

Teachers Are Striking in Poland, Too

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A nationwide teachers strike is underway in Poland. It's challenging the authority of the church and forging links with the country's resurgent feminist movement — while radicalizing a growing number of students.

On April 8, staff in over fifteen thousand schools and kindergartens in Poland began indefinite strike action. With around 75 percent of all public schools taking part in the strike and growing social support, we're witnessing what might be the biggest teachers' strike since 1989.

The workers, organized by the [Polish Teachers' Union](#) (Związek Nauczycielstwa Polskiego, ZNP) and mobilized by a strong grassroots movement, are demanding higher pay. But the rage and frustration of Polish teachers is the result of longstanding policies of neglect and austerity directed at public schools (still dominant in the country, especially outside of major cities).

The strike is critical because it's taking place the same year as the first general elections since the right-wing Law and Justice Party (PiS) took power in 2015. But it should also be analyzed in the context of local class struggles. Its victory or failure will set the stage for any future organized labor activity in Poland, especially in the public sector.

The Emergence of the Movement

The landscape of the labor movement in post-Communist Poland has been characterized by unfavorable labor laws, which overcomplicate the formal procedures of worker-employer disputes, along with low levels of unionization and strike activity in the private sector. Without the support of a strong labor movement, unionized public-sector workers have been unable to resist neoliberal policies, implemented by virtually every government since the end of Communism.

Public services such as health care and education have continued to suffer. Their steady financial and administrative collapse has driven rapid growth in income disparities, with Poland currently [exhibiting the greatest levels of inequality in Europe](#). Low public-sector wages are one of the main reasons why the country's relative economic success has been enjoyed almost exclusively by a small and wealthy elite.

Public sector workers, however, have continued to fight. Among the professional groups involved, teachers are among the most militant. Finally recovering from the failure of the strike in 1993 — comparable in size to the one happening today — the current protest is the latest, and most widespread, in a series of actions that have taken place since 2013. It also involves the building of alliances between different groups of workers and the emergence of long-lasting public support, necessary for establishing a strong and effective movement.

While the strike would not have been possible without the existing union structures, the energy of the movement was mostly built through bottom-up organizing. Independent teachers' groups began springing up on Facebook in 2016 in response to the government's proposal to restructure the educational system and close down middle schools. The bill was hastily drafted and implemented in

2017, without the necessary infrastructure in place.

Students and teachers [have struggled](#) with the consequences ever since, working and studying in overcrowded schools and facing near-constant administrative chaos. Local government structures were left to grapple with the crisis, but insufficient funds have hampered any efforts at stabilization. Attempts by the union to organize resistance in a top-down fashion were also largely ineffective, with only a fraction of workers joining a warning strike in 2017. All the while the small-scale groups that had emerged on social media were building momentum, attracting thousands of followers.

These soon formed something of an independent public sphere, a space for discussion, critique, and analysis. Initially teachers mostly used them to articulate their dissatisfaction with the reform, but talk of the harsh financial realities they'd faced for years soon followed. Many shared their daily frustrations: having to work two or more jobs, attending countless staff meetings during unrestricted overtime, and feeling their work was being disregarded and depreciated.

They had the numbers to confirm their individual experiences. Teachers' salaries in Poland are currently among the lowest in the European Union, and their relative incomes have been steadily falling in recent years: in 2018 an average teacher's salary equaled only 97 percent of the average salary in the economy, compared to 105 percent in 2013. If we account for the income disparities between private and public schools and the fact that some teachers are not eligible for base pay add-ons, we are left with even lower figures, with younger teachers sometimes making only 70 percent of the average salary.

As many were quick to notice, it was the energy originating in such groups that encouraged the union leadership to take action and move for collective bargaining in late 2018.

The Strike

With the date of the strike set for Monday, April 8, the months leading up to it were beset by uncertainty, but also showed teachers' tremendous determination. Bad-faith negotiations run by the government lasted until the very last minute, going as far as reaching a side agreement with the Independent Self-Governing Labour Union "Solidarność," which has been operating as a "yellow union" subservient to the government (many teachers have since left its ranks).

The strike's aesthetic was modeled after the logo of one of the Facebook groups, [blasting](#) a black exclamation mark against a yellow or orange backdrop. On Monday morning thousands of teachers showed up at their empty schools proudly displaying the symbol on their clothing. For many it was their first opportunity to talk openly about the structural injustices they face in their everyday working lives, but just as important was the possibility to imagine public schools beyond the present system.

The start of the strike saw an outpouring of support. Many went to work wearing yellow or orange badges, some accompanied by small children (public offices, universities, and private companies allowed parents to bring their kids to work while schools were closed). Messages of solidarity came from other public sector workers, including academics, doctors, paramedics, and national airline employees (groups that have organized protests of their own in recent years). University departments and cultural institutions stepped up with open lectures and workshops for students, speaking about labor history or educational policies.

