Poland: Resistance grows against right-wing government

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On May 7, Warsaw witnessed its largest demonstration since the end of Communism. Around 240,000 people answered the call of the "Committee for the Defence of Democracy", KOD. Liberals, conservatives and left-wingers took part. Participants included the main centre-right opposition party, the Civic Platform, PO, and the neoliberal Modern (Nowoczesna) Party, led by a former World Bank economist, Ryszard Petru.

The protest was dominated by white and red Polish flags and the blue flags of the European Union and was directed against the reactionary policies of the right-wing conservative government of the Law and Justice Party, PiS, led by Jaroslaw Kaczynski. The PiS has expressed criticism of the EU, particularly Germany, both because of its economic policy and its too liberal policy on refugees. Though he is neither president nor prime minister, Kaczynski dominates his party and the government.

The PiS Prime Minister, Beata Szydlo, wants to enforce a complete ban on abortion in a country which already has the most restrictive laws for terminating pregnancies. At the same time, she has taken measures to limit the powers of the constitutional court and limit the freedom of the press and other media. When the court declared the government?s action unconstitutional, the government simply refused to recognise its authority.

With the support of the arch-conservative President, Andrzej Duda, the government is using the huge PiS majority in the Polish parliament, the Sejm, to grab powers which override all other parts of the constitution, which could establish an authoritarian form of government, similar to that created in Hungary under Viktor Orbán.

PiS: Success and protests

In criticising the current administration, it is necessary not to forget that the result of the election ? 37 percent for the PiS giving it an absolute majority in the Sejm, is due in no small measure to the policy of the previous PO-led government. Under pressure from the international economic situation, their own bourgeoisie and the EU, their policy was one of continuous attacks not only on the workers, but also on the urban petty bourgeoisie and especially the peasantry. This has had a similar result in Poland as in the other countries of Eastern Europe, that is, the growth of anti-EU populism.

The PiS is considered "the voice of Catholicism", whose deep roots in large parts of the population in Poland constantly undermine progressive struggles and lead repeatedly to attacks on women's rights ? as it is doing now.

Against these attacks, active protests arose, especially from the pro-EU camp of the Polish bourgeoisie. This group enjoys quite significant EU privileges, even if they are dependent on the steady drip feed of EU
The leading liberal and conservative forces in the KOD see these benefits of membership endangered by the PiS government's criticisms of the EU and have rushed to defend their interests under the banner of the fight to "defend democracy". The fact that this mass movement has developed under the leadership of KOD, also shows the political weakness of the Polish labour movement and the left.

A left in disarray

After the May 2015 presidential elections, and the stunning triumph for the PiS that brought Duda to power, the OPZZ trade union launched an emergency plan for the left. A United Left coalition, ZL, was formed after two months of negotiations. In the parliamentary elections, however, it suffered a crushing defeat, failing to surmount the eight per cent hurdle for alliances and not winning a single seat.

Just a few months earlier, a brand new leftwing group, Partia Razem, Together, had been created. This was inspired by Syriza and Podemos and the politics of Yannis Varoufakis' DiEM 25. Using the purple colour of the Spanish party, and with a charismatic, leader Adrian Zandberg, it appeals to the young precariat?/. Razem has kept its distance from KOD, blaming the previous PO government, with its neoliberal, market-oriented policies, for the current crisis, but it was too new and peripheral to win seats in that election. Thus, since October 2015, the Sejm has lacked a single representative of the left or any other progressive force. With 24 per cent of the vote, PO lost severely but was not crushed.

The leadership of the trade unions, which emerged from reformed Stalinism just like the Social Democracy, has not taken any initiative for years and did not mobilise independently against recent governments. For years, they have provided no significant resistance against the passage of reactionary, misogynistic or homophobic laws, or against the many attacks on the working class? social gains. Certainly, they have done nothing against the reactionary foreign policy over Ukraine and support for NATO's eastward expansion.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the Democratic Left Alliance, SLD, whose core is the Social Democrats and trade unions, accepts the leadership of the liberal and conservative opposition parties of the bourgeoisie. Indeed, they ultimately prefer this because it allows them to hide behind them politically, and not have to arouse any workers' resistance, which might take on a too radical or "uncontrollable" form.

Razem has kept its distance from KOD because it recognises that it represents the very forces that spearheaded the shift to the right before the PiS, and thus prepared the way for its policy. However, despite this correct insight, Razem has drawn no conclusions; on the question of what forms of struggle and demands to propose, it provides no effective answers.

