

Poland's feminist uprising

Tuesday 17 November 2020, by [MALINOWSKA Magda](#), [MROZ Agnieszka](#), [ROZMYSLOWICZ, Marta](#) (Date first published: 15 November 2020).

Poland has been gripped in recent weeks by a massive strike movement led by women in response to an attempted constitutional ban on abortion. rs21 spoke with several feminist activists in Polish union Inicjatywa Pracownicza about the movement.

rs21: What was the political situation in the country like before the constitutional ruling (including with regard to Covid-19 and the government's response)?

Agnieszka: Successive neoliberal governments (including the [ruling right-wing Law and Justice party](#), PiS, in power for the second time) have systematically ignored the public healthcare system and social services. The Polish healthcare system has been breaking down under the strain of huge numbers of people requiring hospitalisation. Funding for the health sector has been among the lowest in the EU, as strikes by young doctors and nurses in recent years have underlined. Instead of dealing with the Covid crisis, right-wing politicians made a decision, implemented by the constitutional court that is dependent on the ruling party, to attack basic women's rights. Some say they hoped that the pandemic would make the resistance against this weak and short-term, but it appears the government miscalculated. Others say that the government wanted to distract attention from their inability to deal with Covid crises and put the blame on the women's movement for the peak in infections.

Marta: The covid crisis has highlighted the deeply antisocial nature of temporary forms of employment. A large proportion of the working population in Poland, 2.5 million workers, lacks job security. They are casual employees, hired through outsourcing or temporary work agencies, or they are 'self-employed' workers. In hospitality, tourism, entertainment and in subcontracted public services huge numbers were laid off or their short-term contracts were not renewed. Those who remained employed were afraid to go on leave while being sick and have to pay to access healthcare. The pandemic shows that the universal right to healthcare lies in everyone's interest. For us the right to abortion is part of this universal right to healthcare. In response to the economic crisis, the government has introduced so-called 'shields' that benefited mostly business, transferring huge sums of money to company owners, not proletarian women.

Magda: Temporary, short-term, precarious employment, limited access to public services, lower wages and pensions, unpaid childcare, domestic work – that all has a female face. This observation was voiced during the [previous round of pro-choice struggle in 2016](#) and has been repeated now. In 2016 the movement known as the 'Black Protest' mobilised around the slogan 'Women's Strike'. Accessible abortion was seen as part of the social-economic rights that women have been deprived of. That is why the word 'strike' was so important, as a refusal of work in those conditions. The difference is that recent protests have been happening during the pandemic, at the height of infections in Poland which have reached around 25 thousand per day. Covid adds more work for women: they have to work more, schools are closed down, women-dominated sectors are highly affected. The government has passed a series of regulations which make gatherings of more than 5 people illegal, but thousands still went on the streets despite that ban.

rs21: Can you give a sense of the scale of what is happening in Poland currently? How large and widespread is the wave of protest around the country?

Magda: Protests have been taking place all over the country, in 400 cities and even in small rural towns, also in conservative areas of the country. Regarding the numbers taking part, it seems four times bigger than in 2016. The largest protests are said to have included over 100 thousand people (the 30 October demonstration in Warsaw). The main movement slogans are radical in expression: 'Fuck PiS [the ruling party]' and 'get the fuck out!', which on one hand represents a total rejection of the ruling party or the political class in general, but on the other hand presents a risk that the liberal opposition will try to take the movement over and present it as purely against PiS. That is why they want us to shout '*Kaczyński!*' ('Fuck off!'). But a lot of women on the street say that the old political elites don't want any profound change, having accepted restrictive abortion laws for the past 30 years, but merely a change of who is in office. However, social and economic demands are also present in the '*Strajk Kobiet*' (women's strike) movement, as access to abortion has an obvious class aspect: working-class women have less access to underground abortions, can't easily afford to travel abroad for abortion, and have less access to the knowledge of how to get pills to have an abortion at home. At the same time everyone knows that they will not get much support if they give birth to a disabled child. That is why at every protest in different towns the class aspect of banning access to abortion is widely understood. Women know that this ban will affect poor women, not rich.

rs21: There've been reports of all kinds of groups within Polish society taking action as part of the movement - farmers forming tractor blockades and even apparently football ultras storming an office of a right-wing politician in Gdańsk. How widely are feminist activists being backed and supported by other sectors of society?

Marta: First of all this has clearly been an uprising of the younger generation, both women and men, who make up the majority on the streets. They are also evidently less afraid of the virus than older folks. They are highly active and involved, everyone brings their own banner with creative slogans, they dress up, sing songs, dance, shout slogans. It seems to be a founding, generational experience.

