

Unions scramble to contain Polish teachers' strike as 40,000 social workers prepare to stop work

By Clara Weiss
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Amid an almost complete international media blackout, the nationwide strike by 300,000 Polish teachers, which has shut down three-fourths of the country's kindergartens and schools, could soon be joined by over 40,000 social workers. The teachers' walkout is the latest in a series of strikes by educators around the world. The teachers' strike, the first nationwide walkout since 1993, is one of the largest strikes since the restoration of capitalism in Poland in 1989.

Talks between the government and representatives of the largest striking union, the Polish Teachers Union (ZNP), broke down again last Thursday. The ruling ultra-nationalist Law and Justice party (PiS) is refusing to accede to teachers' demands for a 30 percent raise. Instead, it insists on imposing the same contract that was accepted by the Solidarity union against the opposition of its members, which provides for a gradual 15 percent wage raise tied to an increase in the number of weekly lessons from the current 18 to 24. The government's "zero compromise" line is largely motivated by its fear that any concessions to the teachers could trigger a rebellion among other sections of the working class in Poland and internationally.

Teachers in Poland are earning poverty wages, ranging from 1,800 zlotys to 3,000 zlotys (US\$470 to US\$780) a month in a country where living expenses are similar to those in Western European countries. Ania, a 21-year-old teacher from Knurów, an industrial town in the coal-mining region of Upper Silesia, told the WSWS that both she and her husband are working as teachers but must pick up extra work in order to provide for their two children. "I earned a Bachelor's and then a Master's degree and then studied Surdopedagogy, which means I'm qualified to teach kids with hearing problems. I know two foreign languages and did lots of other courses,

mostly at my own cost. I earn about 700 euros a month. My husband makes the same. The average politician gets 3,000 Euros."

The anger of teachers has only grown in recent weeks over the intransigent position of the PiS government and its extraordinary campaign against the teachers. The right-wing politicians have been using the language of warfare against educators. Patryk Jaki, Deputy Minister of Justice and one of the best-known representatives of the ruling party, sparked a major public outcry when he compared the teachers to the soldiers of the German Wehrmacht, which invaded Poland in 1939, and was responsible for the murder of about a fifth of the country's population. His statements made clear that the government viewed the teachers as nothing less than an enemy at war with the state.

One teacher, 35 years old, said on Facebook said that she had never met such venom poured on teachers from state-controlled television. Media reports have also revealed that the government has been using fake social media accounts to impersonate high school students who are set to graduate, in order to malign the striking teachers.

Thousands of teachers and workers joined the call of the ZNP union for a very limited nationwide protest on Tuesday, which lasted for just one hour. According to a teacher who spoke to the WSWS, the main protest in Warsaw drew thousands of people. Polish news reports have sought to downplay the turnout for the largest public protest since the beginning of the strike. Other protests took place in several major cities in Poland, including Lublin, Opole, Łódź and Cracow. In total, there were demonstrations in 22 cities and towns.

Everything indicates that the overwhelming majority of the Polish working class fully supports the teachers'

strike and that broader sections of workers are preparing to join, despite the desperate attempts of the unions to contain the movement. Under these conditions, the leadership of the ZNP trade union is scrambling to maintain control over the strike movement.

Feeling unable to continue negotiations with the government amid the outrage and anger of teachers, the ZNP and other unions have announced that they would not participate in a new roundtable initiative of the government. The ZNP presidium is set to decide on a continuation of the strike on Wednesday. In two interviews, Sławomir Broniarz, the head of the ZNP, effectively declared that it was impossible for the union to end the strike at this point because of the overwhelming militancy of the workers.

On Tuesday, Broniarz told the television station TVN24, “If one looks at the atmosphere, at what is going on in the schools, the tensions, some statements by politicians in recent days, I would be extremely skeptical when it comes to the possibility of ending the strike today. It is a huge protest of the teachers’ milieu with very big support from the parents.” He called the situation “extreme” and stated that he would be in favor of continuing the strike as it has been conducted and that the strike might last up until early September.

In an earlier interview with the conservative newspaper *Rzeczpospolita*, Broniarz had expressed concern about an escalation of the strike. He criticized the government for behaving like “an elephant in a China shop” and said that the “emotions of the teachers in many schools show that fires of the strike might be sparked in the country independently from the decisions of the union leaders.” Teachers throughout the country “say that they will strike until the very end.”

The fears of the unions and the government that the teachers’ strike will spark a broader strike movement of the working class, are well founded. Thirty years after the restoration of capitalism, horrendous levels of social inequality and poverty wages for vast sections of the working class have created a social powder keg that is set to explode as the class struggle is intensifying all over the world.

The front page of the Tuesday edition of the *Rzeczpospolita* newspaper reported that over 40,000 social workers are about to join the strike either later this month or early in May. Social workers earn an average of 1902 zloty a month, less than \$500. If social workers were to go on strike, the newspaper warned, social payments like the 500+ payments for families with

multiple children will be stopped. The government has relied on these modest payments, which are primarily distributed in deeply impoverished rural districts, to prop up its wavering support. The political repercussions of such a strike for PiS could be immense, and it could easily trigger a much broader strike movement in the Polish working class.

Commenting on the news about the impending strike of social workers, a young Polish woman studying to become a teacher told the WSWS, “Wait a little bit longer and every one will strike. It will be a mess in Poland and the government will have a big problem.”

The biggest obstacle to this development is the trade unions. They are deliberately working not only to contain the strike, but also to prevent teachers from raising political issues and demands. In his speech to protesting teachers in Warsaw on Tuesday, Broniarz insisted that “teachers don’t want politics, they want better schools.”

In reality, the teachers’ strike is confronting major political questions: the results of the restoration of capitalism in 1989 after decades of Stalinism; the attacks on democratic and social rights under PiS and the preceding governments of the Civic Platform (PO) and the preparations for war against Russia. The Polish ruling class is spending billions of dollars on a military buildup while arguing that there is “no money” for teachers.

The teachers’ strike in Poland must be broadened to the widest possible sections of workers in Poland and Europe and connected to the major political issues facing the working class: the struggle against social inequality, the defense of democratic rights and the fight against war. This requires the formation of rank-and-file committees that are independent from all the unions and bourgeois parties, as part of the development of a mass political movement of the working class guided by a socialist program.

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