

Polish teachers launch nationwide strike

By Clara Weiss
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As part of an international rebellion by teachers, on Monday April 8, over 80 percent of Poland's 400,000 teachers joined an indefinite, nationwide walkout. This is the first national strike by teachers in the country in 25 years, and one of the biggest strikes in Poland over the past several decades.

The strike was declared by the trade union ZNP (Związek Nauczycielstwa Polskiego, Union of Polish Teachers) after month-long negotiations with the government of the extreme right-wing Law and Justice Party (PiS) broke down on Sunday. The other teachers' trade union, Solidarity, had accepted a government offer on Sunday for a gradual 15 percent wage increase, and had called upon its members not to join the national walkout. The union signed the deal with the government without any consultation with the membership and has still not disclosed its exact contents.

Outraged over the union leadership's deal with the government, teachers from the Solidarity trade union joined the walkout across the country. Many nonunionized teachers also joined the strike.

According to the ZNP, over 86 percent of Poland's teachers participated. Polish media reports suggest that even these numbers might be an understatement. As one newspaper remarked, "silence in the class rooms" reigned in most of the country's schools.

The strike has already badly shaken the PiS government ahead of the European elections in May, and the Polish parliamentary elections in the fall. For the first time since 2015, when PiS received the majority of votes in the parliamentary elections, there is a real possibility that it will lose its majority in the country's parliament and suffer major losses in the European elections.

Behind the strike lies enormous social and political anger. Thirty years after the restoration of capitalism in Poland, teachers and their families are forced to live on

poverty wages. The starting salary for a teacher in Poland is 2,538 Zloty (\$666), and the maximum salary is around 5,603 Zloty (\$1471). Meanwhile, prices in Poland for basic food items and clothing are similar to those in Western European countries.

The past years have also seen a massive reduction in the teaching workforce. Just a few years ago, there were about 670,00 teachers in Poland; now they number just around 400,000.

There is also widespread anger over the PiS's education policies and reforms. Teachers are under enormous pressure to comply with the government's nationalist and historical revisionist agenda, which includes the whitewashing of the crimes of Polish nationalists against the country's Jewish population. Any mention of the latter was banned by law last year (see: "Anti-Semitic propaganda distributed at Polish parliament as government witch-hunts Holocaust historians").

In recent months, there have been numerous signs that anger among teachers is reaching the boiling point: In December, some 10,000 teachers handed in sick-notes to protest their low wages; in March, teachers in Cracow occupied the school board's building and went on a hunger strike for weeks.

Although the national walkout comes just days before high school exams, it enjoys broad support within the population. In cities like Lublin, in the east of Poland, high school students have announced protests in support of their teachers. Protests and meetings are also being held at institutions of higher education, including Warsaw University.

Students and workers throughout Poland and the world have declared their solidarity with the teachers on social media. Thus, one twitter user wrote, "I am proud of my mum—today she is protesting alongside other Polish teachers over low pay and funding issues in the education sector. Teachers are the backbone of

society and they deserve our respect and better pay.” A resident of Warsaw tweeted, “I’ve seen too many teachers among friends and family take second jobs, get burnt out, quit, or all three. Teaching is too important and teachers don’t deserve poverty wages. So it’s good to hear reports of 80 percent schools closed in Warsaw, 90 percent in some other parts.

One teacher from Connecticut wrote on Twitter, “Jesteśmy z wami! [We are with you!] You all have always had our back, after all!:) Solidarity from a teacher in CT, USA. Down with austerity, up with workers!!”

The Polish teachers’ strike is part of a global upsurge of the class struggle, which has found particularly sharp expression among teachers and educators. Over the past year, hundreds of thousands of US teachers and educators have gone on strike in multiple states; educators have struck in Britain, Mexico, Brazil and many countries in Europe, Africa and Latin America. Most of these strikes were organized in defiance of the unions. Whenever the unions regained control over the movement of workers, they betrayed the strikes and shut them down as soon as possible.

The Polish trade unions are no different, and Polish teachers must place no confidence in the ZNP. In talks with the government, the ZNP has already made numerous concessions, reducing its initial demand of a 1,000 Zloty wage increase across the board to a 30 percent wage increase. Throughout the talks, the ZNP has pursued the reactionary strategy of demanding to gut other social programs in order to fund wage increases for teachers. As of this writing, the ZNP has not declared whether or not it will accept the government’s offer to re-enter negotiations and immediately end the strike.

In talks with the ZNP, the government has remained intransigent, arguing that there “is no money” and offering an insulting maximum 15 percent wage increase. The main motivation for this “zero compromise” line has been the government’s fear that any concession to the teachers would trigger unrest among broader sections of the working class.

The argument that “there is no money” is a blatant lie. Working in close alliance with the imperialist war planners in Washington and NATO, the PiS government has been pursuing a massive military build-up against Russia. In March, the Polish

government announced that it would spend \$48 billion by 2026 to expand and equip its armed forces. By 2030, the government is planning to raise military spending to 2.5 percent of GDM. Just a few weeks ago, Poland ordered 20 mobile missiles from the US, worth \$411 million. In March 2018, the government ordered a US Patriot missile defence system worth \$4.7 billion.

While harbouring differences of a tactical nature over foreign policy alliances with PiS, the main bourgeois opposition party “Civic Platform” (PO) has likewise pursued a policy of austerity when in power. Throughout the past decades, the PO has supported the US-led military build-up against Russia and has helped transform Poland into a potential staging ground for a Third World War.

The striking teachers face important political issues. The struggle to defend public education and fight for decent wages is inseparable from the struggle against the growing danger of war, and attacks on democratic rights. In order to carry out this fight, teachers must break from the nationalist and pro-capitalist unions, form rank-and-file committees and appeal to the broadest possible support among the working class in Poland and internationally. This strategy requires a socialist and internationalist program, and the building of a revolutionary leadership in the working class. We urge teachers in Poland who are ready to discuss these issues to contact the *WSWS Teachers' Newsletter* today.

This author also recommends:

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>