

Mass protests against anti-abortion law in Poland develop into a revolt against government

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Protests against the tightening of abortion restrictions in Poland have intensified further in the past week and are developing into a revolt against the PiS government.

In opinion polls, almost two-thirds of the population support the protests. Three-quarters of respondents rejected the decision of the Constitutional Court to further limit the right to abortion.

Every day, there are new protests. Last Wednesday, according to police reports, 430,000 took to the streets throughout the country for a “general strike by women.” There are no reliable figures about how many stayed away from work. During the day, it was mainly schoolchildren and students who took part in the demonstrations; but there were many spontaneous expressions of solidarity. In some places, protest slogans were posted on public transport notice boards. Road traffic was blocked in many places. The protests continued to grow throughout the afternoon.

The Polish ruling class has reacted to the protests with violence and repression. The new Education Minister Przemysław Czarnek (Law and Justice Party, PiS) is particularly prominent in this regard. When he was appointed on October 19, he was already confronted with protests by students demanding better protection from the coronavirus, protests that have now seamlessly merged into the broader movement.

Czarnek has threatened all schools and universities with cuts in funding if they allow students to participate in the protests. Among others, the rectors of the universities of Wrocław and Gdansk had cancelled classes to enable student participation in the protests. The Catholic University of Lublin, on the other hand, has threatened students and censored posts on its Facebook page that advocated the protests.

The education minister is leading a veritable crusade against the protesters. He declared that women should not be dissuaded by “neo-Marxists and feminists” from their God-given role as housewives and mothers. Czarnek described the participants in the demonstration as “radical left-wing revolutionaries,” some of whom were shouting “Satanist” slogans and for whom “there can be no place” in Poland.

Czarnek announced that he would have “all textbooks—especially those in Polish, history and social studies” checked for their Polish-patriotic content. His attack on the alleged “cult of guilt in the classroom” indicates the historical-revisionist and fascist direction this new orientation in textbooks is to take. As voivode (chief of the district administration) of Lublin, Czarnek had openly collaborated with the fascist ONR (National Radical Camp).

On October 27, the ONR announced a new initiative to create paramilitary associations. These “National Brigades” are to protect

“Polish society, religious sites and patriotic events from militant attacks and provocations by neo-Marxists, an embodiment of Bolshevism.” They have openly announced a “systematic training in martial arts, weight training, shooting and other disciplines.”

Even if the ONR itself denies it, this initiative follows on from the statement of PiS chairman Jarosław Kaczyński the same day. The *éminence grise* of the PiS has called the demonstrators criminals and declared it a civic duty to resist them.

“We must defend ourselves,” Kaczyński said. “We must defend Polish churches. At all costs. I call upon all members of the Law and Justice Party and our supporters to defend the churches.” The Church’s system of values was the only moral system that Poles know, he said.

More than 130,000 negative reactions on the PiS Facebook page show the enormous contempt for his reactionary position. Almost 50,000 users agreed with a comment calling for “the dictator” and his government to resign.

Kaczyński wore the “Kotwica,” the symbol of Polish resistance during the Second World War, during his speech. In doing so, he underscored the extreme right-wing narrative placing the PiS measures in a historical line with the Polish struggle against National Socialism (Nazism) and Communism. State broadcaster TVP-Info, which conforms to the line of the PiS, also called the demonstrators “left-wing fascism on the rise.”

Given its cold, stoic nature, Kaczyński’s speech was repeatedly compared with the speech in which General Wojciech Jaruzelski announced the introduction of martial law in 1981. Even then, state and church were intricately linked, and they still are today. The speaker of the Polish Bishops’ Conference, Leszek G?siak, has declared participation in the protests against the abortion restrictions to be a sin.

Father Tadeusz Rydzyk also plays an important role in this. The priest and founder of Radio Maryja is notorious for his anti-Semitic and clerico-fascist views. His radio station, which has supported the policies of the PiS for years, condemned the protests as “satanic aggression.”

The ONR and the All-Polish Youth followed Kaczyński’s call to arms. They posted their “political soldiers” in front of churches all over the country and took action against demonstrators. Throughout Wednesday evening, there were attacks on demonstrators in Wrocław by right-wing extremist thugs from the football hooligan scene. According to unanimous reports from demonstrators, the police mostly did not intervene against the fascist thugs.

Two journalists from *Wyborcza* were also attacked. *Wyborcza* reported shortly afterwards that the thug was only arrested temporarily. He was released and the arrest warrant revoked on the initiative of Justice Minister Zbigniew Ziobro, who is also chief prosecutor. It is not the first time that the state has held its protective hand over right-wing extremist thugs, as *Wyborcza* notes.