Neither the Social Democrats, nor Razem, nor the trade unions, have their own action programme to offer any prospect of mobilisation so they are unable to play any sort of political role in challenging the bourgeois leadership of the protest movement.

How to fight?

The labour movement currently has its back to the wall. The demise of the left has not come about by accident: Stalinism and social democratic reformism have perpetrated crimes against the Polish workers, selling out their struggles against restoration and selling out to the EU too, making at best only symbolic mobilisations against these attacks. The left consists mostly of groups from a reformist or Stalinist tradition such as the Communist Party of Poland (KPP) and the paper Brzask, Dawn. The remnants of Social Democracy can only look forward to continued marginalisation.

The trade unions are also heavily bureaucratised. Solidarity held out the hope for a fall of the Stalinist...
bureaucracy at the beginning of the 1980s, with promises of workers' self-management, but under the capitalist restoration and martial law it was significantly weakened as a trade union. The OPZZ was always the larger confederation and, since 1989/90, it has followed in the wake of the former Stalinists and transformed itself into a social democratic organisation.

The fact that not a few leftists and workers now seek their salvation in a middle-class movement like KOD is a result of the lack of perspective and the political bankruptcy of the leaders of the labour movement. The KOD, led by Liberals and conservatives, appears to them, in conjunction with the EU, as the only realistic chance to oppose the nationalist and racist divisions in the country and the arch conservative misogynistic and homophobic policies.

The reactionary attacks of the PiS government clearly show what a political dead end a national re-division of Europe would mean for every progressive movement. It should be a warning in this respect also to all enthusiastic proponents of EU exit and the supposed benefits of national independence.

The tragedy of the current situation is that the labour movement is so politically weakened that it was the KOD that mobilised the hundreds of thousands. It is therefore essential that the left participate in the movement on the basis of its own programme, taking a clear class position. It would be wrong either to turn their backs on an ongoing mass movement just because it has a bourgeois leadership or to adapt to the KOD politically and to run after it uncritically as "the lesser evil". There is no reason not to go to the meetings called by KOD or to demand a consistent fight against the PiS government, to expose the bourgeois politicians and and urge all leftist organisations and trade unions to agitate for a workers' united front against the attacks of PiS.

The Alliance should not limit itself to the defence of the current, deteriorating, conditions. Although the leaders of KOD oppose a further deterioration of the already restrictive abortion law, they are not for the abolition of the prohibition of abortion because they do not wish to sever their relations with the Church. Certainly, they do not want to raise social demands.

All of this shows the need for a political break with the KOD, and offering the youth, the women, the workers a wider perspective to gain the trust of Polish men and women who rightly do not trust the KOD leadership because of its neoliberal policies in the past.

The central axis of a workers' united front should therefore be:

? Withdrawal of the media and judiciary law! Down with the threshold for parliamentary seats!
? Separation of Church and State! Down with the law prohibiting abortion - free accessible abortions for all!
No religious education in schools. Expropriation of all clerical property!
The current minimum wage, €410, is too low; for a national minimum wage, set by workers' committees, at a level that secures a tolerable life for all! Equal pay for men and women!
? Nationalisation without compensation of all companies that declare redundancies, refuse to pay the minimum wage, do not follow health and safety guidelines or fail to pay taxes! The entire staff should carry on the business democratically! Enough with the "low wage country" Poland!
? No to nationalism, no to false hopes in the EU! For the common, cross-border resistance of workers and youth against racism, militarism, attacks on democratic and social rights!

To achieve these demands needs concrete action. The mass demonstrations are a good step toward rallying our own forces. They have shown that in Poland, despite seemingly all-powerful conservatism, mass mobilisations are possible. But it is also clear that demonstrations alone will not force the PiS government to withdraw its attacks. This requires a movement that is rooted in the enterprises, in the public sector, in schools and universities, which can go beyond demonstrations to the political strike.
Therefore, it takes a movement, which is based on the working class, and led by its own organisations.

This needs a class leadership pursuing its own programme, a policy independent of all the bourgeois forces. This means addressing two related tasks: firstly, it is necessary to organise in trade unions and to build a mass movement to create action committees at the workplace, in factories, shops and offices, in educational institutions and in working class districts to defend democratic rights against the attacks of the government and to coordinate demonstrations and direct actions up to the political mass strike.

Secondly, it needs a political force that can give it direction, a political leadership for such a movement, a revolutionary workers' party. All those who are struggling in the present crisis and moving towards an anti-capitalist orientation need a discussion on the programmatic fundamentals and an action programme upon which to build such an organisation.

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