However, the momentum of the strike was met with the combined forces of the state, the Catholic Church, and subservient groups. The narrative the government has been pushing most tirelessly, which is meant to pit parents and students against teachers, concerns this year's exams. The reform

has caused alumni from the old and the new system to overlap, with as many as 370,000 eighth-graders, 350,000 middle-schoolers, and a comparable number of high-schoolers supposed to take standardized tests this spring.

This has become a central issue for everyone involved in the crisis. The strike was scheduled with the intention of either threatening to disrupt or actually disrupting the exams by withholding the labor necessary for their organization. The government, on the other hand, has made it its principal goal to make sure exam committees convene in every school in the country.

Anxiety began to creep in pretty quickly, with middle-school exams scheduled on the third day of the strike. Despite a fair amount of disorder, the government managed to appoint provisional committees in most schools.

Among those drafted were retired teachers, academics, firemen, and foresters — but mostly catechists and Catholic priests. Despite a strong tendency toward secularization, the clergy remains a strong presence in Polish schools. Since church-state relations in Poland are still regulated by [the 1993 concordat](#), which stipulates that religion should be publicly funded and taught in schools, its influence was to be expected during the strike. The presence of a separate structure of command is already proving to be a challenge for the movement.

However, in the face of the abhorrent alliance of state and church, teachers can look for support not only from fellow workers, but also the new social forces reshaping Poland's political landscape: the women's and youth movements.

While the gender ratio of the union's central board leans male, one cannot lose sight of the fact that this is a women's strike. The participation of women in regional structures is clearly visible; their active role is even more evident if we look at the people leading the grassroots organizing. The feminization of the profession (82 percent of Polish teachers are women) has created an opportunity to speak openly about issues of care work, double exploitation, and discrimination.

This has brought some teachers closer to the feminist movement, which in recent years, especially [since the 2016 Black Protest](#), has become more worker-focused in its message. Opposition to conservative ideology and the growing influence of the Catholic Church might also contribute to a welcome convergence of the women's and teachers' movements. While it might be too much to say that teachers are collectively moving away from the church, the interference of religious authorities assuming the role of strikebreaker will not be easily forgotten.

The resistance against church influence in drafting school curricula was a hot topic long before recent events. Teachers have openly criticized the new curriculum, which in the case of natural sciences was drafted in consultation not with scientists and academics, but with the church. Another important subject of discussion is the question of sex education, which is either pushed out of schools or dominated by religious mores.

A massive wave of support for the strike came from students and youth activists, who have not only shown an understanding of the stakes and aims of the protest but in some cases have even radicalized its dynamics. In one school, students went as far as to publicly criticize their teaching staff for choosing not to go on strike.

Young people are also organizing "students' strikes," aimed both at supporting the teachers' movement and demanding a say in public debates about the future of education for themselves. Their current involvement likely stems from the unprecedented level of mobilization students have achieved in recent months due to their engagement in initiatives like the [Polish Youth Strike 4](#)

[Climate](#).

What's Next

Scheduling the strike during the exams was risky — and it might have made the movement more vulnerable. The eighth-graders' exams, which happened last week, brought another string of defeats, further disrupting the initial rhythm of the protest. Negotiations [have also proved futile](#), with no reasonable offer in sight.

Teachers are likely to face new problems when the strike resumes after Easter break. The government has clearly chosen to fight a war of attrition. According to Polish law, workers are not reimbursed for the time they spend on strike. Some local governments have declared they will compensate teachers from municipal budgets, but for many the material consequences could soon become daunting. Supporters of the strike have established funds for non-unionized teachers, but it's doubtful if they'll be able to raise enough money to make up for the lost salaries.

The movement, however, has not lost its momentum, and teachers seem determined to continue the strike, although by the end of the second week around two thousand schools have decided to end the strike. Constantly regrouping and seeking new ways to organize, teachers are slowly giving shape to a possibly more radical dynamic in the weeks to come. Some of the tactics discussed are either not issuing grades to this year's high-school seniors — effectively blocking them from taking their final exams — or [following in the footsteps of teachers in France](#) and rendering the process meaningless by letting everyone pass with top marks.

Another, possibly more foolproof, strategy is marching into the streets and demonstrating their strength collectively. A rally outside the Ministry of Education this week was definitely a sign of this new wave of mobilization — another one will happen on April 23.

The task ahead of us now is to keep supporting the teachers' strike with all means at our disposal, but also to analyze the new political composition emerging within the teachers' union, the independent movement, and the political forces supporting them. Whatever the outcome of the strike, it will have greatly influenced the conditions for organized and independent forms of resistance against capitalist exploitation and the conservative state in Poland.

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