

In naked sellout, union announces end to strike by 300,000 Polish teachers

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On Thursday afternoon, the Polish Teachers Union (ZNP) declared that it was calling for educators to return to work beginning Monday, and shutting down the powerful 17-day nationwide strike by more than 300,000 teachers, without achieving any of their demands.

The ZNP's actions are a naked sellout. The far-right Law and Justice Party (PiS) repeatedly declared that it would not negotiate on the teachers' main demand for a 30 percent wage increase, now offering only a paltry 10 percent wage rise tied to increases in working hours. Teachers in Poland earn poverty wages of 1,800 to 3,000 zlotys (US\$470 to US\$780) per month, and many are forced to work second jobs to make ends meet.

Such is the anger and determination to fight among teachers that the ZNP knew it could not agree to this rotten deal, as did the Solidarnosc union. Instead, ZNP president Sławomir Broniarz released a statement Thursday afternoon, declaring, "We are suspending the strike, but the fight is going on and will last until the end!"

The union is claiming that it is "giving time" to the government until September, and that if there is no better offer, it may call a strike once again. In the meantime, teachers are being instructed to proceed with baccalaureate examinations before the end of semester at the beginning of June, handing all of the initiative to the government. Presenting its return-to-work order as a militant maneuver, it declares that "from today we are entering a new, much more important stage" of the struggle.

Deputy Prime Minister Beata Szydło, who was in charge of the talks with the union, praised the ZNP for shutting down the strike, stating in a press conference: "I'd like to thank ZNP for this decision — pupils and teachers needed it."

The ZNP's announcement provoked anger and denunciations from teachers on social media. "I have a strange feeling that the ZNP had the same contempt towards our strike [as the government]," said one teacher, in a Facebook comment "liked" by 18 others.

The government's strategy from the outset has been to wait out the strike and count on the union to prevent any expansion of the struggle. Its vicious hostility to the most elementary demands of workers was expressed in its minister's denunciations of the teachers as akin to the Nazi Wehrmacht, which invaded Poland in 1939 and was responsible for the death of 20 percent of the population.

In response to the language and policy of open class warfare by the government, the union has worked to isolate teachers, refusing to provide any strike pay and assisting in the government's policy of starving them into submission.

It is still unclear what, if any pay the teachers, who have lost thousands of zloty throughout the strike, will receive for the duration of the strike. While some local city councils have declared their readiness to pay the teachers out of local budgets, the PiS government has intervened, arguing that doing so would be "illegal".

Under these conditions, to the extent that some teachers see no way forward in a continuation of the strike, it is a result of the scabbing policies of the union, and an expression of the total lack of confidence among workers that the union would wage a genuine struggle in their bitter confrontation with the government.

The ZNP's decision to shut down the strike was above all motivated by the extreme fears of both the unions and the government that the strike was winning growing support from broad sections of the working class, and signs that other sections of workers would join the strike.

On Tuesday, a public-sector union, seeking to maintain control over 40,000 social service workers, declared that it may be joining the strike. A leading liberal newspaper warned the following day that “this is already a rebellion, not an average strike.” In total, 15,000 schools and kindergartens were closed, and teachers have been joined by numerous demonstrations of thousands of university and school students

The ruling class knows that it is sitting on a social powder keg. The restoration of capitalism in Poland in 1989 unleashed three decades of social attacks on workers’ conditions and a rapid growth in poverty and social inequality. The share of wealth going to the richest one percent of Poles has doubled over this period, and the bottom 20 percent of households possess just one percent of all household wealth.

The union has sought to argue that teachers could not continue the strike because they were isolated and lacked public support. But this is a lie. In fact, it is the unions that have worked to isolate the strike. They have opposed making an appeal to other sections of the working class to broaden the struggle, including healthcare, social services and other public sector workers, and link the struggle of teachers to the fight for higher wages and an improvement in public services for all workers. They have also deliberately blacked out all political issues confronting the teachers – from the major war preparations of the Polish bourgeoisie, for which the workers are made to pay, to the assaults on democratic and social rights under the PiS and preceding governments of the opposition parties.

The international media and trade unions throughout Europe have imposed a near-total blackout on the strike in Poland. This underscores the deep fears in the ruling class that such a strike could rapidly expand throughout eastern and western Europe. In neighboring Germany, the teachers’ unions suppressed any discussion of the strike in Poland, fearful of the widespread support for a united struggle among teachers.

Certain basic conclusions must be drawn from the experience of the past 18 days.

First, it is impossible to conduct any struggle within the framework of the trade unions. These organizations are not workers’ organizations, but labor-management businesses, whose role is to suppress opposition among workers, and enforce cuts by employers and governments. The *World Socialist Web Site* urges

teachers to form their own workplace committees in schools and neighborhoods, independent of the unions, to organize opposition to the return-to-work order, and establish contact with teachers and other workers.

Second, the strike in Poland is part of an international process. It takes place amidst an upsurge of working-class struggle that has developed on an international scale since the beginning of 2018, including the Yellow Vest protests in France, a series of state-wide teachers strikes across the United States throughout 2018, and strikes by teachers across northern Africa, in Europe and in Asia. This raises the critical necessity for workers to consciously unite their struggles across national borders.

Third, workers must take up a political struggle, based on a socialist program. The class war policies of the ruling class, including austerity and the attacks on public education, are inseparably linked to the bourgeoisie’s advanced drive to war. Workers cannot defend the right to education or the right to decent salaries, without taking up a fight against imperialist war and its root cause, the capitalist system.

This fight requires the development of a new socialist and revolutionary political perspective and leadership, which bases itself on the essential political lessons of the 20th century: above all the struggle waged by the Trotskyist movement in defense of the program of world socialist revolution against the nationalist policies and betrayals of Stalinism. We urge all workers and youth in Poland who are ready to discuss these issues to contact us.



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