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Poland

# The #czarnyprotest and Monday's women strike might be a turning point in Polish politics

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**Large protests have taken place in Poland against a proposed ban on abortion in all cases. On Monday (3 October) Polish women are taking part in a nationwide strike to defend their basic reproductive rights. Mark Bergfeld, who researches Polish immigrant workers as part of his PhD, spoke to Aleksandra Wolke who is a feminist activist and on the steering committee of the Razem party in London and MikoBaj Ratajczak, a philosopher who edits the Praktyka Teoretyczna journal and is a member of the Razem party in Warsaw.**

### **Aleks, what will the proposed abortion law mean for women in Poland?**

Aleksandra: If the new law is implemented, it will force women to give birth regardless of threats to life and health associated with it. Women will be forced to birth seriously malformed foetuses the lives of which will end soon after, often in great pain. The proposal will also force victims of sexual violence to give birth regardless of psychological and physical harm it will cause. This will also affect underage victims who are not biologically ready for pregnancy.

The proposal would introduce prison sentence of up to five years for those who terminate pregnancy, including pregnant women. Cases of abortion performed to prevent 'direct threat' to woman's life would be exempt. However, the definition of 'direct threat' is likely exclude chronic illnesses such as cancer, the treatment of which would be withheld during pregnancy.

Women who miscarried will be put under additional stress by formal investigation if circumstances are deemed suspicious by the authorities. The changes would, of course, affect the report rate of rape and sexual assault.

### **How did this movement against the abortion law start and what are the politics like?**

Aleksandra: So when the right-wing think tank Ordo Iuris proposed to curtail abortion rights back in March-April, it sparked a massive women's movement which resulted in, among other things, the creation of a group called Gals for Gals (Dziewuchy Dziewuchom). This had been by far the biggest movement focused on women's rights in Poland ever.

The movement seems quite 'good' politically. For example, it accommodates the fact that it's not only cis-women who may need an abortion.

MikoBaj: The #czarnyprotest campaign and the black Monday strike are actions against the new anti-abortion law discussed in the parliament. The petitioning has been immense. The initiative RatuJmy Kobiecy (Save the Women) gathered more than 215,000 signatures under the civic legislation project however this project was rejected by parliament initially. Arguably, the wave of support for the liberalization of the current abortion law which has been in place since 1993 is quite substantial.

### **What is the role of the Catholic Church in all of this?**

MikoBaj: The Polish Catholic Church doesn't have a clear stance. At first, the Polish Episcopate openly supported the new abortion law and allowed for signatures for the ban to be gathered next to churches. But today the same episcopate has declared that women shouldn't be penalised for having an abortion. It's difficult to say what motivates

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the Church. One explanation might be that they're afraid of people – especially young people – turning their backs on them.

### **Could the strike feed into other social movements or is this a single issue campaign?**

Miko?aj: It's obvious that the current protests are officially directed against the new abortion law. But many women and other individuals who post photos of themselves dressed in black or show their support online openly talk about the right to choose.

The big question will be whether the campaign against the discussed anti-abortion law will turn into a new social movement or will aid the existing movements. Will it lead to the continuation of the fight for the liberalization of the abortion law in Poland despite the rejection of the civic project submitted by the Ratu?jmy Kobiety initiative? These are open questions.

### **What has Razem's role been in the protests? Have other political parties supported the movement?**

Aleksandra: The Razem party supports the initiative in itself. However, we are trying to channel the energy and activities towards organising localised actions. It's not just about taking a day off work for the sake of being absent.

Miko?aj: There's an important question in regards to the relationship between social movements and political parties, not only Razem. The black protest was initiated by the Razem party. Monday's strike was declared by individuals associated with the KOD, the Committee for the Defence of Democracy (Komitet Obrony Demokracji), an independent social movement which campaigns for civic rights and the rule of law in Poland. KOD is openly supported by parties in opposition (Platforma Obywatelska, .Nowoczesna, Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe), some of whose parliamentary members have voted for the new abortion law and rejected the civic legislation project submitted by the Ratu?jmy Kobiety initiative. Believe it or not, the Euro-parliamentarians of Platforma Obywatelska even dared to vote against the petition to discuss the situation of women in Poland in European Parliament.

It's not entirely clear what the relationship between social movements, political parties and civic initiatives looks like when it comes to the current protests. But the dynamic already reveals that the question "where do you stand in the abortion debate" will become one of the most important fault lines in the political scene in Poland. Moreover, the relationship between the extra-parliamentary opposition and political parties – especially Razem – will be renegotiated on the basis of this question.

### **Have any labour unions supported the movement?**

Miko?aj: The labour union which is active in the campaign is a small, but very militant, union "Inicjatywa Pracownicza" ("Workers' Initiative"). It fights for workers' autonomy and organizes precarious workers, workers in special economic zones and others not represented by major trade unions. Although the subject of women workers' rights isn't present in the current campaign, the comrades from Inicjatywa Pracownicza are very conscious of the control of the female body in the reproduction of capitalist social relations. They openly support Monday's strike.

### **What have you done in London to support this on-going movement?**

Aleksandra: Earlier this year in April, we in Razem Londyn co-organised a demonstration outside of the Polish embassy. More than 400 people came. It was the largest Polish people's demonstration in Britain in decades. Only far-right protests have been able to compete with that.

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For the moment pro-choice initiatives and women's groups in London have been organizing the protests here in London. This weekend there's a lot going on. We will be attending the events as individuals because they are in support of the National Womens' Strike which Razem criticizes because not everyone can take a day off work without consequences. The lack of access to union protection, as well as being unable to take a day off, will affect especially the poor and those in precarious jobs as well as workers in certain industries such as health care.

### Who are the key actors behind the strike?

Aleksandra: They are individuals who came together after the Ordo Iuris proposal was pushed through a parliamentary committee last week.

According to statements and proclamations, they want to recreate what happened in Iceland in 1975. But the crucial difference between the strike in Iceland and the one taking place in Poland on Monday is that Icelandic unions were involved in the organising of the strike. This is not the case with the National Women's strike in Poland. Thus, many public sector workers such as nurses won't participate.

Mikołaj: One of the key actors have been young people. It is important to highlight their politicisation. In recent elections, young people overwhelmingly voted for conservative parties, including the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) and even joined right-wing movements. One of the reasons might be a lack of any alternative or a political symbol that would have mobilized high-school and university students to get engaged in left-wing initiatives and politics. In this context, the black protest might be a huge turning point.

An independent web analysis shows that the black protest campaign, initiated by Razem, has become the largest and most effective internet-based campaign started by a political party. Estimates suggest that it might have reached up to 10 million people on social media alone.

### Can this strike and protest movement potentially defeat the bill?

Mikołaj: Hopefully the result will be a greater political consciousness among young Polish women and men and a hegemonic turn in the discussion of abortion from liberal sphere (as a "cultural issue") to the register of leftist politics (as a "social issue").

Aleksandra: It's a difficult question whether the strike will defeat the bill or be effective. It's hard to predict what will actually happen. To be honest, it's already very popular and has made a huge impact on social media. Thousands are attending, even more are interested and continue to share it.

If it is effective on a local level it might result in some incredible actions. But unfortunately I doubt that it will actually stop the bill from being passed. If anything, it may lead to some alterations in the bill itself. For instance, they may keep the possibility of accessing an abortion if a woman's life is in direct danger (and the definition of 'direct danger' may change). This is important!

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