

Polish high school students strike to demand end to in-person classes

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High school students across Poland on Monday started a one-week strike to demand an end to in-person instruction in schools. The strike, which has been almost totally blacked out in the national and international press, has been organized primarily on social media under the hashtag #uczniowskiprotest and the slogan “We are scared.”

Students are either refusing to go to school or they are going to school dressed in black. While no numbers about participants have been reported, high school students who spoke to the WSWs said that the majority of their classmates have joined the strike and that it enjoys overwhelming support among teachers and parents. Hashtags relating to the student strike were trending on Twitter on Monday and Tuesday. A petition demanding either hybrid models or stricter safety protections in schools, but not an end to in-person instruction, has gathered over 36,600 signatures as of this writing.

The strike comes shortly after a wave of school occupations in Greece. Poland, like all of Europe, is now in the midst of the second wave of the pandemic. Daily infections reached 5,300 on October 10, up from 837 new cases on September 17. This is about ten times more than the daily new infections recorded in spring during the first wave of the pandemic. The country, which has a population of less than 40 million, has over 135,000 infections, one of the highest numbers in Europe.

Jakub Zieliński, an epidemiologist from Warsaw University, acknowledged last week, “We are losing control over the pandemic. In two out of three cases, we don’t know where the infection originated. However, we know that in the majority of cases, they [the infections] originated with children who had gone to school.” Zieliński also said there may be up to ten times more cases of the virus in Poland than officially acknowledged.

Nevertheless, the government of the far-right Law and Justice Party (PiS) is adamantly refusing to shut down the

schools that were reopened on September 1. Only a small portion of schools have shifted again to remote learning.

Over the last week, at least two teachers and one student have died from coronavirus. The death of Kamil Pietrzyk, only 31 years old, an elementary school teacher who was a poet and cultural journalist in his free time, provoked particular shock. Just a few days earlier, a 44-year-old teacher in Osiek, a small town in northern Poland, died from COVID-19.

Then, on Monday, it was reported that a 20-year-old high school senior from Bydgoszcz, a mid-sized city in northern Poland, died of the coronavirus. The student, who had reportedly had comorbidities, attended school until October 2 and was hospitalized five days later. His case echoed the horrific death of a 19-year-old US college student who died from complications of the virus, giving the lie to the claim that “only” the elderly die from COVID-19.

Under these conditions, high school students have taken the initiative to shut down the schools in order to protect their own health, as well as that of their loved ones and teachers.

Julia told the WSWs: “I’m participating in the strike because I want the government to change its approach to this issue, which is so important to the safety of students, teachers, and their families in a pandemic that threatens the lives and health of many people. It also has a negative effect on the mental health of these groups.” Julia noted that most parents and teachers and a growing number of young people were supporting the strike.

Aleksandra, a student in Lublin, echoed these sentiments, stating, “I’m participating in the strike because I fear for my own safety and that of my relatives, some of whom, unfortunately, have comorbidities and are immunocompromised.”

She said it was difficult to say how many students in Lublin were participating in the strike but that the

majority of her acquaintances and friends are.

Speaking about the recent death of the two teachers and student, Aleksandra said: “It is really irresponsible and sad that young people have to take care of their own safety by protesting. The government has been telling students the same thing since the beginning of September: ‘There is no need to close the schools.’ Do we really need more tragedies like this to understand that schools are the main source of infection?”

She recounted that a student in her class had been in contact with someone who was ill with COVID-19. However, when the teacher called the State Sanitary Inspection, which manages national testing, she was told not to have the student tested because he did “not show symptoms.” Aleksandra noted, “Both the school and the State Sanitary Inspection ignore those who are ill with COVID when they ‘don’t have symptoms.’”

Others reported similar cases on social media. One Polish worker wrote on Twitter: “In the school of one of my colleagues, one student felt very ill, she was very pale and eventually passed out. She had previously been in contact with someone who was in quarantine. The school swept everything under the rug and did not provide information to anyone.”

Another Twitter user reported that one student whose parent had tested positive was told by an employee of the State Sanitary Inspection to leave quarantine because she showed no symptoms.

Full responsibility for the mass infection and deaths lies with the Polish ruling class. Like capitalist governments around the world, the Polish PiS government has de facto adopted a policy of herd immunity. It is letting the virus rip through the population, without any concern for how many people will die, and the many more who will suffer the long-term medical, psychological and social consequences of mass infection and death.

While Poland has, so far, a relatively low official death rate, those who fall ill with COVID-19 are left to fight for their lives in a health care system that has been left in shambles by the restoration of capitalism and decades of austerity. At the beginning of the pandemic, hospitals became overwhelmed when dealing with just a handful of COVID-19 patients. Entire cities lacked functioning ventilators.

The government pushed for a premature reopening in May, both to guarantee the exploitation of the working class, and to enable it to hold the highly contested presidential elections in July, which were dominated by the anti-Semitic and far-right nationalist campaign of

Andrzej Duda. In Silesia, the government had refused to shut down the coal mines from the very beginning, creating the basis for the region to become the center of the pandemic in Poland.

However, it is not just the PiS that is responsible for this policy. The nominal liberal opposition party of the Civic Platform has enabled the PiS at every step of the way, blocking any genuine opposition to these policies from the working class and working with the government to ensure its implementation. The trade unions, for their part, have played a key role in propping up the government by betraying the 2019 national teachers’ strike. Now, they have not even issued nominal support for the student strike and are seeking to prevent any broader mobilization by teachers and other sections of the working class against the unsafe reopening.

Workers and youth in Poland are confronted with political and international tasks. The reopening of schools is an integral part of the response of the capitalist class to the pandemic across Europe and the Americas. In order to extract profits from the working class and pay for the massive bailouts of major corporations earlier in the spring, workers have to be forced back into their factories and workplaces. Without the forced reopening of schools, this policy would be impossible.

To protect their health and social rights, workers and youth must form independent organizations of struggle that put the interests of workers above those of private profit. We encourage our readers in Poland to study the statements by the International Committee of the Fourth international on the working class response to the pandemic, including the statement by the International Youth and Students for Social Equality in opposition to the school reopening. If you agree with these statements, please contact us today.



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