

# Coronavirus pandemic in Poland: Silesian miners sacrificed for profit

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The Polish mining region in the Silesian voivodeship has been the biggest hotspot of the coronavirus pandemic in Poland for months. Nearly every day, almost half of the new infections in Poland can be found in Silesia. For example, on June 13, 209 of 440 new infections were in Silesia, 82 of them were miners. The day before, 120 miners had been diagnosed with the COVID-19.

Poland is the fifth largest brown coal and the tenth largest black coal producer in the world. About 100,000 jobs are directly related to coal mining, of which about 60,000 are underground.

The mining region, rich in tradition, is one of the strategic pillars of the Polish economy and is an economic core region due to the industrial region of Upper Silesia (Górnośliski Okręg Przemysłowy, GOP), which is historically linked to it. Almost 3 million people live in the GOP, which is more than in the capital Warsaw.

But it is not only the population density that makes Silesia susceptible to the pandemic. Due to the approximately 80 percent coal-based energy supply, the Polish population suffers from enormous environmental pollution. Officially, around 44,000 people die every year from air pollution—a direct result of outdated technology in both industrial incineration plants and private heating systems. People with pre-existing conditions or previous lung damage are known to be particularly at risk for COVID-19.

Responsibility for the rapid spread of the virus in the region lies with the government and the trade unions. Although the first reports of infection in Silesian mines were as early as the beginning of April, and a nationwide curfew was in place, work in the mines continued. Government and companies publicly denied there was any danger of infection underground.

Today, the more than 5,600 infected miners make up almost one-fifth of all those infected in Poland. The Silesian voivodeship, the main coal mining area, stands out clearly on the Polish infection map, with currently 10,682 confirmed cases and 260 deaths. In total, Poland has currently reported 29,329 infected and 1,247 deaths from

COVID-19. The number of new infections in Poland reached well over 3,000 in the last seven days.

Due to the high level of environmental pollution, on the one hand, and the high infection rates, on the other, the region is now referred to in the media as the Polish Wuhan.

This is accompanied by speculation as to whether the region should be completely sealed off by the army. The government in Warsaw has denied this several times, “but rumours don’t fall from the sky,” the vice mayor of Ruda Śląska, Krzysztof Mejer, commented in an interview with broadcaster *Deutsche Welle*.

In mid-May, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki travelled to Silesia and declared, “The situation is under control and in hand.” At the same time, during May, all exit restrictions were lifted, and schools and day-care centres reopened.

Two weeks later, the number of infected miners doubled. At the same time, Morawiecki announced a consolidation of the mining industry. This means that the 100,000 or so workers who depend on coal mining face the threat of wage losses, increased exploitation, or job losses in addition to the health risks posed by the coronavirus pandemic.

With approximately 5,400 per 1 million inhabitants, Poland has carried out significantly fewer tests than most other EU states. “If it had been decided earlier to carry out tests on a large scale, this level of infection would not have occurred,” according to Andrzej Sołnierz, a former head of the National Health Office (NFZ). For a long time, the miners and inhabitants of Silesia had also warned in vain of possible infections and an epidemic in the mines.

The miners are already exposed to many dangers under normal circumstances: high temperatures, poor oxygen supply and dusty air increase the danger of illness. Explosive gases and often dilapidated technology increase the risk of accidents. Only 3 percent of the miners working in underground mining reach the age of 80, while on average in Poland about 15 percent of miners reach the age of 80.

In return, they earn only 2,000 to 4,000 zoty net (€500 to €1,000) monthly, with additional premiums for meeting

production targets and a 13th month's salary bonus. This corresponds approximately to the average wage in the country.

But even these wages are subject to constant attacks. Since the introduction of capitalism in Poland, countless mines have been closed. Like Germany's Ruhrkohle AG and former East German mining companies, the Polish state is directing the process and taking over the costs of the inherited burdens, while the profits are largely privatised.

For example, the Polish state runs the loss-making Polska Grupa Górnicza (PGG), the largest mining company in Europe. With a 55 percent share, the state is also the majority stakeholder of Jastrzbska Spółka Włowa SA (JSW), which went public in 2011 as the largest European coke producer. The costs of closed-down coal mines are, in turn, outsourced to the state Spółka Restrukturyzacji Kopal SA, which has received around 2 billion złoty in state subsidies over the last 10 years.

Given the poor economic situation of the mining companies and a high production surplus at the beginning of the year, the government had already reduced the miners' working week to four days in January, which meant a 20 percent wage cut. After several protests and street occupations, a miners' strike was stalled at the last moment by a compromise between the unions and the government.

The reasons for the surplus at the beginning of the year were the mild winter and the recession of the world economy. The economic consequences of the coronavirus pandemic will put this crisis far in the shade.

On May 9, the government and trade unions negotiated a kind of short-time working allowance (Tarcza 4.0) for PGG workers. Inactive miners receive 60 percent of their average wage as part of the government's coronavirus measures, a sum that forces many to go underground to survive, despite the dangerous conditions.

The companies and the government are still deliberately downplaying the danger of coronavirus. For example, the State Mining Institute (Główny Instytut Górniczyder, GIG) stated that the risk of infection underground is "no greater" than for workers working above ground, in other industries or for any other resident of the Republic of Poland.

In fact, it is impossible for miners to comply with the simplest recommendations of virologists on infection protection. Up to 50 miners travel together in the shaft elevator to the depths. Even with fewer workers, effective protection against infection is not possible due to the narrow conditions. Even when the train travels to the mining site, measures to maintain social distance cannot be adhered to because the workers are crammed into the tightest of spaces in the cars. At the end of the day, workers then shower together.

Although every miner must now produce two negative tests to be allowed to work, the responsible authorities are hopelessly overburdened with the mass tests, even months after the pandemic began.

Many miners complain that even if they had symptoms, they could not reach the testing station. In order not to miss their shift without a valid reason, which could lead to dismissal, they go underground despite the suspicion of infection. Workers that have been tested often do not know when they will receive the results. Others get no information from the health service or the results of their tests are lost.

At the beginning of last week, Prime Minister Morawiecki again declared that everything was under control. On the same day, he announced that from Friday, 10 mines belonging to PGG and two to JSW will be completely closed down for three weeks, with miners supposedly receiving 100 percent pay. Many more pits with hundreds of infected miners are continuing to work.

Both the crisis-ridden PiS government and the trade unions are driven by the fear that the social discontent in this working-class region will find political expression and that under conditions of a worldwide growing protest and strike movement, the class struggle will also break out openly in Poland.

In their appeals to the government, the trade unions warned expressly of this danger. For example, the successor to the Stalinist miners' union, Związek Zawodowy Górników w Polsce, warned that the PiS government's coronavirus economic stimulus measures threatened "to exacerbate social problems and cause a sharp increase in unrest."



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