

The resurgence of the class struggle in Poland

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Thirty years after General Wojciech Jaruzelski's Stalinist regime began to collapse, opening the way for the restoration of capitalism, the class struggle has again erupted in Poland. On Monday, more than 300,000 teachers launched an indefinite strike. It is the first national walkout by teachers in Poland in decades, and one of Poland's largest strikes since the massive 1980–81 strike movement against the Stalinist dictatorship.

The strike is part of an international wave of struggles by educators demanding better working conditions, higher wages and decent schools. The year 2018 saw the greatest number of US teachers go on strike in a quarter-century. In the Netherlands and Argentina, national teachers' strikes were carried out last month amid ongoing teachers' strikes in France, Tunisia, Morocco and other African countries.

The teachers' strikes are part of a broader upsurge of the international working class, including Central and Eastern Europe. The walkout by educators in Poland follows a two-week strike by workers at the national airline LOT and strikes by Polish Amazon workers. Recent months have seen strikes by workers in auto and other industries in Romania, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Serbia and Kosovo, as well as mass protests against the so-called "slave law" adopted by the right-wing regime of Viktor Orbán in Hungary, which forces workers to accept unpaid overtime.

In Germany, tens of thousands of public-sector workers took part in warning strikes in February against the collapse of schools, intolerable working conditions and miserable wages. Thousands of transportation workers struck in Berlin in March, bringing the city to a halt. Last Saturday, 40,000 people protested in Berlin against rising rents, demanding the expropriation of real estate companies and hedge funds.

The bourgeoisie fears the emergence from these struggles of a socialist movement of the working class. The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* was appalled when a poll showed that the majority of German workers and youth support the demand for expropriation. Bewildered, this mouthpiece of the German banks commented: "Almost 30 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Karl-Marx-Allee [the Berlin boulevard where demonstrators marched on Saturday] has become a herald of the reintroduction of socialism. Long live the revolution."

The German and European media are imposing a virtual blackout on the Polish teachers' strike because it shatters the official narrative promoted by the European Union. The Stalinist dictatorships' restoration of capitalism did not relegate the class struggle to the dustbin of history. Among Eastern European workers, there is both deeply-rooted opposition to the nationalist, economically autarkic policies of the Stalinist regimes, which brutally suppressed the working class, and seething opposition to the consequences of capitalist restoration.

In the 20th century, the Polish working class was among the most militant in Europe. It led monumental struggles against the Soviet bureaucracy during the "Polish October" of 1956, the workers' uprising in December 1970 and the mass strikes in 1980 that began in the Lenin shipyard in Gdansk and spread throughout the entire country, involving over 400,000 workers.

The claim that the October 1917 revolution in Russia led inevitably to Stalinism is a lie. It is refuted by the historical fact that there was a revolutionary socialist alternative that implacably opposed the Stalinist regime and fought for the program of world socialist revolution, which had guided the Bolshevik-led Revolution. That alternative was the Left Opposition which emerged in the early 1920s under the leadership of Leon Trotsky, who went on to found the Fourth International in 1938 after the collapse and betrayal of the Stalinist-led Comintern.

The Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe carried out a bureaucratic expropriation of capitalist property in the late 1940s, but they were not socialist. The many struggles of workers in these countries against the Stalinist dictatorships demonstrated that there was an objective basis in the working class for the alternative perspective advanced by Trotsky: a political revolution against the state bureaucracies as part of a renewed international revolutionary struggle of the working class for socialism.

With the Eastern European working class moving once again into struggle, these crucial political and historical experiences must be assimilated. As workers face the dangers of war and authoritarian rule across the region, the Polish strike is bringing teachers into headlong conflict with the forces that worked with the Polish Stalinist regime to

restore capitalism three decades ago.

Today, the Solidarity union is an openly right-wing movement aligned with Poland's far-right Law and Justice Party (PiS) government. Its teachers' branch was the only union that from the outset accepted the government's punitive terms. After the strike began on Monday, the head of Solidarity's teachers union, Ryszard Proksa, who is also a PiS local government official, denounced the teachers who walked out and threatened retribution against striking union branches.

Poland's main ZNP union, for its part, is seeking a quick end to the strike. ZNP leader Sławomir Broniarz has said the union wants to "put out this fire," i.e., strike a rotten deal with the PiS.

After four decades of bureaucratic suppression by the Stalinist regime, followed by three decades of capitalist restoration, workers in Eastern Europe face a crisis of perspective and leadership. The elementary requirements of conducting the strike raise the need to build new rank-and-file workers' organizations, directly controlled by the workers themselves and independent of the unions. However, Polish history provides a particularly sharp lesson that the role of these rank-and-file organizations depends critically on the perspective of their leadership.

The central issue that emerged in the struggle against Stalinism in Poland was the conflict between the Trotskyist perspective defended by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and that advanced by the petty-bourgeois Pabloite renegades from Trotskyism, who abandoned the program of the Fourth International and claimed that the Stalinist parties could be pressured into playing a revolutionary role.

The Solidarity movement emerged out of genuine, independent working class opposition against Stalinism and organized at its peak 10 million workers. However, it fell under a right-wing leadership that set Poland on course not to a political revolution against Stalinism, but to capitalist restoration.

In this, Pabloite figures such as Jacek KuroŹ played a major role. KuroŹ promoted Lech WaŹsa into Solidarity's leadership, after which WaŹsa became its leader and then the president of the Polish capitalist government. KuroŹ himself participated in the round-table talks in 1989, becoming minister of labor amid capitalist restoration in 1989–1990 and 1992–1993.

Three decades of capitalist rule have produced not the flowering of democracy and rise in working class living standards promised by the false prophets of the capitalist "democratic revolutions" in Eastern Europe, including Solidarity. Capitalist restoration has produced a social disaster for the working class and the rise to power of

right-wing and fascistic forces.

Poland is one of the most unequal countries in Europe. A recent study titled "Inequality in Poland" found that official figures "substantially underestimate the rise of inequality" during the past 30 years. "The top 10 percent income share increased from 23 percent to 40 percent and the top 1 percent income share from 4 percent to 14 percent between 1989 and 2015," the study concludes.

Poland's extreme nationalist, pro-NATO PiS government is warmongering and anti-Semitic. It has supported Washington's ratcheting up of military tensions with Russia and welcomed the stationing of NATO forces near the neighboring Russian enclave of Kaliningrad, posing the constant danger of a conflict between nuclear powers.

Last year, the PiS outlawed any mention of crimes committed by Poles against Jews during the Holocaust. Since then, a number of historians researching anti-Semitism and anti-Jewish pogroms in Poland have been purged from their jobs. At the Polish Independence Day celebration last November, prominent state officials, including Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, marched alongside fascists from Poland and other European countries.

The emerging opposition in the Polish working class to austerity and the PiS confirms the analysis made by the ICFI. Today, unlike the 1930s, far-right movements and governments do not have a mass base. But they are no less dangerous, because they are deliberately promoted by the state, the established parties, the media and sections of academia in response to the threat of a socialist movement of the working class. The developing movement of the working class must be consciously prepared. This requires the building of sections of the ICFI in Poland and across Eastern Europe to give the expanding struggles a genuinely socialist perspective and leadership.

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