

Polish trade unions end miners' strike

Markus Salzmann
20 February 2015

The trade unions in Poland have brought a two-week strike by miners to an end, reaching an agreement with the government that enables it to intensify the attacks on jobs and wages at a later date.

Representatives of the trade unions and government signed a statement last Friday that immediately halted the strike at the coal company Jastrzebska Spolkamit (JWS). In exchange, the company's chief, Jaroslav Sagorowski, is to resign, as the trade unions had demanded. A district court in Gliwice declared the strike to be illegal. But large sections of the workforce were unwilling to respect the judgement.

The despicable deal was negotiated between company management, the trade unions and government. Miners at several company sites had been on strike for two weeks, after management declared a number of collective agreements to be void and unveiled cost-cutting measures. In the future, miners will work six instead of five days a week for the same wages. In addition, one-off payments and bonuses were to be cut.

Strikers showed enormous militancy during the course of the struggle. At JWS headquarters in the Silesian city of Jastrzebie, there were clashes between protesting miners and the police, who used tear gas and rubber bullets.

The agreement was greeted with relief in Polish and European business circles. JWS stocks rose by 11.7 percent to 26 zloty. As the PAP news agency reported, based on comments from departing chief executive Sagorowski, both sides signed agreements in secret talks that will bring significant savings for the company.

The company had been losing 30 million zloty (€7.2 million) per day, during the strike. Prime Minister Eva Kopacz warned of the collapse of the company after more than 5,400 workers occupied the mines.

The shares in mining firms KGHM Polska Miedz and LW Bogdanka rose noticeably after the ending of the

strike.

The strike occurred 11 days after an agreement between the government and trade unions at another mining company, Kompania Veglova (KV). Here, the workers were protesting against the laying off of 5,000 workers and the planned closure of several mines.

After 10 days of protests and strikes, Kopacz had to withdraw her plans.

The minister for state property, Wlodzimiers Karpinski, described the trade union deal at KV as an "historic agreement," and Kopacz explicitly thanked the union for its work.

In recent weeks, it was clear that the workers exerted considerable pressure on the government and JWS management and that a broad movement against the government was only averted by the union's despicable role. Government representatives praised the "responsible" conduct of the trade unions on several occasions.

The deputy chairman of the Solidarity trade union at JWS, Savomir Brudzi?ski, declared that the miners did not want to strike, but they were compelled to do so by Sagorowski. This shameful lie was exposed by the strike vote. More than 18,400 workers voted for strike action and only 236 against.

Trade union spokesman Piotr Szereda repeatedly made public statements that participation in the strike was voluntary so as to encourage workers to break the strike.

Last week, the union voted to accept a savings programme totalling 140 million zloty (€33 million). The only concession they demanded was the resignation of Sagorowski. Szereda declared, "The operator should ask itself if one man is worth all of the losses."

The agreement at JWS serves to prepare deeper attacks on the workforce. "Kopacz has failed," wrote the *Gazeta Wyborcza*. "It is unlikely that the signed

agreement will resolve any of the problems.”

JWS made net losses of 305 million zloty in the first three quarters of 2014. A year earlier, the company made a 71 million zloty profit in the same period. Poland has Europe’s second-largest coal reserve. More than 100,000 people are employed in the mining industry. The companies are losing an average of €15 per ton due to dilapidated infrastructure and falling energy prices.

The fact that the government has temporarily abandoned the restructuring plan is due to fears over mass protests in an election year. Presidential elections take place in May and parliamentary elections in October.

“From the political standpoint, there is a risk of protests if the sector is fully and comprehensively restructured, which means eliminating jobs,” an economic adviser to the government was cited by the *Financial Times*. “But viewed economically, it is the only viable solution.”

Polish Deputy Economy Minister Tomasz Tomczykiewicz declared in a radio broadcast that the privileges of the miners were a relic of the country’s socialist past.

President Bronislaw Komorowski from the Citizens Platform (PO), which is also the party of Prime Minister Kopacz, is concerned over his reelection. He is threatened with losing votes in the country’s impoverished south, where the mining is concentrated.

But above all, an expansion of the protests is feared. In January, sections of doctors protested against pay rates in the health sector. On Wednesday, hundreds of farmers drove to Warsaw with their tractors, where they blocked the main streets. Among other things, they are demanding compensation for government measures in the milk and pig meat markets. The West Pomeranian farmers are also calling for a halt to the sale of state land to foreign investors. In Pырzyce, for example, 60 percent of all land has been promised to foreign investors.

The country’s trade unions, especially the two major associations Solidarity and OPZZ, have a long record of sabotaging workers’ struggles. Solidarity emerged in the huge workers’ strikes of the 1980s against the Stalinist regime. At the time, it had around 10 million members. But its support for the reintroduction of capitalism in Poland and the destruction of jobs and

social rights that went with it resulted in it losing around 90 percent of its members in the 1990s.

Today, only around 12 percent of the workers are organised in trade unions. As the social crisis deepens, Solidarity is emerging ever more openly in opposition to the working class. The union established close relations with the PO during the government of Kopacz’s predecessor, Donald Tusk. The OPZZ, as part of the Stalinist state party in Poland, also has a legacy of suppressing workers’ strikes and protests.

It is beyond doubt that strikes and other forms of social conflict will increase. In these struggles, Polish workers must organise independently of the trade unions. The coming strikes by miners will only be successful if they are led as part of a European-wide struggle for genuine socialism and the overthrow of the capitalist system.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact