

New report documents extreme poverty in Poland

By Clara Weiss
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The NGO Szlachetna Paczka (Noble Package), which helps poor families during the Christmas holidays, released a report in December 2016 documenting extreme levels of poverty in Poland. The report is based on the work and experience of volunteers of the organization.

Since its founding in 2001, Szlachetna Paczka has helped, according to its own numbers, some 112,000 families. Another 20,000 families were added in 2015. The report reveals the miserable living conditions facing broad sections of the working class and the peasant population who, a quarter century after the restoration of capitalist relations, lack access to basic elements of civilized life.

The living conditions of millions are more reminiscent of the conditions facing the working class in England in the period of early industrialization in the 19th century, than the 20th or 21st centuries. In contrast to other reports on poverty, this one includes not only numbers but also offers an insight into the deprivations in everyday life brought about by poverty.

Szlachetna Paczka examined the situation of groups of the population that are particularly affected by poverty: infirm pensioners, families with more than one child or with a single parent, the self-employed, as well as families with one or more member who is seriously ill.

The resulting picture is devastating. Every third ailing pensioner in Poland cannot spend more than 7 Zloty (\$1.69) per day in order to not go in debt. Every second family with more than one child has problems paying its bills and debt. Every fifth family with more than one child lives together in one room. Every sixth family with more than one child does not have its own bathroom. Of these families, 60 percent have to pay off a long-term loan. 15 percent of the families with a

seriously sick or disabled member have only 1.6 Zloty (\$0.39) per person per day. This is not even enough to buy a loaf of bread in Poland.

The interviewees often lacked the possibility to relax and rest, and suffered from low self-esteem. The elderly and sick, in particular, suffer from loneliness.

Conditions are particularly outrageous for elderly people dependent on the meagre payments from the state.

A 83-year-old lady, Pani Zofia, has to spend 300 Zloty (\$72.40) every month on medication and does not have enough money to pay for more than two hours of heat every day. An elderly man, Pan Kazimierz, has laryngeal cancer and therefore had to give up his work before reaching the official pension age. For this reason, he has to live on only 600 Zloty (\$145) per month. He was told by the government official at the office: “You will get your pension in heaven.”

Another elderly lady, Pani Czesia, has to pay off debts of 5,000 Zloty (\$1,207) following the suicide of her husband. The son suffers from a mental ailment and is currently in psychiatric care. For breakfast she eats of piece of bread and drinks a glass of milk which she gets from a neighbour.

A single man, severely disabled since age 21, must live on about 700 Zloty (\$169) per month. This is hardly enough to pay for the basic food, the bills and the help offered by his neighbour. Families with more than one child or a single parent are particularly affected by poverty. According to official estimates, 1.4 out of 8.9 million children and young people aged under 24 lived in poverty in 2014. This means that every fifth child has no hot meal during the day, no books, toys, new clothes or access to dentists, not to mention vacations.

The report cites the example of a single mother with

three children who lives in a remote village in the countryside. The youngest son suffered an electric shock and has since then been unable to speak and walk. In order to feed her children, the mother has to knit socks and collect mushrooms in the forest.

Some families with more than one child were asked about the impact of the governmental program 500+ on their financial situation. The program was introduced by the ruling right-wing government of the Rule and Justice Party (PiS), in an effort to mitigate social discontent in the face of the rapid preparations for war and the buildup of a police state.

The program provides for a monthly payment of 500 Zloty (\$121) for every child after the first. The report shows that the meagre payment signifies a certain relief for many families, though not solving their everyday struggle for existence.

In one of the families introduced in the report, the mother has to raise five children on her own after the death of her husband. One of them is severely ill. They are all sleeping together in one bed to keep warm as the family cannot afford heat. The additional money from the government program pays for the children to go on school trips. She still struggles to pay for the medication for her sick child.

The examples provided in the report by Szlachetna Paczka reflect the social reality of millions of working people in Poland, which remains one of the poorest countries in Europe. In 2013, the GDP per capita in Poland of 13,349 Euros was three times lower than that in neighboring Germany (45,000 Euros), putting Poland behind even Russia, Croatia, Greece or Chile.

The persistent poverty has driven more than three million Poles since 1989 to leave the country. Most of them work for low, but still better, pay in Germany or Great Britain. The unemployment rate in Poland is still around 8 percent.

According to the Central Statistical Office (GUS), 7.4 percent of the population lived in extreme poverty in 2015 with an income of less than 545 Zloty (\$132) per month. Another 16.2 percent lived in relative poverty, which means for a family of four that is has less than 2056 Zloty (\$496) per month to live on.

Figures by the Institute for Work and Social Questions (IPiSS) which preceded from a somewhat higher, but still low minimum for social existence of 1080 Zloty (\$261) per person and 2915 Zloty (\$704)

for a family of four per month, corroborate this picture. In 2015, 42.7 percent of Poles live beneath these very low living standards. According to IPiSS, this includes 64.9 percent of peasants (some 40 percent of the population still live in the countryside), 55.4 percent of infirm pensioners, and 41.9 percent of workers.

There is a wide social gulf between the city and the countryside in Poland. Thus, in big cities such as Warsaw, or Cracow—the centres for the social elites and the middle classes—only about 1 percent of the population live in extreme poverty, whereas in the countryside it is about 11 percent.

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