

Polish and British governments exploit attacks on Polish immigrants

By Clara Weiss
15 September 2016

A number of xenophobic attacks on the large Polish immigrant community in the UK following the Brexit referendum are being exploited by both the Polish and British ruling class to strengthen their alliance, amid deepening divisions within the European Union (EU) and growing tensions with Germany.

There are 850,000 Poles working and living with their families in the UK, making Polish in many cities the second language after English. Britain is home to the second largest Polish émigré community in Europe after Germany, where an estimated 2 million people from Poland are living and working.

The overwhelming majority have emigrated since the beginning of capitalist restoration in 1989 and particularly Poland's entry into the EU in 2004. While Polish workers are on average paid less than their British counterparts, their average salary of €1,800 monthly in the UK is still twice as much as that in Poland.

There has been an increase in attacks on Polish workers in the UK in the wake of the Brexit referendum by right-wing elements encouraged by the whipping up of xenophobia and nationalism by all factions of the ruling elite and the media.

The most publicized case is also the most obscure: British police are investigating the killing of 40-year old Arkadiusz Jó?wik in Harlow, a town in Essex by a group of youth. Although it remains unclear whether the killing had anything to do with Jó?wik's nationality, it has received much media coverage in Poland and the Polish ambassador in London, Arkady Rzegocki, attended Jó?wik's funeral.

The campaign of the Polish press and politicians of the ruling right-wing Law and Justice Party (PiS) is not only hypocritical, coming as it does from outlets and politicians who are routinely whipping up racism and

nationalism in Poland. It also stands in no relation to the actual number of cases (15 to 16 since the Brexit) that were reported by the Polish embassy.

What is involved for the Polish bourgeoisie is not a defence of Polish workers, let alone a struggle against racism. Rather, the Polish bourgeoisie is using the issue as a pawn in negotiations with Britain over Brexit and the future of bilateral relations which, in face of the crisis in the EU and resurgent German militarism, are assuming ever greater importance for both countries.

During British Prime Minister Theresa May's first visit in Warsaw in late July, Polish Prime Minister Beata Szyd?o stressed that Britain was and remains a "strategic ally," but that the key issue in negotiations over exiting the EU would be "the free movement of people." She insisted that Polish workers would have to remain in the UK.

The PiS government is horrified by the prospect of a closure of EU borders to Polish workers. Above all it fears an explosion of social tensions in Poland. The restoration of capitalism was accompanied by the destruction of a massive 3.2 million jobs in 1989-2003. With €11,100, the GDP per capita in Poland is less than half that of the EU average (€27,400) and more than three times below that in neighbouring Germany, where it is €37,100.

This situation has prompted millions of workers to seek employment abroad. Out of a working-age population of about 25 million, around 2.5 million Poles have taken the opportunity to work in other EU countries since 2004. According to data by the Bank Polski from 2015, Polish workers working in other EU countries have transferred €43 billion back to their families in Poland from 2004 to 2013. These payments play an important role for many working class and middle class families in a country where 9 out of 38

million people live beneath or near the official poverty line.

Moreover, without the mass emigration of Polish workers the unemployment rate would rise significantly. Unemployment has hovered around 10 percent for about a decade now. Among youth under 25, every fourth is unemployed.

The new British Conservative government under May has shown itself eager to improve relations with the Polish government. During her first visit in late July, May emphasized that the Brexit vote should lead to a deepening, not a loosening, of bilateral relations. Foreign Minister Boris Johnson too stressed that he wanted the bilateral relations to become “from good to great” in his recent visit to Warsaw in early September where he talked with foreign minister Witold Waszczykowski.

Aware of the concerns of the Polish bourgeoisie over the return of Polish immigrants, Johnson, a notorious racist who spearheaded the anti-immigrant campaign for the Leave camp, hypocritically claimed in Warsaw said that there was “no room for xenophobia” in London and that Polish workers were “welcome” in Britain. Both May and Johnson have been careful, however, to not issue any guarantees about the legal status of Polish citizens in the UK after the Brexit.

Poland and Britain already maintain close economic ties. Poland is Britain’s second largest trading partner and the largest market in Central Europe for British companies like Tesco. Over 900 small businesses, with up to nine employees, are operating in Poland. The community of immigrant workers from Poland and other Eastern European countries represents an important pool of cheap labour for British businesses. Poland and Britain also closely collaborate within the framework of NATO, where they are spearheading the war preparations against Russia in Europe.

The PiS-government, shocked by the Brexit referendum, is now trying to use the negotiations over Brexit to push for its vision of the EU and weaken the political position of Germany. The British government in turn is trying to establish closer bilateral relations with the PiS-government, regarding it as a possible ally in negotiating favourable conditions for the Brexit. The fate of the Polish immigrant workers in the UK is merely a pawn in these manoeuvres.

A central concern for May, who is heading a cabinet

bitterly divided over Brexit, has been to seek to negotiate the exit conditions with all 27 EU members individually and asked for secret negotiations—a proposal that was rejected by Brussels and Berlin.

The PiS-government is critical of Berlin’s proposal of a military union which it fears would weaken NATO and strengthen the German hegemony in Europe. Jarosław Kaczyński, the head of PiS and most influential figure behind its government, has come forward arguing for a closer economic union and more political independence for the EU member states.

Moreover, there has been a bitter clash between the PiS government and the Polish President of the European Council, Donald Tusk. Tusk is a member of the opposition party Civic Platform (PO) and has openly supported the protest movement against the PiS-government earlier this year, which was headed by political forces arguing for closer collaboration with Germany .

Following the vote for a Brexit, Kaczyński said that Tusk was “directly responsible” for the outcome of the referendum because he had put excessively harsh conditions on the table for Britain in previous negotiations. Kaczyński called upon Tusk to “disappear” from the political scene. At the recent summit in Bratislava, Tusk was pushing, in apparent agreement with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, for a quick Brexit, and the toughest possible conditions for Britain.

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>