

# Tens of thousands protest new restrictions on abortion in Poland

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Since the end of last week, tens of thousands have been protesting in Poland against new restrictions on abortion. In the capital Warsaw alone, 10,000 took to the streets Friday evening. In Poznań, Wrocław, Kraków and more than 60 other cities, thousands more demonstrated. Protests were also held yesterday.

Although the state authorities are taking action against the demonstrations with a large deployment of police officers, and have brutally used tear gas against peacefully demonstrating women in Warsaw, the protests have been continuing now for seven days. Due to the coronavirus restriction, they take on spontaneous and diverse forms.

Online, too, discontent is being expressed on a large scale. For example, a petition on *avaaz* has been signed by over 1.5 million to date and shared 300,000 times on Facebook alone. Demonstrators told reporters that the country has been set back 200 years and that there should be no such attack on human rights in 2020.

On Monday in Warsaw, numerous intersections and squares were blocked, bringing traffic and public transport to a standstill in many places. The group “Women’s Strike” planned a “general strike” of all women for Wednesday.

The mass protests were triggered by the decision of the Polish Constitutional Court to declare the country’s abortion regulations unconstitutional. The judges ruled that abortion violates the protection of life guaranteed by the constitution. Abortion will only be legal if the woman’s health is in danger or if the pregnancy is the result of a criminal act. As 98 percent of the approximately 1,000 legal abortions performed annually in Poland last year were justified by the foetus suffering an incurable disease, this is tantamount to a total ban on abortion.

Poland already had one of the strictest abortion laws in the European Union (EU), which is why many Polish women choose to go abroad or attempt a life-threatening home abortion. A “vacation in Slovakia” is a well-known euphemism for an abortion. Human rights activists assume that there are more than 100,000 unreported abortions every year in Poland, which is about the number of legal abortions in Germany every year.

As early as 2016, the ruling PiS party had proposed a change in the law to parliament, the Sejm, which provided for a similar restriction on abortions. At that time, too, anger at the reactionary move exploded into mass protests. At the height of the first wave of the “Czarny Protests” (Black Protests), more than 20,000 demonstrated in Warsaw alone. The government backed away

when confronted by this mass movement, and some sections of the PiS voted against the law.

This time, the PiS bypassed parliament. Instead of debating and voting in parliamentary bodies on the draft law introduced after the 2019 elections, 119 PiS members of parliament and other right-wing factions submitted a motion to the Constitutional Court.

The PiS could be sure that the Constitutional Court would decide in its favour. After its election victory in 2015, the PiS began a multi-year campaign to ensure the conformity of the judicial system. As a result of its attacks on the constitutional separation of powers, there is virtually no independent judiciary in Poland any longer. The president enjoys extensive powers to intervene in the work and staffing of the courts.

With the almost complete abortion ban, the PiS is intensifying its attack on human rights and its authoritarian, extreme right-wing course. However, it is acting from a position of weakness.

In the last elections in 2019, the PiS was able to expand its majority in the Sejm but lost the majority in the Senate (upper house). Even the re-election of PiS President Andrzej Duda was only narrowly successful.

The fact that the PiS government has staggered from crisis to crisis since its re-election is also shown by the large number of cabinet reshuffles. Head of government Mateusz Morawiecki has already replaced ministers individually or severally or changed their portfolios. In August of this year, for example, the foreign and health ministers were replaced, and in October the education and agriculture ministers along with several other ministers.

Also noteworthy is the entry of Jarosław Kaczyński into the government, where he holds the office of deputy prime minister without portfolio. Since the end of his one-year term in 2007, Kaczyński had not held a state office and had guided the work of the government and the president from the background as the *éminence grise* of the PiS.

The coronavirus pandemic and the government’s negligent policy of opening up the country have further exacerbated the crisis. Infections are escalating in Poland. In the last few days, more than 10,000 new infections have been added daily, reaching a new peak on Tuesday at over 16,000. Two members of government, former Health Minister Łukasz Szumowski and the newly appointed Education Minister, have also become infected with the virus.

Epidemiologist Tomasz Oszorowski has warned that hospital capacity is quickly approaching collapse. His colleague Robert

Flisiak compared the situation in Poland with that in Italy in the spring, when pictures of coffins being transported away in military trucks went around the world.

The Polish government has consciously accepted the increase in infections in order not to endanger the profits of big business. In the summer, the rampant number of cases in the Silesian mining region revealed its contempt for human life. While still locally limited at that time, the number of new infections exploded nationwide when school reopened in September. While the daily number of infections never exceeded the 1,000 mark until September, it has increased tenfold since then.

