

Polish government vows to fight wage rises as teachers' strike enters second week

By Clara Weiss
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The Polish government, led by the extreme right-wing Law and Justice Party (PiS), is refusing to accede to demands of teachers for increased wages and better classroom conditions. Hundreds of thousands of teachers have been engaged in a national walkout since April 8 in one of largest struggles by the working class against decades of austerity, which followed the restoration of capitalism 30 years ago.

Some 80 percent of Poland's 400,000 teachers voted in favor of the national strike. Last week, roughly three quarters of the country's schools and kindergartens were shut down by the first nationwide teachers' strike in Poland since 1993. While local news reports suggest that in some schools and especially kindergartens educators are returning to work, the vast majority of the teachers are still on strike. The Polish Teachers Union (ZNP), the largest of the striking unions, is demanding a 30 percent wage increase.

Teachers are not receiving any salary or compensations from a strike fund and rely on donations to make up in part for their loss in wages. With teachers already living on poverty wages of between 1,800 zlotys and 3,000 zlotys (US\$470 to US\$780), they are making significant financial sacrifices to continue the strike.

Spontaneous demonstrations by students have been taking place across the country. On Friday, academics and students of the University of Bia?ystok, one of the most impoverished cities in Poland in the northeast, demonstrated in support of the teachers. For days, banners saying "We support the demands of the teachers" have been hanging at the university building. On Tuesday, parents, students and teachers demonstrated in the city center of Olsztyn, a city in the northwest. Middle- and high-school students have called a protest in ?ód?, the third largest industrial city, for this Saturday. According to polls, around 80 percent of middle- and high-school students support their teachers' struggle for better wages.

Parents too have expressed their support for the strike. After days of denunciations of teachers by government representatives and the media, a parent from Warsaw wrote

an angry letter to the Ministry of Education, which was viewed thousands of times on Facebook. It said, "You are trying to tell us parents that the teachers provoked this crisis. But the truth is that the students were abandoned not by the teachers but by you!" In a comment on a video of a demonstration in Olsztyn, another mother wrote, "I am for the teachers. They too deserve a worthy life. I have teachers in my family and they indeed receive starvation salaries."

The broad popular support for the teachers is an expression of profound social and political discontent within the working class. Three decades after the restoration of capitalism, carried out by the Stalinist bureaucracy in conjunction with the leadership of the Solidarno?? trade union, Poland counts among the most unequal countries in Europe with levels of social inequality similar to those in Germany and the UK.

According to one report, between 1989 and 2015 the real income of the country's top 1 percent of income earners rose by 458 percent and that of the top 10 percent by 190 percent. The income of the top 0.1 percent rose by a staggering 1,019 percent. By contrast, the income of the poorest half of the population rose by only 31 percent.

A study from 2017 found the period of economic growth in 2004-2008, after Poland joined the EU and when the pro-EU party Civic Platform (PO) was in power, witnessed the largest rise in top income concentration with 5 percent of income earners receiving half of the total real income rise, while the bottom 95 percent captured the other half.

The PiS government insists that it will not agree to any other conditions than those accepted on the eve of the strike by the Solidarity trade union, which works closely with the government. The contract accepted by Solidarity provides for a miserable, gradual 15 percent increase in salaries and an increase in the number of lessons that teachers have to give per week from the current 18 to 24.

While the government has been spending billions of dollars on the US- and NATO-led military buildup against Russia, the Polish education minister, Anna Zalewska, who has publicly denied the participation of Poles in anti-Jewish

pogroms after the Second World War, insisted in a press conference, “There is no money in the 2019 state budget for the increases to be higher.”

The Polish government is determined not to give in to the demands of the teachers precisely because it recognizes that the strike is part of a broader resurgence of the class struggle internationally and the beginning of a counter-offensive by the working class against decades of austerity. It fears that any concession to the teachers would encourage other sections of the working class to go on the offensive.

The strategy of the Polish government consists in smearing the teachers publicly and relying on the unions to isolate the strike and starve the teachers into submission. At the same time, the government is trying to minimize the effects of the strike by organizing for the middle-school exams to proceed as planned by employing religious teachers, Catholic priests, nuns and other strikebreakers to supervise the exams. There are also indications that the government is preparing to victimize striking teachers. Last week, the Ministry of Education sent out a request to school principals to give it the names of all striking teachers.

Virtually everything that the trade unions have done so far has played into the hands of this strategy.

The Solidarno?? union, whose head, Ryszard Proksa, was recently revealed to earn 130,000 zlotys per year (roughly US\$34,341, which is more than five times the average teachers’ salary), signed a contract with the government on the eve of the strike without any authorization from the membership. It has told its members not to join the walkout. The union is now in a deep crisis as countless teachers have handed in their resignation.

Speaking for thousands, one teacher told the local media, “He [Proksa] makes a living from our dues. If he gets paid so much, then no wonder he doesn’t care about our struggle for decent wages. He cheated us for his own private interest. This is an utter betrayal, he stabbed us in the back!”

The ZNP union, which has supported decades of austerity policies, is working to contain the strike and shut it down as soon as possible. Knowing full well that there is broad support for teachers, the unions have deliberately not made any appeal to other sections of Polish workers, nor have they called any large-scale national protests.

Leading ZNP representatives have pursued the reactionary strategy of pitting educators against peasants and other sections of the impoverished population. The unions have complained about the very low subsidies the PiS government has given to the rural poor, saying the money should go to teachers instead. At no point have the unions demanded that the wealthy pay to fund quality public education.

The ZNP has also facilitated the government’s efforts to

weaken the effect of the strike, by allowing teachers to supervise middle-school exams on an individual basis.

While the teachers are confronted in the sharpest manner with the social crisis produced by the restoration of capitalism, the right-wing nationalist and historically revisionist agenda of PiS, and the bourgeoisie’s efforts to make the working class pay for its war preparations, the unions have deliberately blacked out all political questions from the strike.

ZNP head S?awomir Broniarz announced that a new round of talks with the government would take place within the framework of the “Council for Social Dialogue” on Thursday. On Tuesday, April 23, the presidium of the ZNP will meet to discuss the continuation of the strike.

There are signs of growing dissatisfaction among the striking teachers with the ZNP. One teacher from Warsaw told the newspaper *Wyborcza*, “I personally think that the strike needs to be sharpened. The government is playing with us and doing whatever it wants, and we are not reacting to it.”

Teachers and students in Poland must be warned: The ZNP is preparing to sell out the strike. Working closely with the main opposition party Civic Platform (PO), which as a ruling party was responsible for far-reaching austerity measures, including in education, the ZNP is hoping to use the strike as a maneuver to weaken the PiS government ahead of the European elections in May and the Polish parliamentary elections in the fall. However, just like PiS and the entire Polish ruling class, the ZNP leadership fears nothing more than a broader movement by the Polish and European working class.

The struggle of the Polish teachers can only be successful if they turn to the broadest sections of the working class in Poland and Europe as a whole, and connect their struggle with the fight against social inequality, the preparations for war, and attacks on democratic rights. This fight requires the formation of rank-and-file committees, which are independent of the unions and bourgeois parties, and the development of a mass political movement of the working class guided by a genuine socialist program.

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