

# Teachers on strike in Poland

Tuesday 23 April 2019, by [BIELINSKA Katarzyna](#) (Date first published: 22 April 2019).

**On April 8<sup>th</sup>, 74% of schools and kindergardens in Poland went on strike. [1] The strike's organizer is The Polish Teachers' Union (ZNP), close to the Social Democrats, but the strikers are also members of the pro-government Solidarność (Solidarity) union and non-union members. It is the biggest teachers' strike since 1993 and possibly the biggest in the history of Poland. There is impressive solidarity and grassroots mobilization of a mainly female occupational group. Inter-school strike committees are being launched as well.**

The strike also enjoys broad social support. For example, many academic institutions and town halls have announced that their employees, being parents, can come to work with their children. Others are organizing special events for children. Rallies in solidarity with teachers are held all over the country, also organized by pupils. The strike is supported by other occupational groups such as the recently protesting early-stage physicians and employees of LOT Polish Airlines. The strike also enjoys the favor of circles who do not normally support workers' struggles, including mainstream liberal media opposed to the rule of the radical right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) such as the major daily *Gazeta Wyborcza* and the largest private TV broadcaster. The Parliamentary opposition is also supporting teachers.

At the same time, teachers are under very strong pressure from the government, which is trying to break the strike in various ways. The personal data of teachers who are on strike is being illegally collected. Vehement anti-strike and pro-government propaganda is broadcast on the Internet and public television, denouncing the strike as communist and anti-national and accusing teachers of harming children. The strike broke out just before final exams in the junior high schools. However, exams were held, as striking teachers were substituted by random people, like office workers, religious instructors including priests and nuns, prison officers and firemen.

"From the very beginning, the government all the time humiliates us," a striking teacher told LeftEast. "Today again we have got a punch in the face. They treat us as if we do not exist. The government has entrenched its position and is trying to starve the teachers – we will not get paid for the strike days. Some people have quit the strike because of the economic pressure, some because of propaganda pressure – the pro-government propaganda says that we are holding children hostage. I'm not judging them. It is hard – we are still thinking about the pupils. Although in my school the atmosphere is great, this strike is not fun. But we are not striking just for money – we are striking for the dignity of our profession."

The ZNP demands a raise in teachers' salaries of 1000 PLN (€250). For many years, teachers' purchasing power has been systematically declining. At the moment, the basic salary of a graduate teacher (the highest level of the teachers' career), is 3484 PLN (€870) – 70% of the national average. An early-stage teacher earns 50% of the national average. [2] But it is not only about the earnings. In 2017 the Law and Justice government introduced an education reform: a return to an earlier, two-level (primary school, high school) system after a couple of decades of three-level one (primary school, junior high school, high school). Although the very idea was popular, the reform was seen by many as unprepared (44%). [3] Because of its implementation, the reform was criticized and

protested not only by teachers but also by parents and local authorities, which were to bear its costs. [4] The ZNP collected 910,000 citizens' signatures (almost twice as many as required by law) in support of a referendum on the question of the education reform but it was rejected by the Parliament, where the Law and Justice Party holds the majority.

The implementation of the reform has fueled growing discontent among the teachers who are forced to run every day from one school to another so that they can have a full time job. Another "side effect" of the reform is that in 2019 high schools face twice as many candidates as before, which is particularly stressful for pupils and parents.

"The reform of [Education Minister] Anna Zalewska means for teachers not only new duties, deteriorating work conditions and lower earnings but also everyday discontent from the pupils' parents who experience the negative effects of the reform. Because of that, teachers more and more often decide to quit their jobs in schools and kindergartens. ... Zalewska is responsible for all of that," Sławomir Broniarz, president of the Polish Teachers' Union, explained in September 2018.

Because of the growing teachers' grassroots discontent, the pro-government Solidarność organized their own protests but the union's leadership was against the strike. Moreover, just before the strike, Solidarność signed a separate agreement with the government, accepting the government proposal, seen not only by the ZNP and its members but also by the Solidarność members and non-union teachers as completely unacceptable: teachers started to quit the union and regional and local leaderships of Solidarność supported the strike and called for the resignation of its national chair.

"This strike is extremely important and it should have been organized many years ago. Teachers, like nurses, are blackmailed by mass media. However, as sociologist Beverly Silver writes, teachers are proletarians. Public opinion must be confronted with the fact that teachers are not only in the position of trust or carry out the 'mission' to educate future generations but also an occupational group, who have their own collective interests," Dr. Marcin Starnawski, a social scientist and a specialist in education, explains to LeftEast. "I personally think that from the very beginning it should have been be a sit-in strike, exams should not have been held. This strike should reorganize everyday life. Acts of public support such as the creation of the national strike fund are wonderful, but we need more of them, perhaps also some forms of daily informal community education and care to help parents of schoolchildren. Let us hope that the striking teachers will overcome," he adds.

After the collapse of "actually existing" socialism, at the beginning of the 1990s, facing the implementation of neoliberal reforms, teachers organized strikes and protests with their culmination in 1993 - the biggest teachers' strike in the history of Poland until now, with final high school exams not being held. That strike was not successful. Let's hope the teachers of 2019 will succeed.

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**P.S.**

## Footnotes

[1] ZNP, *Informator strajkowy od 7*

*kwietnia*, <https://znp.edu.pl/wydarzenia/informator-strajkowy-od-7-kwietnia/> [18.04.2019].

[2] J. Suchecka, *Ile powinni zarabiać nauczyciele? Estoński nauczyciel zarabia prawie dwa razy więcej niż polski*,

„Wyborcza.pl”, <http://wyborcza.pl/7,166575,24613944,ile-powinni-zarabiac-nauczyciele.html> [18.04.2019].

[3] *Polacy o reformie systemu edukacji*, CBOS, komunikat z badań

16.2017, [https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2017/K\\_016\\_17.PDF](https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2017/K_016_17.PDF) [18.04.2019].

[4] J. Suchecka, *Protest nauczycieli przeciw reformie edukacji. Manifestacja, jakiej szkoła nie pamięta*, „Wyborcza.pl”,

19.11.2016, <http://wyborcza.pl/7,75398,21001936,protest-nauczycieli-przeciw-reformie-edukacji-manifestacja.html> [18.04.2019].