Agnieszka: A lot of them were too young to take active part in protests of 2016. Then the movement won; the law was not made more restrictive. This time the movement has a defensive nature, as the decision was made for us out of the blue by a legal body whose legal foundations are dubious. That is why the protests are still happening, are much bigger and more intense, and why its participants are more angry, very angry.

Magda: The problem is that this anger may be co-opted by the opposition and old elites treating the movement as an instrument to regain power. If that happens we are going to lose the chance as a movement to change the situation of the majority of women in this country. It has to be remembered that the same opposition, when it was in power for many years, did not liberalise the strict abortion laws that had been introduced in 1991. Every government called it an abortion compromise, but in fact it was a compromise between the politicians of every colour and the clergy at the cost of women, especially proletarian women. They are on the streets now: nurses, teachers, students. Those who couldn't join were wearing black clothes at work. The right to strike, including general strike, in Poland is highly restricted so most of them took holiday on demand, sick-leave, child care, or even donated blood to be able to join demonstrations.

Agnieszka: It is true that we could see people of different backgrounds in the streets and different protest tactics being used. In Poznań, where we come from, a farmer's tractor parked in the middle of a major roundabout that we blocked for few hours. On the same roundabout, tram drivers stopped their trams and were waving to us. I went to a clinic those days and all the nurses were wearing

masks with the logo of the movement, red lightning, and they said they could not join the strike but on that day they asked women to enter the consulting-room first. On the rallies, there were speeches by tenant and climate activists, teachers and kindergarden workers, mothers of disabled children and disabled women themselves (who a few years ago organised a series of impressive protests and occupied the parliament building to demand more support for their families).

Kaczynski, the head of PiS, in his famous talk to the nation, [called on his party members to defend churches](#) and traditional Polish Christian values, and as a consequence we could see 50-100 right-wingers, supported by nationalist thugs, who gathered around churches when demonstrations were passing by. In the first days of the movement some demos did end in front of cathedrals, and some rallies were even organised inside, during masses, for the first time ever. It was like touching the taboo, criticising the influence of the church on political life. However, that changed later, as the movement agreed we should go in front of the seats of the ruling party and also in front of the private houses of key right-wing politicians and decision-makers. On a few occasions the demonstrations were attacked by the extreme right and nationalist fanatics. They were dangerous, but there weren't many of them in the end. Some women in the demos said that they are Catholics and even that they voted for PiS because they benefit from some of the social reforms PiS introduced (like child benefit), but this time PiS had crossed the line. What is outrageous for us as women active in the trade union movement is that the bosses of *Solidarność* (some people from abroad will still remember them as a socialist union movement, but today it is a right-wing organisation with close links with the ruling party) also called on their members to defend churches against our movement.

rs21: Are people discussing what they will need to do to really win this battle? What are the most effective tactics so far in exerting pressure?

Marta: In our union, *Inicjatywa Pracownicza* (Workers' Initiative), we say that in order for women to be free we need to be less tied down by work (paid and unpaid) and we need greater economic independence. The protestors want concrete socioeconomic plans for making our lives collectively better. The demands we have been making include shortening the working day to 7 hours, getting rid of civil law work contracts and temp agencies, more public housing, and keeping the social gains that we were able to win from the government, like the 500+ welfare program for families with children, a younger retirement age for women, and a consistently increasing minimum wage. We believe that the feminist movement needs to discuss and push for these demands in order to avoid the movement being constrained to fighting within the frame of a culture war.

Magda: The steering committee of the Women's Strike association has been the biggest organisation calling for protests and, in some places like Warsaw, providing infrastructure. In the past days they announced that they are creating an advisory council to the women's strike modelled on what was created in [Belarus](#). At present, the council's members are largely a reflection of old elites (a former minister of labor, a former MP, some intellectuals and activists). In Poznan, women have reacted to this by getting together and forming alternative councils with their own demands. We will see how this evolves.

rs21: What can feminists and socialists in Britain, and internationally in general, do to support the movement?

Agnieszka: There are new self-organised pro-choice initiatives that have recently started work in the Czech Republic ([Ciocia Czesia](#)) and Austria ([Ciocia Wienia](#)) that help Polish women with overseas abortions. The first group of this type was [Ciocia Basia](#) from Berlin, which has been active already for some years. These initiatives need financial support. Secondly, as we believe that it is important to combine feminist, labour, and tenant demands into one class-oriented international movement, we believe it is important to link the struggles happening in these fields in different countries. That gives

motivation and hope that change is possible. Women often stand at the first line of these movements and that it is not a coincidence.

Magda Malinowska, Marta Rozmyslowicz and **Agnieszka Mroz** are members of the [Inicjatywa Pracownicza](#) base union from Poland. They have been trade union activists at an Amazon warehouse in Poznan. In 2016 they co-found the Social Congress of Women that bring together labour and tenant activists, developing social movement feminism in Poland.

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