Poland: Mass protests and strikes against abortion ban

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For days, thousands of demonstrators have taken to the streets in Poland. Their signs and banners read: "They have blood on their robes", "Protect the women", "Fuck off" and "This is war". This was the response to a near unanimous decision of the Constitutional Court, handed down on Thursday, October 22, that abortions due to malformations of the foetus would contradict the "right to life" guaranteed by the Constitution. This followed an investigation for constitutional compliance of the abortion law initiated by the ruling party PiS (Prawo i Sprawiedliwo??, Engl.: Law and Justice).

The contempt for women shown by this decision came as little surprise. As early as 2017, the EU warned Poland about the political closeness of the judges of the Constitutional Court to the ruling party. Now, abortions are only possible if the pregnancy is due to a rape or incest proven in court or if the mother's life is seriously threatened by the pregnancy or birth.

Further tightening

The situation is extremely serious. With the new decision, Poland has further tightened one of the most restrictive abortion laws in Europe. For decades now, a maximum of 2,000 abortions have been performed legally for a population of 38 million. In 2019, 97% of the total of 1,100 legal procedures were performed because of foetal malformation, the reason that is now forbidden.

The law passed in 1993, which has now been further restricted by the Constitutional Court, already forced women to have illegal abortions either within the country or abroad. The number of abortions is 140,000 per year on average, some estimate as high as 200,000. On the one hand, this shows how restrictive the law already was and how narrowly it was being interpreted. Many of those affected report that they have been denied abortion even after providing proof of legally legitimate reasons. On the other hand, the figures show that unwanted pregnancies are not necessarily decreasing, but only that these pregnant women are being driven into illegality. As the situation now stands, pregnant women who want to have an abortion either have to pay out of their own pocket to go abroad or engage in illegal, or even self-performed, medical procedures. Even if they avoid legal consequences, they risk severe threats to their health and even their lives.

While we must protest against this drastic deterioration, we must also fight for much more. A woman's right to control her own body, and to decide whether to continue with a pregnancy or not, have a child or not, should not be subjected to ancient religious dogmas. Abortion must be available for whatever reason and the costs should be fully covered by the state. This is part of the medical care which every woman should have a right to receive. If a state wants to avoid the termination of unwanted pregnancies, it needs not a prohibition law, but information, free contraceptives and good sex education in schools that freely
discusses the existence of more than the binary sexes and one type of (hetero)sexuality.

Right turn

In addition to the slap in the face for women that the new constitutional decision represents, other measures initiated by the PiS show that the party is not only deeply misogynist, but actively pursues policies against all the oppressed. The party, which advocates "the church's" values, is prominent in glorifying the nationalist ideals of its own history and denying all sexualities and gender identities that do not fit into its norms.

This aggressive, reactionary policy corresponds to the right-wing populist character of the current government. With the de facto total ban on abortion, it is also a matter of preserving its reactionary, petty bourgeois mass base and mobilising against an alleged threat coming from outside. Nationalism, and especially Catholicism, are the ideological points of departure for mobilising behind the bourgeois government and courting a multi-class following, from the social elite and state leadership to petty-bourgeois strata and backward workers in both the cities and the countryside. Alongside the church and PiS, extreme nationalist and outright fascist forces are on the anti-abortion mobilisations that have been attacking sexually oppressed people and their public actions for years, tolerated, or even encouraged, by the police and church.

The reactionary attack on women's rights is presented as a fight against a supposed cosmopolitan elite, caught up in the "gender mania". In reality, its main targets end up being working women, wage earners and poor peasant women.

The protests against the latest restrictions are becoming increasingly intense. Since Monday, October 26, blockades have been erected in Warsaw. Strikes are threatened for the next few weeks if the Constitutional Court (whose decision, incidentally, is also being questioned legally) does not give in. That, however, is certainly not to be expected. On the contrary, the Polish bourgeois and right wing populist reaction has made the restriction of the abortion law a core issue of its policy. The PiS chairman, Jarosław Kaczyński, the real puppet master of Polish domestic politics, called on his supporters on 29 October to defend the churches and tighten the law at "any price": "Let us defend Poland, defend patriotism and show determination and courage. Only then can we win the war declared directly on us by our opponents".

We must take this threat, this Trump-like war rhetoric, very seriously. The court and the government will not voluntarily abandon the worsening of the already terrible conditions, let alone grant the right to abortion. This confrontation with the reactionaries can only be won by means of class struggle, only through radical protest actions, mass mobilisations and political strikes.

Realising the potential

The prospects of success are not that bad. According to surveys, almost 70 % of the Polish population not only oppose the tightening of laws, but also agree with the statement that women should have the right to decide for themselves whether to terminate a pregnancy. The question is how to realise this enormous potential.

The dynamism and power of the movement in Poland are evident on the streets and in the mass actions. On October 26, blockades, demonstrations and rallies took place in over 150 cities and municipalities in Poland and across Europe.

On Wednesday, October 28, a nationwide strike was called for and numerous other actions. These are appealing to workers and smaller grassroots unions such as the Inicjatywa Pracowników (IP = Workers'
Initiative). The decisive factor, however, will be whether the strike and the protest movement can be anchored in the enterprises. All unions critical of the government, especially the OPZZ, must openly stand up for the struggle and mobilise their members. Mass meetings should be held in the factories and offices to organise a work stoppage and elect strike committees.

The question of advocacy for women's rights, especially women workers' rights, is also an issue in the factories and in the working class to break workers from the unions that support the PiS and to work for a unified trade union movement, independent of all bourgeois parties.

Kaczyński's blatant threat of war also means that the women's movement, and all those who take to the streets or strike, must expect attacks by right-wing, nationalist and sexist forces and provocations by the police. They must, therefore, defend their democratic rights against possible bans on demonstrations and strikes under the pretext of pandemic protection. What is needed is a movement organised from below and coordinated nationwide, based on strike and action committees, on the demonstrations and rallies, as well as coordinated self-defence structures to ward off threatened right-wing attacks.

International solidarity

The movement in Poland also needs our international solidarity. In the struggle for the legal right to abortion, we cannot rely on the EU and the "democratic" states of Western Europe. Angela Merkel and Ursula von der Leyen will not seek another conflict over the abortion law, which is not high on their agenda anyway. The Polish government's assent to an EU crisis policy is a thousand times more important to them than the future of Polish women.

The real allies are the people who took part in solidarity demonstrations and rallies in many European countries, in Germany, Austria, Ireland, France, Italy and others, in order to put pressure on the Polish government from outside. Apart from those directly affected, we are all in the firing line from a rising right wing populism. We will not let the right to control our own bodies be taken away! Act in solidarity with the women in Poland and give full support to their planned strike!

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