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Poland

# The Spectre of the General Strike over Poland's Coal Mining Industry

- News from around the world -

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### **Over 2000 miners of the Silesian coal basin (southern Poland) are on strike in response to the governmental decision to close down 4 mines of state-owned company Kompania Weglowa.**

Kompania Weglowa is the EU's largest coal mining group with a production capacity of 34 million tones of coal. It consists of 14 mines and 5 plants employing 64 000 workers. The strike started on January 7, with the miners from the Brzeszcze mine refusing to return overground. The protest quickly spread through the coal mining sector of the region. Currently miners working in the pits owned by other big mining groups (Jastrzbska Spółka Weglowa and Katowicki Holding W glowy) are joining the strike, while Silesian municipalities are petitioning the national government in defense of workplaces essential to the social well-being of the region.

Right now all 14 sites are on strike, with miners protesting underground. Other forms of protests include hunger strikes and railway blockades. Over 10,000 people, both miners and ordinary citizens, protested in Bytom on Tuesday. The city is struggling to save the last of its mines. The unemployment rate in Bytom is reaching 21%, as a result of the 1990s "restructuring" of the coal sector.

Leaders of the miners' unions declared that if an agreement is not reached with the unionists by January 20, miners would be joined on strike by workers from the railway, energy and postal sectors. Regional unions univocally declared readiness to go on general strike should the situation escalate. The opinion polls show that the miners' strike is backed by 68,5% of Poles.

The closure of the four mines will result in the loss of 5000 jobs in the region where the coal industry is the largest employer with a decisive influence on the local economy. Additionally, as every job in a pit generates up to three jobs in sectors and regions linked, there is a justifiable fear that the whole region may lose up to 20,000 jobs.

Today it seems quite obvious that the governmental proposal is a method of paving a way to the privatisation of mines in Brzeszcze, Bytom, Ruda Zl ska and Gliwice. Universal Energy, a company owned by one of the wealthiest Polish businessmen, Krzysztof Domarecki, has already made an offer to buy three out of four pits that are to be closed. Another Polish millionaire, Jan Kulczyk, is making great profits importing coal from Russia through a transshipment terminal in Braniewo, a bordertown near Kaliningrad Oblast.

Basically, it is the UK's '84 all over again. Silesia is one of the last remaining embers of resistance, and the mining industry is probably the most unionized trade sector in Poland. We call for support with Polish miners who keep fighting for their lives and the well-being of their communities that are threatened by the government plans.

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