Typical for the reactionary agitation PiS defenders spread in the media is also a statement by the deputy head of the Ministry of Defence, Marcin Ociepa. He asked, how was it that young girls were taking to the streets to protest so aggressively. “I think something is wrong here. I think it is worth investigating this phenomenon. Someone is behind it.” The language, and hints of conspiracies involving dubious backers, follow an anti-Semitic trope.

On Friday, the protests reached a new peak. In Warsaw alone, at least one hundred thousand took part, and another hundred thousand throughout the country. While the huge crowds remained peaceful, there were again massive attacks by right-wing extremist groups.

As can be seen on video recordings, the fascists wore white armbands, a distinguishing mark that was used by extreme right-wing paramilitaries like the German Freikorps a hundred years ago. The police remained largely inactive or were not even on-site, since large detachments together with the military police were sent to guard government buildings and churches as well as Kaczynski’s residence.

The demonstrators not only confront the attacks of PiS and extreme right-wing organisations. This is shown by an interview with the former president of the Constitutional Court, Andrzej Rzepliński. He condemned the demonstrators as a mob and hooligans and said that they disgusted him.

Rzepliński had been elected to office with the majority of the current opposition, Civic Platform (PO). Many editorials point out that Poland’s reactionary abortion legislation, the so-called 1993 Compromise, was the work of all parties and was not liberalised even during the PO’s several years in power.

Nevertheless, the leaders of “women’s strikes,” such as Marta Lempart, and the entire Left Bloc are sowing illusions in the PO. The left-wing Razem party and Wiosna (Spring), founded in 2019, are nominally to the left of the PO, but beyond their radical phrases, they do not advocate an independent programme that would show a way out of the downward spiral of the bankrupt capitalist system.

Replacing the PiS government with a PO-led government would not solve any problems for the Polish working class. The close intertwining of the Catholic Church, fascist militias, the state, the media, and establishment parties, all of which emerged from the swamp of capitalist restoration in the 1990s, will not disappear with a change of government.

The PiS came to power in the first place because it was able to exploit dissatisfaction with the right-wing policies of PO and, before that, the social-democratic PSL. To tie the protests to this discredited and untrustworthy opposition, a “consultative council” was formed in Warsaw on Sunday. This body is oriented toward the opposition in neighbouring Belarus and is explicitly intended to use the experience of the “democratic opposition from the time of the [Soviet era] Polish People’s Republic”—i.e., the Stalinist political forces from which both the PiS and the PO emerged.

A similar appeal was made by the chairman of the Polish Senate, Tomasz Grodzki (PO). Speaking to *Wyborcza*, he urged the government to begin talks with the parliamentary and non-parliamentary opposition.

Faced with the escalating coronavirus crisis, the opposition parties

hand no answer that does justice to the urgency of the situation. On Thursday, the number of new infections in Poland exceeded the 20,000 mark for the first time, and it exceeded 21,800 on Saturday. On Friday, the number of deaths reached a new daily record of 298.

Given the dynamics of the pandemic, a collapse of the already ailing Polish health care system is inevitable, experts warn. The government’s plan to build an additional 10,000 beds in field hospitals will not change anything given the chronic shortage of personnel, equipment and materials.

The only new measure that the government has implemented in response to the exponentially growing case count was the closure of cemeteries before the upcoming All Saints Day holiday. The opposition also demanded the closure of churches.

None of these measures will bring the pandemic under control. As already demanded by the protesting students, normal operations in schools, day-care centres and universities must be stopped immediately. The economy would have to be reduced to what was absolutely necessary, and extensive funds would have to be made available for the health system.

However, this would jeopardise the profits of the corporations and the rich, which continue to flow copiously. For example, three weeks ago, e-commerce website Allegro was launched on the Warsaw Stock Exchange with record proceeds of €2 billion and immediately became the most valuable company in Poland.

The fear of Poland’s ruling class is directed at the mass social protests that the tightening of the abortion laws has ignited like a spark. What is driving people onto the streets is by no means just the demand to withdraw the ban on abortions. The protests are articulating all the pent-up anger against the social and economic system that is currently led by the PiS but supported and defended by all parties. Therefore, the push for a legislative compromise by President Duda on Friday was completely futile—that abortions would be legal if the mother could prove she would suffer a stillbirth.

Meanwhile, rumours about the imminent imposition of a state of emergency are growing. For example, in *Wyborcza*, former director of the government security centre and former deputy interior minister Antoni Podolski cited historical examples to show three possible scenarios linked to former Polish premiers: “Gierek—talk to the demonstrators and abandon violence. Jaruzelski—introduce a state of emergency and quell the protests with violence. And finally, the Gomulka variant—the leaders of the leader, concerned about his progressive loss of any sense of reality, conclude that it is time to replace him to save their power.”

To avert these scenarios, which ultimately all amount to the violent defence of Polish capitalism, the working class must take its fate into its own hands. This requires a clear perspective that unites Polish workers with the international working class in the struggle for a socialist transformation of society, and the building of a Polish section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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