

The shift to the right in Poland and the crisis of the EU

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Sunday's elections in Poland have brought to power an extremely right-wing, nationalist and authoritarian party.

The Law and Justice Party (PiS) follows the traditions of Josef Pilsudski, the strongman of authoritarian pre-war Poland. Its leader, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, is often compared with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, who has changed the constitution dozens of times since his government came to power five years ago, hobbling the opposition and gagging the press. There are also parallels to the French National Front.

Already in 2006, as prime minister, Jaroslaw Kaczynski attempted to secure his power by authoritarian means. His twin brother Lech Kaczynski, then president, was given the right to issue decrees with the force of law. The prime minister had political opponents monitored by the secret service. Kaczynski's government disintegrated after just one year due to differences between the coalition partners. The Civic Platform (PO) took over the government and remained in power for eight years. Lech Kaczynski died in a plane crash in 2010.

The PiS was discredited, and the Kaczynski era seemed to be over. But now the PiS has returned to power with an absolute parliamentary majority. There are a number of domestic political reasons for this outcome; but the full significance and the consequences of this turn to the right can only be understood in a European context.

The European Union, long touted as the embodiment of European unity, peace and prosperity, is increasingly openly revealed to be a hotbed of nationalism, inequality, dictatorship and war. Its efforts to unify the continent under capitalism inevitably means that the biggest financial and economic corporations set the tone and the strongest states force their will on the

weaker ones. Instead of moderating national and social contradictions, the EU is pushing them to the extreme.

This had already been demonstrated in the EU's eastward expansion a decade ago. Instead of bringing the promised prosperity to Eastern Europe, the area became the cheap labour workbench for the major European corporations. While some members of the upper middle class with access to the money pots of the EU found prosperity, wages remained low and unemployment high. The social support systems were smashed. Millions of pensioners, rural residents and those in need of support live in indescribable poverty.

This social counter-revolution was not confined to Eastern Europe. In southern Europe, the EU took advantage of the 2008 financial crisis and the resulting budget deficits to unleash unprecedented social cutbacks. It made an example of Greece, and with unprecedented rapidity set back the standard of living of the majority of the population by decades. The German government played a particularly prominent role in this, acting as the hegemon and disciplinarian of Europe. German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble and Chancellor Angela Merkel were the epitome of German ruthlessness and arrogance.

With the refugee crisis, the consequences of the imperialist wars in the Middle East and North Africa have now returned to Europe. Millions who lost their livelihoods as a result of the American and European military interventions are desperately flocking to Europe, and can no longer be restrained at its external borders.

The refugee issue has politically polarized Europe. While broad sections of the population demonstrate their solidarity and readiness to help, the ruling elites have unleashed a furious campaign against refugees, are erecting border fences and mutually insult each

other. Tensions between the governments have reached such a pitch that the EU may break apart.

Extreme right-wing movements are being deliberately promoted. The German interior minister and Bavarian state premier express themselves in xenophobic tones that were previously heard in neo-Nazi circles. The same applies to the editorial pages of the broadsheets. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, yesterday still the pariah of European politics, is now received as guest of honour of the Bavarian Christian Social Union.

The right-wing movements that are encouraged in this way are not only directed against refugees, but against all social and political opposition. They serve the violent repression of the class struggle, which will inevitably develop in context of the ongoing crisis in the global economy and the escalating wars in the Middle East.

In the Polish election campaign, all these questions have come together.

The PiS conducted a demagogic anti-German and anti-Russian campaign, stirred up hatred against Muslim refugees (of which hardly any exist in Poland), while demagogically exploiting the social question. It could do this only because of the utter bankruptcy of the so-called "left". The social democratic successors to the Stalinist state party, whose member Aleksander Kwasniewski was president from 1995 to 2005, did not even manage to enter parliament.

In its eight years in government, Civic Platform (PO), in close cooperation with Brussels, has implemented brutal austerity measures that led to stagnating wages, chronic unemployment and growing social inequality. Two million Poles have emigrated because they could not find work at home. Wage levels are only one-third as high as in neighbouring Germany.

During the election campaign, the PiS promised to partially reverse the cuts and to stop the closure of the coal mines, against which workers had taken vigorous strike action in the spring. PiS lead candidate and future prime minister, Beata Szydlo, is the daughter of a miner from the region.

Of course, the PiS will not keep either of these campaign promises. It is committed to defending capitalist private property at all costs, is hysterically anti-communist and a purveyor of Catholic intolerance. The exploitation of the social question by the right-wing parties is not an invention of Kaczynski. From

Mussolini, to Hitler, to Marine Le Pen, fascist demagogues have used these means. Once in power they have suppressed every independent movement of workers by force.

Moreover, support for PiS is smaller than would appear from their parliamentary majority. With a turnout of 51 percent and a 37 percent share of the vote, support from just one-fifth of the electorate enabled it to win a majority in parliament. Its membership is just 21,000. By comparison, the Christian Democratic Union and the Social Democratic Party in Germany have just under half a million members each.

The political shift to the right in Poland is part of a pan-European development, which heralds violent class struggles. Given the deepening crisis of capitalism, the ruling elites everywhere are moving rapidly to the right. The great danger is that working people are not politically prepared and organized. Workers must unite across Europe and fight against the EU from the perspective of the United Socialist States of Europe. To do this, they need their own international, socialist party.



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