Poland: Last shipyards in Gdansk threatened with closure

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The ceremonies currently taking place marking the 20th anniversary of the collapse of the Stalinist regime in Poland have been overshadowed by fierce social tensions. The event was due to take place at the monument to fallen shipyard workers in Gdansk, which commemorates the strikes of 1970. Construction of the monument was a demand of the mass protests of 1980. But Prime Minister Donald Tusk (Civic Platform party, PO) has announced that the celebration is being moved to Krakow in an attempt to avoid any confrontation with demonstrating shipyard workers, who are defending the last remaining shipbuilding jobs in Gdansk.

The controversy over the 20th anniversary celebrations is characteristic of the unresolved political problems faced by Poland today. Twenty years ago, on June 4, 1989, the first semi-free elections in Poland heralded the end of the Stalinist regimes throughout Eastern Europe and the USSR. The elections were a delayed consequence of the mass strikes of 1980-81, which began at the Lenin Shipyard in Gdansk and went on to shake the entire country. At that time, workers demanded improvements in their economic situation as well as freedom of the press, access to the mass media and disclosure of all information concerning the social and economic situation. The strike wave was only finally suppressed by the imposition of military rule.

Twenty years later, it is debatable what there is to celebrate. Instead of democracy, the workers got capitalism—with devastating social consequences that are increasingly incompatible with democratic conditions. On the backs of the Gdansk shipyard workers, who protested again in 1988 against the increase in bread prices, the leaders of the trade union Solidarnosc, together with the Stalinist bureaucrats, agreed on the introduction of the free-market economy. From that point on, former Stalinists and Solidarnosc leaders have quarrelled over the spoils of the former state-owned property in rapidly changing governments, while social inequality has intensified.

The “shock therapy” of 1989 destroyed the social gains that workers had achieved, and hyperinflation massively depressed wages. In the 1990s, under the auspices of the European Union, large sections of state-owned industry were privatised and restructured, entailing further mass redundancies and wage cuts. Unemployment rose to over 20 percent. Meanwhile, over 2 million Poles have left their homeland in order to look for work abroad.

Gdansk, in the meantime, faces a complete end to shipbuilding. On April 29, shipyard workers protested outside the congress of the European People’s Parties in Warsaw and were involved in violent clashes with police. The brutal police response resulted in 30 workers requiring treatment in local hospitals.

At that time, EU Commissioner for Competition Neelie Kroes had rejected a plan for restructuring the shipyards. The debate was over whether the shipyard owners, who had received development funds of 720 million zloty (about €165 million) from the Polish government in recent years, should pay back this money. This would have inevitably led to bankruptcy. A second proposal considered how the shipyards could be restructured and made profitable—at the expense of the workers. As so often is the case, the European Union acts openly as a tool of the largest European corporations, in order to circumvent the rights of the workers.

The two state-owned shipyards in Gdynia and Szczecin have already had to close their gates because the EU

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forced through the reimbursement of the development funds they had received. Now the holding company United International Trust has taken over both enterprises. Details about the deal are just as vague as the question of whether shipbuilding is ever likely to re-start, or whether the remaining machinery is to be sold off cheaply. What is very clear, however, is that no more than 1,500 of the 3,500 workers who were sacked might get their jobs back—and then only under substantially worse conditions.

Working conditions in Gdansk have already worsened considerably in the past years and months. In 1989 over 15,000 still worked in the shipyards. Today the total is barely 3,000, the rest having fallen victim to privatization and restructuring.

"The pressure of work has increased substantially," according to Lukasz Wyczynski, who has been employed for the last eight years in the Gdansk shipyard. "Since the enterprise was taken over one year ago by a new investor, it is impossible to complete a job in the time allowed," he said. This means that each worker is only able to meet between about 60 to 70 percent of his or her production target.

Net monthly wages sank last year from 3,500 to 4,000 zloty (about €800-900) to 1,700 to 2,000 zloty (about €390-450). Cuts were already pushed through in 2002 and 2003. Wages were often paid late and only in part. "However, at that time we also had no orders," Wyczynski reported. "At present we are building three ships, but nevertheless the wages and working conditions are bad."

Wyczynski and two colleagues have therefore decided to go and look for work in the shipyards in Norway. He sees no possibility of the situation improving in Poland. "The two trade union federations, Solidarnosc and the All-Poland Alliance of Trade Unions (OPZZ), are not putting up the slightest struggle. They do nothing about workers' complaints and just refer to the fact that it is also going badly in other departments." The government would rather ruin the shipyard than save it, in his opinion.

Even if the shipyard is not closed down, further mass redundancies and wage cuts are on the table. The Solidarnosc regional chairman, Bogdan Olszewski, told the WSWS that the union had already submitted a further proposal to cut wages and working hours.

The mood is extremely tense. Hardly anyone in Gdansk understands why billions of euros are being handed over to rescue the large banks and corporations in Europe, while Polish shipyards are being driven to ruin.

The fact that the Polish shipyards could be run down over the last 20 years without any real protest, and that the EU is now able to deliver the mortal blow, is directly due to the role of Solidarnosc and the other trade unions. They have repeatedly agreed to the gradual reduction in capacity, mass sackings and wage cuts while working to isolate the workers' protests. They defend capitalism without reservation and claim there is no alternative.

"Many workers desire the return of the social certainties of 'real existing socialism,'" says Olszewski, employing the euphemistic term used by the Stalinists to describe their bureaucratic system. "The task of Solidarnosc consists in mediating the things today that we have to do ourselves." In Gdansk, the trade union doesn't fight for higher wages or nationalisation; it only wants to secure the present level of jobs. That means a further dismantling of wages and working conditions. As past developments show, that does not exclude mass redundancies, but will accompany them.

Solidarnosc functionary Olszewski rejects any international solidarity between European shipyard workers. Instead, he stands on the side of his own management and regards German and Norwegian workers as competitors: "There is a clear competition between the shipyards, and we do not want to abolish the free-market economy. Whoever builds better ships will get the orders."

Solidarnosc has called off all protests for June 4 and instead wants to restrict its activities to a church mass. It is not likely that a significant group of workers will follow them. Due to its right-wing policies, Solidarnosc has lost considerable influence and now only organises about 2 percent of Polish workers.

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