solidarnosc, time and again invoking the “heroes of Gdansk”, who had made democracy possible in Poland.

On the other hand, none of the speakers referred to the tragic development of the workers’ protests at that time; making no mention of the fact that the right-wing and nationalist orientation of the Solidarnosc leaders made the proclamation of military rule and the smashing of Solidarnosc possible in 1981. Nor did anyone raise how the workers’ protests were misused in 1988/89 to enable the restoration of capitalism, which heralded the greatest attacks on workers’ social rights.

Instead, the congress heard numerous references to Polish patriotism. The meeting began with a film about Daniel Podrzycki, the founder of August 80 and the PPP, who died in a car accident in 2005. The Polish national colours and the crowned eagle formed a regular backdrop in the film, which showed Podrzycki stating, “Patriotism is one of the most important ideals.”

In his closing speech, Zietek thanked Olivier Besancenot for bringing a “fresh wind” into the party. He had previously thought that the PPP was isolated, but now it had found fellow fighters on a European level.

The congress of the PPP marks a clear turn to the right in the project to form a new European party of the left, as advocated by the NPA and the SWP. As the crisis intensifies, these organizations are abandoning even any verbal reference to socialism and are preparing for alliances with right-wing forces in an effort to thwart an independent working class movement.

This must be opposed by the building of sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International throughout Europe. In Poland, this means dealing critically with the experiences of Solidarnosc and by conducting a principled struggle against all forms of nationalism, which more than once has meant ruin for Polish workers.



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