

National strike by Polish teachers enters fifth day

By Clara Weiss
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Amid an almost complete blackout by the international media, the strike by more than 300,000 Polish educators is entering its fifth day, with students across the country spontaneously protesting in support of their teachers.

Like hundreds of thousands of teachers before them in the US, the Netherlands, Tunisia, Mexico and many other countries, Polish educators are striking against poverty wages. Their monthly net earnings range from 1,800 zlotys to 3,000 zlotys (\$470 to \$780). One teacher of 13 years from Warsaw told a German newspaper that she and her husband, who is also working as a teacher, still need to live with their children at her parents' house because they cannot afford to rent their own apartment on their teacher salaries.

Anger is also widespread over the right-wing government's nationalist and historically revisionist agenda, which history teachers are obliged to comply with. It involves a ban on mentioning any of the crimes of Polish anti-Semites against the country's Jewish population, as well as a crossing out of the term "communism" from Polish history before 1948.

According to Polish media reports, roughly three-quarters of the country's schools and pre-schools remain closed. In Central Poland, where several of the biggest industrial cities, including the capital city of Warsaw, are located, over 85 percent of the schools and pre-schools are shut down.

The extreme right Law and Justice Party (PiS) government has refused to make any concessions to teachers.

In a press conference on Wednesday, deputy prime minister Beata Szydło, restated the government's intransigence. The only offer on the table for the teachers was the contract signed on Sunday night by the union Solidarity over the heads of its membership. The contract

provides for a pitiful gradual wage increase of 15 percent and an increase of the numbers of lessons that teachers must give a week from 18 to 24.

Government officials are trying to rally public opinion against the teachers by accusing them of selfishly hurting their students. Middle school exams necessary for eighth graders to graduate were supposed to be given this week.

Szydło insisted that "quiet" must be maintained and repeatedly emphasized that the exams were being held as planned and in a "calm" manner. However, local news media report that many middle school students will nevertheless be unable to complete their degrees, because grades cannot be entered.

[Picture: A Catholic nun and priest supervising middle school exams in a Polish school. The picture was posted on Facebook with the commentary: "This is what education in the 21st century looks like in Poland."]

While the unions leading the strike, the Polish Teachers' Union (ZNP) and the Trade Unions Forum (FZZ), have refused to mobilize students and broader sections of the working class in support of the teachers, spontaneous demonstrations by students to support their teachers have taken place across the country.

In Sosnowiec, some 50 students, among them several who cannot complete their school year because of the strike, staged a spontaneous demonstration in support of their teachers. The head of the student's self-government at the school, Zuzanna Karcz, told a local newspaper, "The school community is our family, and the teachers also belong to it. Family members support each other. We don't want them to give up. We owe them too much."

Students held signs, saying "[like] a wall behind the teachers," [Murem za nauczycielami], "We are with you" and "We support the teachers' strike." One of the school teachers who came out to the demonstration to thank the students said, "It is my biggest dream to again stand in front of the blackboard and teach you. But I simply must

strike.”

Student protests also took place in Lublin and several other cities.

Donations have been raised to support the teachers, and they have received public support from many of Poland’s best-known intellectuals, artists and journalists, including the Academy Award winning director Paweł Pawlikowski, writer Olga Tokarczuk as well as Wanda Traczyk-Stawska, a well-known survivor of the 1944 Warsaw Uprising against the Nazi occupation of Poland in World War II.

Fearing that the struggle of teachers could spark joint action by other sections of Poland’s impoverished working class and beyond, the PiS government has systematically worked to portray the teachers as demanding more than their fair share and is mobilizing other sections of the population against them.

Jarosław Kaczyński, widely recognized as the party’s *de facto* leader, has also made a point of campaigning among the rural population, promising modest increases in child pay. About 40 percent of Poland’s population of 40 million still lives in the countryside, where PiS enjoys significantly more support than in the industrial cities. Far from seeking to unite teachers with the oppressed rural population, the unions have provided ammunition to the right-wing government by suggesting that government money should pay for teachers’ raises instead of benefits for the rural poor.

Youth and teachers must be warned: to rely on the trade unions, which have betrayed and sold out every struggle for decades, is a recipe for disaster and defeat. The teachers are confronting major political and historical questions. Their strike brings them in confrontation with the entire political and economic set-up that was put in place through the restoration of capitalism in Poland, carried out by the Stalinist bureaucracy in conjunction with the leadership of the Solidarity trade union, which worked to disorient and suppress a mass movement of the working class against the Stalinist bureaucracy.

The leadership of the extreme right-wing ruling PiS party, including its head Jarosław Kaczyński and the anti-Semitic and fascistic defense minister Antoni Morawiecki, all emerged out of the KOR (Workers’ Defense committee), which played a central role in advocating for a pro-capitalist program, and the Solidarity movement. The main opposition party Civic Platform (PO), which advocates for a closer alliance of Poland with German imperialism, was founded by former members of Solidarity, such as Donald Tusk and Maciej Płażyński,

who also advocated for the restoration of capitalism. Today, the Solidarity union works closely with the PiS-government and is widely hated and despised in the working class.

The other unions too have supported capitalist restoration and decades of austerity. The ZNP emerged directly out the Stalinist government-controlled union of the same name, and supported capitalist restoration as well. For decades, the ZNP was aligned with the Left Democratic Alliance (SLD) party, whose policies of austerity led to its complete loss of parliamentary representation in 2015.

Now, ZNP is oriented to the main bourgeois opposition party PO. When it was in government until 2015, the PO enacted savage austerity measures, including large-scale school privatizations, which in no small part account for the social disaster confronting teachers today. This allowed PiS to capitalize on social discontent within sections of the population. Just like PiS, the PO supports the military build-up against Russia, which has cost tens of billions of dollars in the past few years alone.

The strike of Polish teachers can only be successful if they appeal for support to the entire Polish and international working class. They must connect their struggle for decent wages with the struggle against war and social inequality. This step requires a political and organizational break from the pro-capitalist trade unions and parties, and a turn toward the struggle for socialism, that is based on the lessons of the Trotskyist struggle against Stalinism and the restoration of capitalism.

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