This reactionary policy has already met with mass protests by students, which now coincide with the protests against the abortion ban. The government's indifference towards the dangers of the pandemic also shows that the claims of the anti-abortion opponents that they are concerned about protecting life are pure hypocrisy.

Whereas in the past, the PiS had secured its power with a mixture of right-wing populism and social handouts, in particular paying a child benefit of 500 zloty (\$127) per month, the worsening global economic crisis is removing the basis for such limited reforms.

According to World Bank estimates, Poland's economic output slumped by 8 percent in the second quarter of this year alone, and the national debt rose by 160 billion zloty (around \$40.6 billion). Given the worsening crisis, this is only a foretaste of what is to come.

At the same time, international tensions between the major powers are intensifying, above all between the US and the EU, headed by Germany and France. Warsaw is trying to manoeuvre back and forth between these camps. Recently, PiS threw its support behind US President Donald Trump in the presidential election campaign.

As in the past, the PiS is stepping up its extreme right-wing rhetoric. Openly fascist and anti-Semitic tones are becoming openly louder. Like last year's "war" against the LGBT community, the campaign against abortion is characterised by fascist tones that present it as a fight against "cultural-" or "neo-Marxism."

The PiS has sought for a long time to cultivate a fascist milieu and harness it for its own purposes. In 2018, both Duda and Morawiecki participated in the "March of Independence," dominated by extreme right-wing organisations such as the National Radical Camp (ONR) and the All-Polish Youth.

Now the same right-wing extremists are once again working closely with the state apparatus to counter the protests. In Warsaw last Sunday, the fascist ONR positioned itself in front of the church doors of the Holy Cross Basilica and denied access to the protesters. Under the eyes of the police, it attacked demonstrators, dragging them away by force.

On Monday, also in Warsaw, a BMW drove into a demonstration injuring a woman so badly she had to go to the hospital. The incident was reminiscent of Charlottesville, Virginia, where, in 2017, a right-wing extremist drove at a demonstration against the far-right, killing one participant; since then, such attacks on demonstrators have become more frequent in the US.

Since the Catholic Church is one of the main supporters of the

anti-abortion campaign, symbolic protests were carried out in churches in many places. While right-wing extremist thugs go undisturbed, Justice Minister Zbigniew Ziobro condemns the non-violent anti-abortion protests. He tweeted on Monday, "Given the unprecedented escalation of criminal behaviour against believers, including intimidation, destruction and desecration of religious sites, I have instructed state prosecutors to monitor these cases."

Prime Minister Morawiecki sang the same song on Tuesday. He condemned the "acts of vandalism, aggression and barbarism ... on churches, on our holy places, on people and their rights" and announced the deployment of military police on the streets starting Wednesday.

Ma?gorzata Tracz, leader of the Green Party and part of the Citizens Coalition led by Platforma Obywatelska (PO), spoke of a "war" for which Kaczy?ski was responsible and which he would lose.

Behind the militaristic and in part hyperbolic language of both government and opposition lies the fear of the ruling class of a revolutionary uprising. The massive protests, which have spread to rural areas, the traditional base of the PiS, are fed by the general social anger against the ruling class.

In a commentary in *Rzeczpospolita*, Micha? Szu?drzy?ski explicitly warned that the PiS had "released an element that it may no longer be able to control" and that the opposition "will not benefit most from the protests." On Sunday, Szu?drzy?ski, together with editor-in-chief Bogus?aw Chrabota, declared that the verdict of the Constitutional Court was the spark that set Poland on fire and demanded, "This fire must be extinguished immediately."

The opposition parties of the Left Bloc play a key role in controlling and strangling the protests and preventing an independent mobilisation of the working class against the far-right course of the PiS.

The feminist group Women's Strike (Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet, OSK), which is organising the protests in many places, was initiated by the pseudo-left Lewica Razem party. The OSK spokesperson is Marta Lempart, who in 2019 ran for the liberal party Wiosna (Spring), then newly founded by Robert Biedro?. In the parliamentary elections last year, Razem and Wiosna ran on a joint electoral list with the social-democratic SLD. The SLD is the official successor party to the former Stalinist state party and, as a long-running party of government after the restoration of capitalism, has, like the PO, launched fierce social attacks.

Workers must draw the necessary conclusions from these experiences. The protests for basic democratic and social rights, for safe education and consistent safety measures in the pandemic, require the independent mobilisation and organisation of the working class based on an international socialist programme.



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