

Police break up opposition-led blockade of Polish parliament

Clara Weiss

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In the early morning hours of December 17, police violently broke up a blockade of the Polish parliament (Sejm) by several hundred protesters. Protests had erupted last week throughout the country against a bill curtailing the right to assembly and another limiting the access of media outlets and journalists to parliamentary sessions.

As of this writing, 20 to 30 Sejm delegates from the liberal opposition party Civic Platform (PO) are still involved in a sit-in at the parliament building to protest the policies of the right-wing Law and Justice Party (PiS).

With this latest stand-off, the constitutional crisis in Poland that began over a year ago following PiS' accession to government has reached a turning point, with the country entering its deepest political crisis since the collapse of the Stalinist regime and the beginning of the restoration of capitalism in 1989.

The blockade of the Sejm started on Friday evening after nationwide protests organized by the liberal opposition against the PiS law limiting media access to parliamentary sessions. Under the law, only five television stations will be allowed to record the sessions, and the number of journalists will be severely curtailed.

Earlier in the week, on December 13, the 35th anniversary of the 1981 declaration of martial law by General Jaruzelski, tens of thousands of people demonstrated in opposition-led protests against the law restricting freedom of assembly. As in previous demonstrations, the protesters on Wednesday and Friday waved Polish and European Union flags.

The bill on limiting media access to parliament was discussed in the Sejm on Friday. Civic Platform delegates protested loudly during the session, occupying the lectern and holding up banners declaring "Free Media" and "No Censorship."

In response, the president of the senate moved a vote on the budget for 2017 to other facilities in the Sejm, banning media from reporting on the vote. The opposition

questioned the legitimacy of the vote, pointing out that it had not been carried out in accordance with the Polish Constitution.

After the session, several hundred demonstrators followed the call of the leader of the KOD (Committee for the Defense of Democracy), which has been organizing the opposition protests since last winter, to block the doors to the parliament. Protesters announced that they would make the delegates, an estimated 200 members of PiS, sit in parliament "until Christmas."

On Saturday night, the police started their crackdown on the protesters. According to the opposition, the police resorted to force. Earlier reports about the use of tear gas by the police were later retracted by the KOD.

At around 2:40 am, Prime Minister Beata Szydło and PiS leader Jarosław Kaczyński, who had been locked up in the Sejm, fled the scene in black limousines. According to some Polish press reports, the vehicles of both were attacked. The police continued to patrol the streets of Warsaw during the night.

On Saturday morning, Szydło appeared on Polish television and declared the protests to have been "scandalous." The minister of the interior, Marius Blaszczak, accused the opposition of an "illegal attempt to seize power." Both statements leave room open for far-reaching anti-democratic measures to clamp down on the protest movement, which will serve to further strengthen the authoritarian regime built up by PiS over the past year.

In an attempt to bring the situation under control, President Andrzej Duda, who is close to Kaczyński but formally not aligned with PiS, met with several opposition leaders. Protesters on Friday had appealed to the president to oppose the policies of PiS, and Duda declared he was "deeply concerned" about the situation and ready to "mediate." The first politician from the opposition with whom Duda met was businessman Ryszard Petru, who founded and leads the Nowoczesna

(Modern) party, which played a key role in organizing the protests.

The president of the European Council and informal leader of the opposition PO party, Donald Tusk, aligned himself with the protesters, urging the government to observe democratic norms and thanking the demonstrators for their protests. Tusk is currently involved in a sharp political dispute with the PiS government, which has accused him of betraying Polish national interests and opposed his renewed candidacy for EU Council president. In contrast to the PiS government, Tusk argues for a much closer orientation in foreign policy to Brussels, and particularly Berlin. (See: Polish government prepares legal action against EU council president Donald Tusk).

The laws introduced by PiS are in preparation for a military confrontation with Russia and the violent suppression of working class opposition. However, the perspective of the opposition movement offers no progressive way forward for workers and youth interested in fighting the reactionary policies of PiS.

The parties involved in the opposition movement include PO, the Nowoczesna party and, increasingly, the pseudo-left party Razem, which is modeled after the Greek Syriza and Spanish Podemos.

While in government, the PO not only enacted deeply unpopular austerity measures, it also curtailed democratic rights. Ironically, in 2012 the PO government took a step toward limiting the right to freedom of assembly, on which the PiS government has based itself in its attacks on the opposition movement. Under the pretext of preventing far-right demonstrations, the 2012 law extended the minimal time between the notification of an assembly and its occurrence and introduced a number of further restrictions.

The unpopular policies of the PO government, in the absence of a genuinely left-wing alternative to give voice to the social and political discontent of the working class, helped pave the way for a return of PiS to power in the fall of 2015.

The Nowoczesna party is an openly pro-business organization, expressing the interests of very privileged layers of the upper-middle class and bourgeoisie that feel economically and politically undermined by the policies of PiS.

Razem serves to channel growing social and political discontent back into the dead end of the liberal opposition. The extent of its democratic commitment can be judged by its alliance with Syriza, which has enacted brutal austerity measures and proceeded violently against

refugees and anti-government protests.

These forces are not acting to defend the democratic and social rights of the working class. They are concerned about the anti-democratic laws of PiS only to the extent that they limit their ability to participate in bourgeois rule and influence the policies of the government.

Tensions within the Polish bourgeoisie are running high over what foreign policy to pursue in the wake of the victory of Donald Trump in the US presidential elections. The liberal opposition has long feared that the almost exclusive orientation of PiS toward an alliance with US imperialism threatens Polish national interests, and now feels confirmed in this regard by the victory of Trump.

In an article titled “What do the nominations by Trump mean for Poland?” the liberal *Newsweek Polska* wrote that “the most concerning [issue] from the Polish perspective is that the nominations by Trump confirm that one has to reckon with a reset in relations with Russia, the victim of which might be the hitherto pursued and, for Warsaw, beneficial US policy in the conflict in Ukraine and with regard to the Eastern flank of NATO.”

The article also noted anxiously that Trump’s cabinet of billionaires and generals would increase social tensions and destabilize the country, also “not good for Warsaw.”

Earlier, the newspaper had published a lengthy interview with Tusk on Polish foreign policy, in which he sharply criticized PiS’ foreign policy. Tusk argued that “the significance of Poland depends on the state of its relations” with Berlin and Paris. The “biggest problem,” Tusk warned, was the deterioration of relations with Berlin under PiS.



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