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Poland

# Towards a general strike in Silesia?

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**“The four biggest trade unions operating in Silesia - Solidarnosc, OPZZ, FZZ and ‘August 80’ - have set up a protest and strike committee. This means the beginning of the preparation of a general strike. If the trade unionists are unable to come to an agreement with the government, the protest could take place in February. (...) "Our goal is to obtain a change in the government's socio-economic policy and if we cannot – a change of government"- said the leader of ‘August 80’, Boguslaw Zietek, during the press conference.**

"We do not go on strike for the sake of it. If over three to four months we come to an agreement with the government and if that leads to a change in the socio-economic policy, then of course there will be no strike"- said the leader of Solidarnosc in Silesia, Dominik Vijay." [1]

This is the first time since 1989 that a regional inter-union structure of the four biggest trade unions has been set up in Silesia and it would be the first time since 1981 that a general strike had taken place in the region. Why now? The employers of the region already owe their employees more than 8 million euros in unpaid wages; 26.6 per cent of workers in Poland are hired on precarious contracts; unemployment officially affects 12.5 per cent of the workforce and redundancies are continuing: Fiat will reduce its production by 40 per cent in late December, is laying off several dozen workers every month and is preparing a collective redundancy; General Motors has reduced its production by 20 per cent; Mittal has stopped several blast furnaces... In the face of this, Prime Minister Donald Tusk has said that he will not accept any legislation enabling temporary workers to benefit from social security and has announced that measures of flexibilisation of working time, introduced in 2009, will be maintained. His neo-liberal government has decided on a "plan to revive the economy": between now and 2015, 52 billion euros will be made available to banks, producers of energy infrastructures and the arms industry, and will be used to finance the extraction of shale gas.

Last September the retirement age was increased to 67 and the government does not want to take into account years spent doing arduous work. Tusk has also announced that maternity leave will be increased to one year... but will only be paid at 80 per cent, a way of reducing the employment of women.

At its regional congress, on September 27, Solidarnosc adopted the idea of a warning general strike and outlined five demands: 1) a system of protection of businesses who do not lay off workers when they reduce their production; 2) compensation for businesses which will be affected by additional taxes because of the adoption by the European Union of its climate package; 3) the legal limitation of precarious contracts; 4) the liquidation of the National Health Fund and its replacement by regional funds; 5) the maintenance of early retirement for workers engaged in arduous work. These demands are highly debatable.

However the members of "August 80" considered that the possibility of organizing a movement of all workers was more important than having a discussion on the nature of these demands. "First, we must overcome the atomisation of the workers and show that collective action is possible" said Boguslaw Zietek, interviewed by phone. The possibility of an agreement between the more combative union, "August-80", and the biggest trade union confederation, Solidarnosc, was enough for the two other confederations to agree to create an inter-union structure to prepare for the strike.

The "August 80" union has put all its forces into the preparation of the strike. It publishes a free 8-page weekly paper, *Kurier Zwiaskowy*, whose circulation has been increased to 30,000 copies. It has produced hundreds of thousands of leaflets. "People take our newspapers and our leaflets with great interest. In one hour around 2,000 disappear. They discuss, they ask questions. As they say themselves, it's good that the unions have finally come to an agreement and

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are working together for people - says Patryk Kosela, spokesperson of "August 80" [2]

Polish strike law is very restrictive: it does not permit a general strike against the government and requires that in each enterprise workers vote for strike action in a referendum. Furthermore, a strike must be preceded by a 4-hour warning strike. Referendums began to be organized on 21 November in the steel industry and on the railways. The first results are encouraging: 83.5 per cent for strike action at the rolling-mill for non-ferrous metals in Labedy, 96 per cent in the Buczek steel-works in Ruda Slaska, 96.5 per cent in the coke-producing chemical combine in Zabrze, 96.9 per cent in the Pokoj steel-works...

To be continued!

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[1] Polish news agency PAP, 23 October 2012.

[2] Quoted by: <http://www.sferatv.pl/index.php/aktualnosci/aktualnosci-ruda-slaska/item/2785-referendum-strajkowe.html>