

Poland: PiS government beats retreat on antiabortion law

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In the face of overwhelming popular opposition, Poland's right-wing government of the Law and Justice Party (PiS) has been forced to retreat on a proposed bill banning abortions. While acknowledging its growing weakness, the government is preparing for more fundamental attacks on the living standards of the working class and an escalation of the military build-up against Russia.

Following Monday protests by tens of thousands of people in about 90 Polish cities against the antiabortion bill, as well as public condemnations of the legislation by EU officials, the PiS government initiated a hasty review of the bill in two parliamentary commissions on Wednesday. The Polish Sejm's (parliament) Human Rights commission had been tasked with reviewing the law after a vote in the Sejm in favor of the bill in late September. After all-night sessions and heated debates, both commissions, with the supporting votes of PiS delegates, recommended rejecting the bill, which the Sejm did on Thursday with an overwhelming majority of 358 votes.

The bill was introduced by the far-right Catholic organization, Ordo Iuris, and would have provided for a total ban on abortion, including for minors and victims of sexual assault, as well as prison terms for women and doctors involved in abortions. Polls showed that an overwhelming majority of the population opposed the bill, with only 14 percent in favor of it. The protests on Monday drew support largely from layers of the middle class and were advertised by the liberal opposition.

When asked why PiS had changed its position on the bill so dramatically within just a few days, Jarosław Kaczyński, the head of the party, declared in the Sejm: "In light of the situation in society we find that the bill will lead to results that are opposed to the goals of those who proposed it."

The liberal opposition's media outlets celebrated the retreat by PiS as a "major victory" (*Gazeta Wyborcza*). From the standpoint of the interests of the working class, this is nonsense and window dressing. First, PiS is still planning to propose another bill to further curtail the right to abortion. Second, either way there exists no right to abortion in Poland. The current law, which is being defended by the liberal opposition, allows for abortions only in the most extreme cases (incest, sexual assault or serious malformation of the fetus), forcing hundreds of thousands of women every year to abort illegally in Poland or seek abortions in other countries.

From the very beginning, the liberal opposition did everything it could to limit the protests against the antiabortion law to gender issues, deliberately diverting them from the larger political questions involved, and trying to prevent a mobilization of the working class against the government. At the same time, the opposition never went further than demanding the maintenance of the current, reactionary law.

The main reason for the retreat by PiS was fear of a broader movement by the working class. Approval ratings for the ruling party recently dropped to just 29 percent, while recent weeks have seen increasing protests and strikes in the working class, including by auto and medical workers.

On the basis of its rejection of the proposed abortion bill, the government is now seeking to appeal to the liberal opposition and the layers of the upper middle class for which it speaks in order to prepare more drastic attacks on the living standards of the working class and to push ahead with the military buildup against Russia. This appeal was well understood by the opposition, which shares the government's fear of the working class.

Last week, Prime Minister Beata Szydło dismissed

Finance Minister Paweł Szałamacha. The week before, the head of the Polish treasury was dismissed. The functions of both the finance ministry and the treasury are now to be handed over to Mateusz Morawiecki, a former banker and close confidant of the head of PiS, Kaczyński. Under his supervision, a new “super-ministry” will be created whose immediate task will be to push through a restructuring of the Polish economy and a reform of the health care system.

In particular, the PiS government wants to bring important branches of industry under greater control of the state in order to supervise a rapid militarization of the economy. Thus, the PiS has announced the building of several new state-owned factories in various Polish cities that will produce armaments for the Polish army, which is undergoing its greatest buildup since 1989. Morawiecki has come forward with proposals to expand the defense industry and make this the heart of a so-called “reindustrialization”.

Jarosław Kaczyński reemphasized the government’s priorities in a speech that he gave Wednesday for the inauguration of the academic year at the Military Institute of Medicine. He said: “We are now in an extraordinary situation – both the armed forces and the health care system have to change and are changing.” He added that the armed forces were now “necessary to Poland as perhaps never before in the previous decades.” While little to no concrete information about the planned health care reform has been released to the public, Kaczyński hinted in his speech that the influence over the health care system of the Military Institute, which is subordinate to the Defense Ministry and supervises numerous hospitals, and the military in general will be expanded.

The Polish health care system ranks among the very worst in Europe. According to the Euro Health Consumer Index, which evaluates the patient friendliness of health care systems, Poland placed 34 out of 35 European countries. The country suffers from a massive shortage of doctors with only 224 doctors per 100,000 inhabitants. Polls show that 75 percent of the population has a “very negative” view of the health care system. Among the OECD countries, Poland has the lowest investments in the health care system. In 2014, it spent only 6.8 per cent of its GDP on health care, far below the OECD average of 9.3 percent.

Due to extremely poor working conditions, four out

five medical students indicate they want to go abroad for work. Last week, thousands of medical workers went on strike for higher wages.

The virtual destruction of the Polish health care system is the result of the combined efforts of all the bourgeois parties that have held power since 1989, including the liberal opposition party PO and the so-called social democratic party PSL. Whatever their tactical differences over aspects of foreign and domestic policy, there is a consensus about the necessity to rapidly militarize Polish society for a war with Russia and to make the working class pay for it.



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