

As union seeks to end walkout

Polish teachers speak out on why they are striking

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It is 18 days since more than 300,000 teachers across Poland launched an indefinite nationwide strike, closing schools across the country to oppose decades of cuts to education funding and the slashing of wages to poverty levels.

The strike is the largest in Poland for decades, and the first nationwide walkout by teachers in 25 years. It is part of an upsurge of working class struggles in Europe and internationally over the past year, including strikes by teachers across the United States, in Argentina, Portugal, Algeria, Morocco, India and France.

The government, led by the extreme-right Polish Justice Party, has refused to meet the teachers' demand of a 30 percent raise. The government is fearful that such an increase would encourage strike action by other sections of workers, under conditions in which social inequality and poverty have rapidly increased over three decades since the restoration of capitalism in 1989. "This is already a rebellion, not an average strike," warned the leading liberal newspaper *Wyborcza* yesterday.

Under these conditions, the trade unions are working desperately to shut down the walkout without meeting any of the teachers' demands. Yesterday, Adam Zygmont, the president of the Polish Teachers Union (ZNP) in the West Pomeranian region, called for ending the strike in the name of allowing students to complete their examinations. Zygmont adopted the same slanderous argument used by the political establishment, church and the media: that striking teachers—not the political establishment that has slashed education funding for decades—are harming students.

"We do not want to be the ones who will prevent students from approaching the baccalaureate,"

Zygmont declared. "That is why I am asking you in the communiqué" for the union branches to "suspend the strike for the duration of the baccalaureate." He claimed that this was only his "personal opinion" and not the view of the entire union leadership.

While the unions are working to sell out the strike, teachers who spoke to the WSWS expressed their determination to fight, for themselves and for the students. "We are always told that teachers shouldn't strike," said Ania, a teacher with 21 years' experience in an industrial town in the coal-mining region of Upper Silesia. "We are constantly being attacked by politicians," and "even by some priests during service who preach that we are lazy and should stop striking."

She added, "For 17 days, there have been no classes because our government will do nothing to help, and what's more they are trying to turn the population against us. The Vice Minister of Justice compared teachers to the Wehrmacht [the Nazi army that invaded Poland in 1939]. Others denounce us as 'terrorists,' for taking the students 'hostage'—meaning not teaching them."

Ania described the working conditions and poverty-level wages that teachers confront. "I earned a bachelor's and then a master's degree and then studied Surdopedagogy, which means I'm qualified to teach kids with hearing problems. I know two foreign languages and did lots of other courses, mostly at my own cost. I earn about €700 a month."

"The same for my husband. He got two jobs just to earn a normal living," she said. "He found a second school where he works for two days a week for three hours each. It's a 14-km trip both ways to get there," and in the end "he will get €200 a month." Previously,

he took second jobs on construction sites and delivering pizzas.

“My friend, who is 28, has a degree in history, and is still at university to complete a doctorate of history. She is paid about €450 a month for 22 hours a week. You can earn the same working in a supermarket.” Meanwhile, “the average politician gets €3,000 a week.”

“We are being humiliated every day,” she said.

“The strike that is currently taking place in Polish schools is a fight for the dignity of the teaching profession and for the future of education,” said Agata, a teacher with over 20 years in Kraków.

“I work extra hours at my school because there are no teachers who want to work there. I have a second job doing additional lessons several times a week. In our classrooms, we only have the most necessary things. I do all the tests, work cards, paper aids myself at home. I work on my home computer, printer, and buy ink for the printer; I cut out and laminate the worksheets myself.

“We also talk often about the fact that teachers earn extra money working second jobs in stores during the holidays.”

Dorota, who has taught for more than 20 years, said she had seen what is happening to schools in the United States, “and in my opinion we are heading in the same direction.” Teachers in Poland “often have two jobs or we give private afternoon lessons. The system is so sick that students who either can’t catch up or are ambitious pay extra money for lessons after school.”

Joanna, who has taught for 15 years, said she had heard of last year’s state-wide walkouts in the United States, and strikes by teachers in France. She said teachers in Poland should unite together with other teachers internationally. “Each building is as strong and indestructible as the individual elements. In unity, we have power, and we must support each other,” she said.

“When I started work, the teaching profession was respected,” she said. “Now it’s not. It’s very difficult for me to strike. I chose this profession out of passion. But the overloaded programme is impossible. I work every night when I get home until 10-11 p.m.

“Fortunately, my husband is not a teacher, but I am very burdened by the fact that all the maintenance of our family rests mainly on him,” she said.

She spoke against the broader austerity offensive

carried out by successive governments, including both the Law and Justice government and the Civic Platform (PO). “There are no doctors or nurses in Poland. The average age is such that soon there will be no one to treat us. Politicians don’t care because their children go to private schools, and they get treatment in private hospitals or state hospitals especially for them.” Meanwhile, billions of dollars are spent on military spending. “The arming of the military scares the hell out of me,” she said.

Joanna said she had no faith that the union would fight for teachers’ interests. “Honestly, I don’t belong in a union,” she said. “I personally believe they do not represent their union members. They get involved in political or financial arrangements. And that is why many people in Poland do not belong to unions.”



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