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Poland

Mass teachers' strike: "We were afraid parents would be angry; I am pleasantly surprised"

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Just before Polish teachers suspended their strike to allow for exams, Philippe Alcoy interviewed Dagmara. She gave us an insider view on the causes of the historic struggle of Polish teachers as well as on the solidarities of pupils and parents.

Dagmara Zawistowska-Toczek has been a primary and secondary school teacher in the Polish city of Gdansk for 19 years. She teaches in two institutions (30 hours of in-class teaching with students, plus 10 to 15 hours of work at home). As she explains, she is a "qualified teacher," the highest rank in the Polish school system, and earns around 776 euros per month (including bonuses and overtime). Like many strikers, Dagmara is not a union member. In addition to her teaching work, she works as an editor in the evenings. She agreed to answer our questions about the national strike that Polish teachers have been waging against the ultra-conservative government since 8 April.

You are a teacher and you have been on strike since Monday 8 April, when a huge mobilization for wages and dignity was launched nationally. Could you explain to us your reasons for going on strike?

Yes, I have been on strike since 8 April. According to the unions, 74% of schools are affected by the strike – and I think that economic issues are the most important reason for the teachers' strike in Poland. To this we must also add reasons to do with the evolution of the modern world and the role of schools.

While it is clearly necessary to modernize schools, improve curricula, and apply new methods of working with students, the government has introduced a reform that destroyed the progress made over previous years. We want to teach people so that they can adapt to the evolution of modern times, we do not want to brainwash them, especially under such inhuman conditions – overcrowded rooms, a rotating system of up to 18 hours, ideological textbooks for six-year-old kids, overloaded and anachronistic curricula.

Then we have political reasons – against the ideologization of school curricula and life, and fighting for a secular school. And the last reason is the anger of the have-nots and the desire to be heard! The President of the Polish Senate recently declared cynically, when the preparations for the strike were underway, that teachers must work out of love of ideas, not money (he earns 20,000 per month)...

Wages, a better school, political and religious freedoms, anger ... these are the reasons for our strike!

Some ministers try to make teachers look like privileged people, or to say that you enjoy long summer holidays. What is the reality of your working and living conditions?

The battle for public opinion is currently underway and teachers are beginning to win it. Only supporters of the ruling party believe their lies. I find that the majority of the population is increasingly aware of the lies about the working and living conditions of teachers.

Regarding holidays: a Pole is entitled to between 20 and 26 days of annual leave depending on seniority, and up to four days of leave upon request. Teachers only have their holidays in July and August: these are about six weeks, not two months, because the first week of vacation is spent closing the previous school year, and the last week is used to take exams and prepare documents for the new school year. During our vacation period, accommodations, tickets and guided tours are the most expensive of the year. For example, I would prefer to visit Rome or Paris in March or October, when it is cooler and cheaper.

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We also have a two-week break in the winter, but we have to take turns to look after students who do not go on holiday, and we often work as supervisors in winter camps during these fourteen days, in order to earn money. For example, I do not go anywhere because I cannot afford to ski in Poland or abroad.

Polish public schools are poor. There is no paper or ink in the photocopier, no scanners, no internet, we do not have even old computers or multimedia boards, we lack teaching materials; we are obliged to bring things from home, we buy supplies with our own money or ask the parents to buy them.

Social conditions are appalling: the government has delegated school funding to local authorities. After closing down secondary schools and one primary school, we have to cover not six but eight classes – we have 1200 pupils in my school in Gdansk. Offices of school directors and accountants have to be turned into classrooms, where, for example, 25 teenagers are accommodated. Schools must work four times their capacity. Students attend overcrowded primary schools from 7:10 am to 1 pm two days a week, then they go from noon or 1 pm to 5 pm or 6 pm. Teachers often work from 7:10 am to 6 pm with "holes" during which they have to cover for absent colleagues. We are all exhausted.

In high schools, as of September, it will be even worse because, following the destructive reform, they will run two parallel schools in each building (the former three-year high school and the new four-year high school), so there will not be 5 one-level classes as before, but 5 + 5. Schools are not endlessly extendable; we will work 6 days a week.

Three years ago, we protested against this reform and there was a one-day strike. Then, there were formal and informal protests against this new ideologised, anachronistic and erroneous agenda. The Ministry ignored the voices of journalists, university professors, parents and teachers. None of us thought of higher wages, we wanted to stop the destruction of education. Today, we are desperate and angry – because of the very low wages, and because we work in poor schools, which are made to deceive and literally torture children and young people.

What is the response of pupils and parents of students to your strike?

We were afraid parents would be angry, because of the pressure of the exams, and the criticism of "lazy teachers." I have changed my mind about parents and, like everyone else, I am pleasantly surprised. We may not get a salary increase, and maybe they will take away our wages for every day of the strike, but they cannot take away the support, kindness and understanding we have received from thousands of students and parents. They bring cakes, fruit, food and encouraging words to our schools every day; they draw slogans in chalk, such as "we are with you," in front of the buildings. Pupils and parents organize almost daily, and especially on weekends, demonstrations and picket lines throughout the country. Their speeches are wise and full of hope – we hear that they want a school open to public opinion, and to people with disabilities, whom a ministerial decree expelled from school in February in spite of protests.

Us teachers, who are used to resentment, accusations and humiliation, felt surprised and encouraged by the scope and different forms of support. Today, we know for sure that we are fighting on behalf of students and for their long-term well-being, even if the end-of-year exams are in danger. Such voices and attitudes stifle the hysteria of the Internet and the propaganda of the government television in Poland.

What are the reactions and responses of your colleagues?

The strike was well prepared, over a long period of time and with attention to its legal aspect, and social dissatisfaction with the destructive reform of three years ago kept growing. In many schools, there are only one or a few union members, but they managed to include non-union teachers in referenda about the strike. The need for a

strike was enormous.

Again, that so many of us are on strike is a surprise – in my school, out of 90 teachers, only three are not striking for various reasons. We do not criticize them, we respect everyone's decisions. After the strike, we will have to work together again. Also, now we can talk to each other, get to know each other, be together. We keep up to date with the situation in other schools, we organize joint childcare for our children. Common concerns, such as when the government does not want to negotiate, and common joys, like when the Poles organize a collection for the poorest teachers on strike, bring people together.

We are not naive optimists, we know that the lack of wages could eventually defeat us. But, for this moment at least, the word "solidarity" in the 21st century still means something; employees of the school administration, secretaries, cleaners, cooks are also on strike! It is a precious lesson for us. Despite the uncertainty and fear, despite the fact that the government ignores us and has skillfully organized the exams, we do not lose hope.

Last week, secondary school students and this week primary school students, took their final exams, which are necessary for them to continue their schooling. But with the strike, it was possible that many of the exams would not take place normally, they could have been cancelled or postponed. However, the government said that everything went well thanks to the help of "volunteers." Many of these "volunteers" are known to be priests and nuns. How is this possible?

It is true that the Ministry of Education would not have saved these exams without the involvement of priests, nuns and foresters, firefighters and city guards. We were shocked by the shameless manipulation of the regulations. Parents and students were too.

In Poland, after the concordat was signed in 1993, religion classes returned to schools. They are taught by priests, nuns and catechists. Currently, there are two religion lessons a week in elementary schools, the same amount as biology, history or chemistry for example.

The bishops sent a letter forbidding catechists, who are usually teachers, to strike, threatening to remove "their mission of working in school." However, several catechists did not listen and we are on strike together.

A few days after the strike, the Ministry quickly issued an order that anyone (not just teachers with specific pedagogical specialisations) could sit on the exam juries. Regulatory offices sent announcements to offices and parishes, to institutions, asking for volunteers.

This strike began with wage demands, but many strikers speak of "the fight for dignity" as well. What does that mean?

The teaching profession, and we as individuals, have been deprived of our dignity in recent years. What does that mean? Dignity means an attitude of respect towards human beings, treating them as subjects rather than objects. It means an attitude through which I know that I am a precious person, that I am able to think, that I am necessary and important for someone. Every day, almost everyone in my job deprives me of this dignity.

The current conservative, xenophobic and anti-intellectual government handles our dignity with successive decisions and propaganda. The shameless lies about our income are told by ministers, journalists and trolls. They ignore our strike and the societal misinformation, they prolong the talks so as to reject union proposals and they keep repeating: we will not give you a raise, stop the strike and we will talk to you, work more hours, we will dismiss one in four

teachers, etc.

We are not taken seriously, we are offended. During the strike, we fight for dignity because we have the courage to tell the truth about our situation, we have the nerve to be consistent by saying "no," and we fight with a smile. This is our regained dignity, to be together, to not be ashamed when I look at myself in the mirror. Regained dignity means self-respect, respect for the decisions that are made, and the respect of many parents, students, which we were not aware of before.

In France teachers are also opposing reforms that the government is putting in place, and challenging the very serious situation in national education that has been developing for years: what messages would you like to send them?

Today, we are sorely lacking voices from outside Poland – our TV channels and the press are manipulated or extremely polarized, there is no objective and balanced information. Paradoxically, we feel isolated, alone here in Poland. If you already know something about our strike – the closed schools all over the country, the streets filled with protesters – could you support us in the media, on the Internet?

In Poland recently, we saw women protesting against the hardening of the anti-abortion law, there were demonstrations when the government seized the Constitutional Court, when it seized the independent courts and because our country looks less and less like a democratic state. This teachers' strike is either the end of the struggle of people who think about decent work and the future of young people, or the beginning of a series of changes. I ask you intellectuals and artists, celebrities, teachers, parents to write to us! Watch our rallies and picket lines, listen to our songs on YouTube.

We already know that attempts to thwart the ministry of education are not enough, that individual protests are not enough, so learn from our example. It is worth making contact with teachers from other countries!

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