

Report: Thousands of Polish children go hungry

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Data contained in report recently released by the Polish Central Statistical Office (GUS) reveal severely deteriorating living conditions for the country's working population. The report exposes the existence of more than half a million children who suffer from hunger and severe malnutrition.

According to the report, "Living Conditions of Families in Poland", 1.4 million of the country's 8.9 million dependent children and young people, up to the age of 24, live in poverty. In a telling sign that conditions for Polish children are actually worsening, the report reveals that one in three Polish children are now born into poverty.

About 35 percent of juveniles age 0-17 rely on some form of government assistance. Nearly 600,000 children lack dental care, and 530,000 have no access to any medical services whatsoever.

The report further reveals that about 3 percent of those households with one or more children do not receive enough food because their parents lack funds to provide either meat, poultry, fish or a vegetarian substitute in their meals at least every other day. Many parents also cannot provide their children with fresh fruit and vegetables a few times each week.

Despite these shocking statistics, the Polish government plans to allocate only 550 million zł per year (less than US\$200 million) for the supplementary food assistance programme in the years 2014-2020. At the current levels of food insecurity for youth alone, this would amount to less than 200 zł, or US\$70 per year per child!

This financial restraints limit more than the amount of food poor children are able to consume. The report also reveals that more than 5 percent of families are unable to purchase required school textbooks for their children. Additionally, parents of 1.4 million children admit that

they cannot supply their kids with funds for extracurricular activities such as after-school tutoring, sports or music lessons.

One in three Polish families struggle to pay for their child's summer holiday, one in eight cannot afford movie or theater tickets, 3.2 percent of all households and 6.7 percent of families with three or more children report not being able to purchase prescription drugs, vitamins or other supplements. Almost 16 percent of households reported inadequate heating during winter months, and 20.3 percent regarded their living space as too small.

Poverty is especially severe among families with multiple children and those living in small cities. Danger of poverty was the highest in rural areas (23.5 percent) and lowest in big cities (11 percent). The data also reveals that about 10 percent of families raising three children live in extreme poverty or below the official poverty line, while a staggering 26.6 percent of families with four and more children belong in that category.

These levels of child poverty in Poland are among the highest in the European Union, with only Romania and Bulgaria reporting worse conditions.

Despite government and media claims that, unlike the rest of Europe, "Poland escaped the financial crisis," the GUS report exposes a very sharp growth in income inequality that is having a particularly adverse impact on children.

The process of transformation from planned to market economy, the "Shock Therapy" of August 1989, initiated one of the biggest transfers of public wealth in history into the hands of a privileged and parasitical minority culled from the former Stalinist bureaucracy.

These new plans, designed by free-market economists such as Polish finance minister Leszek Balcerowicz, the

International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, resulted in an extremely drastic polarisation of Polish society. Quick and brutal economical changes that consisted of sudden removal of price control subsidies and fixing the Polish currency in relations to the ecu (pre-Euro currency) became the source of social frustration and unrest. This has resulted in increased emigration, mass unemployment, strikes, marginalisation of large portions of the society, its pauperisation (14.5 percent of the population), and rapidly growing poverty (more than 5 million Poles).

As economist Tadeusz Kowalik writes in his book, *From Solidarity to Sellout*: “Shifting income (and property) from the poor to the rich, making about 3 million workers redundant with small chance of finding work, and concealing the dimensions of lowered employment among disability pensioners and earlier retirees (from 1.5 to 2 million) also meant lower prestige of work, a worse position of the workers and the deterioration of workplace hygiene and safety. The backbone of the working class was broken, the trade union movement was weakened, and for many years offering work for low wages was sanctioned” (Monthly Review Press, 2012).

Prices of many food products went up 50 to 100 percent, in some cases even 200 percent. Gas, heating and housing all became more expensive, reducing real wages and pushing many below the official poverty line of only US\$4 per day. In 2005, according to GUS, 18 percent of the population lived below the poverty line, with 12 percent in extreme poverty compared to only 4 percent in 1996.

PiS, the right-wing Law and Justice Party that expects to win the next election and a main rival of the ruling Civic Platform led by Prime Minister Tusk, cynically criticised the supplementary food assistance budget plan passed by the Council of Ministers on December 10 last year. “We don’t want Polish poverty to have a face of a child whose father is Donald Tusk,” said PiS spokesperson Beata Mazurek. “We don’t want the children to pay for the government officials’ lack of competence.”

For its part, the post-Stalinist SLD (Democratic Left Alliance) has not raised any concerns about growing food insecurity, aside from calling for reductions in municipal authority to distribute food and financial aid, which they present as the primary factor contributing to

malnutrition.

All three of the country’s main political parties, SLD, PiS and the PO (Civic Platform party), are united in forcing additional austerity measures against the Polish working class and clawing back whatever remains of past social gains.



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