

Poland: Tens of thousands protest proposed anti-abortion bill

By Clara Weiss
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Tens of thousands of people took to the streets in all major Polish cities on Monday to protest a proposed ban on abortions. The Polish Sejm had approved the bill in late September, releasing it to further reviews by committees of the parliament. The protests were supported by the liberal opposition and are intensifying the crisis of the Polish government.

The bill was introduced by a far-right, Catholic lawyers organization and supported from the beginning by leading politicians of the ruling Law and Justice Party (PiS). The bill has also enjoyed the official backing of the Catholic Church, with which PiS is closely aligned.

If passed, the bill would signify a virtual total ban of abortions, including for minors and victims of rape. The only case in which abortions would be allowed is when the mother's life is immediately threatened. More than that, the current bill provides for jail terms of up to five years for anyone involved in an abortion, criminalizing both doctors and also women that suffer miscarriages. The bill would, furthermore, seriously endanger the health of many pregnant women.

As one Polish doctor who participated in the protests on Monday told the *New York Times*: "This would be the end of prenatal diagnostics. I couldn't do basic prenatal tests, like the amniotic fluid test that allows me to determine whether I'm dealing with certain genetic disorders, such as Down syndrome. Should the procedure go wrong, I could end up in jail. I won't risk that."

The liberal opposition parties Civic Platform (PO) and Nowoczesna ("Modern") organized a "women's strike" on Monday with the support of pseudo-left organizations like Razem to protest the bill. Under the slogan #BlackProtest (#czarnyprotest), up to 100,000 people protested the bill in major Polish cities such as

Warsaw, Cracow, Poznan, Wroclaw, Katowice and Gdansk. The largest protests took place in Warsaw with some 30,000 participants. According to the organizers, protests took place in some 90 Polish cities. Solidarity protests were organized in Berlin, Paris and a few other European capitals, with several thousand participants.

Many employers, including restaurant owners, museum and gallery directors, and university officials, allowed their female employees to take the day off to join the protests. Several mayors of Polish cities also supported the participation of their female workforce in the protests. Judging by Polish press reports, there was no substantial working class participation in the protests.

The fact that more workers did not support the protests was the result of both the deliberate attempt of the liberal opposition to curtail the protests by organizing a "women's strike" only, and the healthy suspicion that broad layers of workers feel toward the political forces behind the protests. Moreover, the liberal opposition speaks for bourgeois forces that are directly responsible for the restoration of capitalism in Poland, which from the very beginning was orchestrated by an alliance of the Stalinist bureaucracy, the leadership of the trade union movement Solidarity, and the Catholic Church.

The protests enjoyed the full backing of the main newspapers in Poland that are affiliated with the liberal opposition, above all in the *Gazeta Wyborcza*, by former liberal dissident Adam Michnik, as well as in *Polityka* and *Newsweek Polska*. The Committee for the Defence of Democracy (KOD), which was formed by various figures associated with the opposition late last year to organize mass rallies against the government's policies, also helped organize the protests.

The pseudo-left party Razem (Together), which is

modelled after the pseudo-left parties of Greece and Spain, Syriza and Podemos, used the ongoing protests against the abortion bill throughout this year to align itself more closely with the official liberal opposition from which it had tried to keep at least a formal distance during the pro-EU protests of winter 2015/16.

The political forces behind the protests have nothing to do with the defence of the democratic rights of the working class. Indeed, they do not even advocate freedom of choice, but defend the current abortion legislation, which is already one of the most restrictive in Europe. As of now, abortions in Poland are only allowed when the pregnancy came about as a result of rape or incest, or when the foetus is seriously malformed or ill.

Under current law only about 2,000 abortions are legally registered in Poland every year. Estimates assume that up to 150,000 Polish women have abortions either in other EU countries or illegally in Poland. These restrictions date back to the early 1990s, when the Polish government, in orchestration with the Catholic Church, introduced a series of laws restricting the right to abortion despite polls showing that 60 percent of the population were in favour of freedom of choice.

The organization of the protests on Monday was not least of all aimed at channelling the mass opposition to the right-wing policies of PiS behind the liberal opposition and its promotion of gender politics and a pro-EU foreign policy. The liberal opposition fears that the current course of the government, which is aligning itself with the most backward and right-wing political forces in Poland, will further widen the gulf between Warsaw on the one hand, and Brussels and Berlin on the other. Moreover, substantial sections of the Polish bourgeoisie are afraid that the government's frontal assault on democratic and social rights will provoke mass unrest in the working class.

The ongoing protests and mass popular opposition to the anti-abortion law have already shaken the ruling PiS-government. With its backing of the bill, PiS has tried to consolidate its base of support among the country's various far-right and Catholic organizations. It thus sought to find a basis of support for its assaults on the social and democratic rights of the working class and its rapid militarization and preparations for war with Russia. (See: "Polish government strengthens the

far right")

Now the government is in disarray about how to proceed with the anti-abortion law. Defence Minister Wytold Waszczykowski, the first to publicly speak on the protests in a radio interview on Monday, dismissed them and said: "Let them play. If someone thinks there are no bigger worries in Poland at the moment, then go ahead. Women's rights are not being undermined in Poland."

Later that day, Prime Minister Beata Szydlo rushed to assure that she does not agree with Waszczykowski. She argued that the defence minister had spoken only for himself and insisted that the government was not even working on the bill. Tomasz Latos, head of the Health Committee in the Polish Sejm, also tried to distance the party from the bill, arguing that PiS was preparing a separate bill.

The government fears the prospect of a broader movement by the working class against its reactionary policies. The turnout at the protests on Monday, which was largely limited to layers of the professional intelligentsia and middle class, is only a pale reflection of the overwhelming opposition to the law in the Polish working class. According to a poll by *Newsweek Polska* taken on the eve of the Sejm's approval of the bill, 74 percent of the population are opposed to it. Another poll found that only 14 percent of the population are in favour of the bill. The approval ratings for the ruling PiS party dropped to only 29 percent early this week.

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