

Poland's school system on the brink of collapse

Martin Nowak
3 September 2023

On August 31 summer school holidays ended across Poland, at the same time as new figures reveal the dilapidated state of the country's educational system. Some 26,000 teachers were sought by headmasters of private and state schools on the official website of the education authority in July. That is a 30 percent increase compared to last year and continues a protracted negative trend.

The Polish Education Minister Przemysław Czarnek and the government are playing down the latest figures. They say that these relate to normal staff changes between school years and that only a small percentage of the country's 700,000 teachers is lacking.

However, the fact that the official figures are deceptive has been demonstrated for several years by the teachers' initiative "Dealerzy Wiedzy," which has compiled its own long-term database. One of its founders, Robert Górniak, an English teacher and deputy headmaster at a private school in Sosnowiec, explained the mechanism of official job advertisements in an interview with *Gazeta Wyborcza*.

For example, the advertisements placed simply disappear after an automated expiry date in the middle or at the end of the month. That is why the number dropped by 6,000 at the end of July and 4,000 were added at the beginning of August. However, it remains unclear how many positions have been filled and in which cases school headmasters have simply given up hope of finding teachers at short notice. But even these official figures increase by 30 percent from year to year, as Górniak makes clear.

The main reason for the difficulty in hiring is the meagre wage paid to teachers. Linguists, psychologists and computer scientists can earn much more in business than in a school. Basic salaries for new entrants, for example, are 3,690 Złoty gross (around 800 euros [\$US863]), i.e., a minimum wage level, and increase only slightly over time to the equivalent of 1,000 euros.

In big cities, where rents are comparable to Western Europe, the problem is particularly evident. "About half of all job offers come from Warsaw. This is not surprising: the [pay] rates for teachers are the same in every city while the

cost of living and rent varies significantly between big city Warsaw and a village in the Carpathian foothills," says Górniak.

The same problem exists in pre-schools and kindergartens, where there is a shortage of over 500 teachers for the coming school year in Warsaw alone. The city administration has reacted by paying education allowances equivalent to the amount paid to class teachers from September 1. However, this sum of 84 euros (380 Złoty) is just a drop in the ocean.

Behind this trend is a fundamental development. The Polish state has increasingly offloaded the costs of schooling onto the municipalities. In the early 1990s, for example, the share of municipal subsidies averaged 20 percent, but last year, the municipalities had to cover 60 percent of education costs.

Now, once again the government has decided to pay out similar shabby handouts. One day before the forthcoming parliamentary election, every teacher will receive a one-time payment of 1,125 Złoty (about 250 euros). In view of a salary increase of only 7.8 percent this year while inflation was twice as high, many teachers feel the offer is an insult.

"A trainee teacher earns a little more than 2,800 Złoty," says Magdalena Kaszulanis of the teachers' union ZNP, "and that often means he or she won't be able to make a living in the city where they studied." According to ZNP, there are as many as 40,000 teacher vacancies, and each teacher works an average of 3.3 hours of overtime per week.

In rural areas, the cost of living is lower, but the small schools do not have enough weekly hours, especially for subject teachers, to employ them full-time. So teachers have to commute from school to school. Last year, the case of a headmistress from Krynica Morska came to light, who drew up joint timetables with six other schools because they all employed the same teachers. At the same time, teachers often look for side jobs, especially during the holidays.

According to the professional journal *Głos Nauczycielski* (*Teachers' Voice*), every fifth teacher has a part-time job. The news portal wydarzenia.interia reports about a teacher who has been working as a kitchen assistant for six days a

week in summer for six years. “All this so that I can pay for electricity and fuel in winter. It’s not possible on a rural teacher’s salary.”

Another teacher, Dagmara, explains she has been a trainer and sports teacher for over 20 years. “For as long as I can remember, I have been working on the holidays. When I started working in this profession, it was an absolute necessity because the salary was so meagre that I would not have been able to make a living without the help of my parents and extra work.”

Even teachers at private schools are hardly better off in terms of salaries. The flight of the urban middle classes to private schools has caused their classes to overflow just as much as those of state schools. In Warsaw, for example, every fifth pupil now goes to a private school. Their parents face the same problem despite paying between 1,000 to over 3,000 Złoty per month: lessons in assembly line mode. “Just the thought of going back to school makes me cringe. My stomach turns, my throat tightens,” one teacher told *Gazeta Wyborcza*.

In a survey conducted by *Głos Nauczycielski* at the beginning of the school year among 33,000 teachers, only 4 percent said they started the school year rested and positive; 46 percent chose the answer, “I feel despair, fatigue and burnout.” Some 27 percent answered, “I’m scared, I’m very worried about the changes in education.”

While the opposition wants to blame the country’s right-wing PiS (Law and Justice) government for the problems confronting schools and teachers, the fact is that Polish schools have long been being cut to the bone. With the massive rearmament for the Ukraine war, which is supported by the opposition Civic Platform (PO), social cuts are now escalating. “This is the biggest staff collapse I can remember, and I’ve worked in education for 20 years,” *Gazeta* quoted school headmistress Beata Molik.

Like workers in other countries, Polish teachers can only wage a successful struggle in opposition to the country’s corporatist unions. In 2019, the ZNP teachers’ union declared a 17-day strike with more than 300,000 participants, but none of the strikers’ demands were met. It was the first national strike since 1993. The sellout of the strike was accompanied by phrases like: “We are suspending the strike, but the struggle continues to the end!” Now the ZNP has organised another harmless protest in front of the Ministry of Education on September 1.

Last year it limited protests to an “education village” in front of the ministry. It thus followed the example of the medical unions, which in 2021 dissipated the fighting spirit of 40,000 nurses, caregivers, pharmacists, physiotherapists, hospital technicians and paramedics after a powerful protest for higher wages and better working conditions developed in

Warsaw in the “Białe miasteczko” (White City), where workshops and numerous rounds of talks with politicians and the media led nowhere.

In view of the unresolved problems, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic that killed over 100,000 people, the medical unions also held a day of protest on September 30—to “initiate a social debate,” as Sebastian Goncerz, head of the PR OZZL union, said. “We don’t currently expect to force the current government to do anything. But we want to make sure that the new government—whoever comes to power—takes the problems of the health system seriously, and more seriously than before.”

In other words, the trade unions are organising symbolic actions six weeks before the general election on October 15 to dissipate workers’ anger and align themselves as partners with the future ruling party. In the election campaign, the ruling PiS party and the opposition PO are outbidding each other with demands for more rearmament, nationalism, racism and anti-Russian war hysteria.

The trade unions are the extended arm of these reactionary parties and act as stooges of the super-rich, who have profited from the looting of the former state property of the Stalinist People’s Republic of Poland and now also from the Ukraine war.

For example, Wiesław Klimkowski, president of the chemical company PCC Rokita, set a new gigantic record last year with annual earnings of 43.3 million zł (9.7 million euros). PCC Rokita profited from exploding world market prices for caustic soda as a result of the Ukraine war. A Polish worker would have to work 488 years to earn Klimkowski’s income for one year.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact