

# Women and young people have started a cultural revolution in Poland

## 1. Mass revolt after a new attack on women

The women's "black protest" in more than 100 cities and the women's strike on "Black Monday" 3 October 2016 forced the fundamentalist right-wing Catholic regime led by the Law and Justice (PiS) party to back down on a bill to ban abortion completely and penalise women who abort. In a catastrophic health situation and while lockdown forbids gatherings of more than 5 people, the PiS tried again, hoping both to reduce the rise of the even more extreme right in the polls, to patch up its governmental alliance of the United Right and also to give satisfaction to the Catholic fundamentalists by pushing the scandal of paedophilia, which is weakening the ecclesiastical hierarchy, into the background. All this while reaffirming that in the 3rd Polish Republic women are subject to men. Thus, on 22 October 2020 the PiS-appointed President of the Constitutional Tribunal announced that abortion "when prenatal examinations or other medical reasons indicate a high probability of serious and irreversible impairment of the foetus or an incurable life-threatening disease" was unconstitutional.

From the evening of 22 October mobilisation of a scale unknown since 1989 began. Women and the younger generation – high school and university students between 14 and 25 years old – occupied the streets, interrupted Sunday masses by chanting slogans on 25 October, and blocked traffic for a fortnight. Mass demonstrations continued in more than 410 towns and villages over the following weeks. On 28 October there was a

women's strike, on 30 October there were more than a million demonstrators, despite an exponential rise in hospitalisations and deaths due to Covid-19. All this with a central demand, addressed to the political, ecclesiastical and intellectual elites who refuse to allow women to benefit from human rights: "Fuck off somewhere else".

According to all the polls, this mass movement has the support of two-thirds to three-quarters of the population.

The United Right government did not dare to publish the verdict of its Constitutional Court in the Official Gazette, making it legally unenforceable. It hopes that a tighter lockdown of the population and the crack down on the demonstrators will reduce the scale of the movement. But even if the current mobilizations subside, the women of Poland will not forget this revolt. Most of them have become aware that they themselves must fight for their dignity, for another world, their world. A cultural revolution has begun.

## **2. Three decades of women's subjugation to rebuild capitalism.**

Since 1993 the Polish government has had a "compromise" with the Catholic church on this question in order to obtain the support of this powerful institution in the face of the mobilizations against the social effects of the ongoing capitalist restoration and for accession to the European Union.

The Catholic Church has always considered that woman is not a human being in her own right. In the verdict of the Constitutional Court of 22 October the Polish state confirmed this: the woman must be limited to a kind of incubator, with additional options requiring her to clean, cook and care for children. The torture of women carrying dead or irreversibly deficient foetuses has been legalized.

"In this country I feel like a slave", "My body is my business", "I will not be a coffin", "My uterus is not a chapel", "You don't want an abortion, just don't have one", "Let us pray for the right to abortion", "Abortion is not a sin", "The revolution is a woman" – it is with such signs (and many others) that hundreds of thousands of women demonstrated in the streets and in churches in Poland against this patriarchal system which oppresses them, deprives them of freedom and denies their dignity. "It is war!" they proclaim as they struggle so that no one will ever again dare to decide for them, so that they can finally be recognized as full human beings, so that they can push back the limits of what is socially acceptable, for a better life in their world.

### **3. Uprising of the younger generation**

For the first time in many years, it was mainly young men and women who showed up in very large numbers. They were the ones who attacked these "dziaders" – men with an archaic vision of the role of women, not allowing them to speak, convinced of their own superiority and absolute infallibility, generally elderly, exercising leading functions – in other words politicians, experts, ecclesiastical hierarchs – suggesting to them "fuck off somewhere else".

The youth shouted in stark terms what Greta Thunberg said at the United Nations in 2019: "how dare you!" These young people, on whom the regime imposed religious teaching in schools, reject the cultural hegemony of the Catholic Church. They are saying no to a society that imposes fear, climate change, unemployment the lack of a promising future, the repeated government lies, the pantheon of authorities, values and national-Catholic symbols. They reject the "fear of sex" – one of the slogans present in many demonstrations. They no longer tolerate the school reforms imposed on her. They do not want to negotiate "compromises", they are choosing a language that those who dominate their country do not understand, they

want to decide their fate and not have it imposed on them by those who claim to “know better”.

Faced with the Minister of Education and Science, who demanded that teachers “teach” their students not to demonstrate, they answered with a single voice: “go to hell”. Their revolt did not only concern the struggle for the right to abortion, but much more: the right of each individual to decide about their body, their identity, the future of society, their right to be in solidarity, dignified, free.

Today, women and young people have transformed the combative and spontaneous but modestly-sized climate strikes or demonstrations in defence of LGBT+ of previous years into hundreds of thousands of demonstrators.

## **4. Political crisis and crisis of ecclesiastical hegemony, crisis of the Third Republic**

Faced with the development of the Covid-19 pandemic, the PiS government prioritized its presidential election victory (first attempted during the confinement on 10 May, then postponed until 28 June 2020) and not protection of the population’s health. Instead of adapting the school system to the pandemic, it focused on teaching homophobia. It accused health personnel of working too little, while ordering respirators from an arms dealer – which do not work. Finally, it chose to attack women. This last initiative was the last straw and opened a major political crisis.

The crisis has even reached the heart of the institutions. The ruling party and the prime minister lost public support. Differences emerged within the government on how to get out of the crisis, with President Duda wanting to appear to have “understood” the demands, while the PiS leader wanted repression.

However, the police commander asked his troops to act “in a balanced and prudent manner”. In addition, in an unprecedented move, more than 200 retired generals and admirals feared “a situation in which once again in the streets of Polish cities the use of force could lead to unnecessary victims”, calling for “respect for the will of the majority of society and change of unacceptable solutions”.

The systemic compromise between all the governing political parties and the Church that was the basis of the Third Polish Republic has been called into question. The latter was to be the bastion of Christianity in a secularized Europe. But there is no longer a status quo, the Church, its impunity, its cultural hegemony are no longer taboo.

## **5. Democratic demands**

The popular uprising in defence of women’s rights – but also of LGBT+ and more generally of freedoms – was essentially spontaneous. Small (and otherwise divided) feminist associations and their activists have acted as media spokespersons, new networks have begun to be built but notably without the younger generation being represented even if only symbolically, but contrary to the tradition of the Polish workers’ revolutions of 1956 or 1980-1981 there has been no mass self-organization. The political parties in opposition to the PiS, which are more electoral structures than militant, have not played a role, even if some of their elected representatives are visible in the movement. The same is true of the trade unions among those, in the minority, who declared their support for the movement. Thus, there is a big gap between the traditional Polish political landscape and this mass revolt.

The association “Women’s General Strike” presented the demands “that can be read on the placards”: “We are want a real Constitutional Court, a fully fair Supreme Court, a real Defender of Civil Rights; We want a new budget – a health

fund, help for workers, culture and real support for the disabled; We want full rights for women, legal abortion, sex education, contraception; We want all human rights; We want a secular state, with no more funding for the church from the state budget and no more religion in the schools; We want the resignation of the government.” At the press conference of the Advisory Council additional demands were presented: “10% of the state budget for health; resignation of the Minister of Education and Science; immediate end to state funding of the church and their real separation; Right for children from 13 years of age to decide if they want to participate in religious lessons; Removal of the conscience clause; End of the concordat; Defascisation of public life; Abolition of useless labour contracts, fight against mobbing and exploitation; Fight against the climate crisis; A better Poland for LGBT+ people; Public media that are a real source of knowledge and information. “

This is a list of demands that do not go beyond formal secular democracy. They go no further than the “cultural revolution” that invaded the streets of Poland in October and November 2020, but has not (yet?) paved the way for sustainable social self-organization or for building a new political representation of those in revolt.

## **6. An international struggle**

On 22 October 2020, the same day as the verdict of the Polish Constitutional Court, the governments of Brazil, Egypt, Hungary, Indonesia, Uganda and the United States organized an online international ceremony, broadcast from Washington, to virtually sign, along with 27 other countries – including Poland – a declaration against the right to abortion “to protect a woman’s right to be a mother”, in the words of the Hungarian Family Minister.<sup>[1](#)</sup> This alliance of countries governed by fundamentalists of various religions is an affirmation of state patriarchy against human rights and a

declaration that human bodies – female, child, homosexual, trans and non-binary – are state-dominated territories.

Against the right to abortion and more generally all women's rights, against those of LGBT+, there is a real international ultraconservative network, supported by the state authorities, campaigning in the context of the transformation of authoritarian neoliberalism in crisis. It is this network that has largely financed the activities against the right to abortion of the Polish extreme right, such as "Ordo Iuris" or the "Life and Family Foundation". It is the same international network that applauded the appointment by D. Trump of the openly pro-life judge, Amy Coney Barrett, to the US Supreme Court. It is this current that refuses abortions to young girls, victims of rape and incest, in Brazil or Argentina.

In the face of this offensive, it is the responsibility of labour movement organizations and feminists in all countries to mobilise in solidarity with the women's revolt in Poland. The powerful feminist movements that have emerged notably in Latin America and Europe since 2017 around the slogan of the women's strike are of an ever increasing importance in winning and preserving women's rights already won and extending them to the whole planet.

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