

Stop gambling with our lives! We won't be a human shield for the Corona crisis!

Statement by National Committee of IP – The Workers' Initiative Union (OZZ Inicjatywa Pracownicza) in response to the Polish government's emergency measures in light of the Corona crisis

National Committee of IP – The Workers' Initiative Union

March 29, 2020

In response to the crisis brought on by the Corona virus pandemic, the government of Poland adopted a set of emergency measures they call the „anti-crisis shield”. Both the amount of money that the “shield” allocates for relief as well as the remedies it proposes, are either completely insufficient or downright misguided. Many of the “shield's” measures will lead to lowering wages, weakening unions and making workers even more subordinate to our bosses than we already are. We categorically oppose all wage cuts: workers will not shoulder the costs of yet another crisis. Below, we highlight the government's worst ideas and oversights. In what follows, we present a list of 10 demands that should be met and implemented immediately.

Worst ideas and oversights in the government's “anti-crisis shield”:

1. A large part of the working population in Poland does not have any job security. They are casual employees, hired through outsourcing or temporary work agencies, or they are self-employed. These workers will suffer the most as a result of the crisis. At the moment, they face the threat of losing their earnings and any benefits. In response, the government's “shield” provides for a one-time payment of 2,000 PLN before tax (roughly 435 euros before tax) to casual workers in need. Given predictions that the crisis will last for many more months to come, this handout does not make for real support.

2. 2.5 million casual workers in Poland are underinsured or do not have access to health insurance at all. In effect, they cannot take paid sick leave. Those who do have access to basic public healthcare must pay if they need to see a specialist or if they need hospitalization. The outbreak of Corona shows that the universal right to healthcare lies in everyone's interest. But the government's “shield” does not provide for any significant changes in this matter.

3. The government is trying to focus public attention on saving jobs. But this argument serves to justify transferring huge sums of money to business owners. With the “shield's” bail-out package business will gain government subsidies to wages during downtime and the legal option of reducing their employees' wages by up to half! This makes business the real beneficiary of the government's plan, which ultimately dumps the costs on us, workers.

4. Changes that the “shield” proposes to labor law give employers a lot of freedom to reorganize work as they wish (especially when it comes to working time or periods of economic downtime). In a country where unions and all forms of worker control have been systematically combated, this means no social control over the use of funds that business will receive from the state budget. Further, it means that workers will have a hard time resisting their bosses’ attempts to impose “anti-crisis measures” at the workplace, even though such measures might not be necessary at all.

5. The government makes no mention of unemployment benefits. During moments of high unemployment in the past, unions repeatedly indicated that unemployment benefits are too low and the time period when they are given is too short. For example, in December 2019, only 16.4% of registered unemployed were entitled to benefits in the amount of only 741.87 PLN after tax (about 163 euro) for the first 3 months. We are dealing with a serious crisis. The government must realize that there will be a significant increase in the number of jobless people who will need income to survive.

6. A massive wave of layoffs has hit workers who lack job security (the casually employed, temp agency workers, fixed-term contract employees and the self-employed). Layoffs have plagued casual workers in industries like gastronomy, tourism, entertainment and in subcontracted public services. The crisis has only highlighted the deeply antisocial nature of temporary forms of employment. Meanwhile, the government’s message to these workers is, “you should have arranged to insure yourself.” As if this were actually possible for workers without any job security.

7. We say “no!” to any changes aimed at making work more flexible (like by extending reference periods). For the past three decades, the government’s typical response to crisis (both real and presumed) has been to make work more flexible. This practice has had disastrous effects on job security. Today, the government confirms that it can only operate within the canon of neoliberal economic policy, which always ultimately seeks to weaken the position of workers on the labor market.

8. The “shield” does not address the mounting problem of low pensions. It also does not provide any safeguards for elderly workers against the effects of the crisis.

9. Little attention is given in the “shield” to protecting home budgets against the rising costs of living, like growing food prices and rents. Likewise, the government does not consider loss of income effects, like: debt on rent, mortgage debt, debt on basic bills like gas, electricity and heating, or the threat of eviction or foreclosure.

10. The government’s plan comes at a time when democratic decision-making procedures are suspended. In effect, we don’t have any say on these highly important issues. We fear that any relief will go primarily to the banking sector, the biggest player in today’s world of politics. Already, a large part of the 212 billion PLN (about 46 billion euros) aid package is going to the financial sector. In the previous economic crisis (2007–2008), the same banking sector consumed not billions, but literally trillions of dollars and euros. In the current collapse, the financial sector is in no way helping to save the economy but rather dragging it to the bottom. It’s a scandal that the ruling class has not drawn conclusions from the previous crisis, and that today it is again giving in to finance’s blackmail. The problem boils down to the fact that the banks (the private and the commercialized) are in possession of our salaries, which is what makes us subject to their pressure and blackmail. Accordingly, in consultation with the government, the National Bank of

Poland has decided to increase the banks' liquidity by relieving them of the obligation to make reserves (40 billion PLN).

11. Successive neoliberal governments (including the ruling Law and Justice party PiS, in power twice) have systematically ignored the needs of the public healthcare system, social services, and other care services for the elderly and dependents. As a result of years of cuts on public spending, today, these key sectors are unprepared for the battle at hand. The Polish healthcare system is breaking down under the weight of an additional several hundred people requiring hospitalization! Neglect along with the long-term effects of austerity politics in the public sector might now lead to large-scale epidemiological and economic collapse.

12. The "shield" provides no support for guardians and caretakers (of children, the elderly and people with disabilities) who are now dealing with difficult access to medication, treatment and rehabilitation.

Instead of the government's "anti-crisis shield", we present our demands:

1. The temporary shutdown of large workplaces that are not essential during the epidemic, and which pose a threat to public health due to their organization of work (warehouses and factories that neither supply nor produce critical products like medical supplies or food). Workers should be paid their salaries in full for this time. In turn, public authorities should make sure that employers are not forcing workers to take "mandatory vacations".

2. A welfare benefits system that will guarantee an income to all those who are unable to work. This system should also allow universal access to healthcare regardless of circumstances. The current crisis should be used to reorganize the entire social welfare system so that access to healthcare becomes a fundamental, universal right that is not tied to employment status. Further, a newly organized system should guarantee income and the right to housing for everyone.

3. Worker control at the workplace must be established and strengthened. Any relief should be directed to workers themselves.

4. Unemployment benefits have to be increased and provided over longer periods of time. All persons in their working age who do not have a job must be allowed the right to receive this benefit.

5. Eliminate all forms of casual employment. At-will contracts, fixed term contracts, self-employment, temp agencies and temporary employment in general transfer the risks associated with crisis (economic, environmental or health crisis) onto the shoulders of working people. This only serves to make exploitation more intense. This epidemic proves that the only acceptable form of employment should be a permanent employment contract (preceded at most, by a single probationary period employment contract).

6. Safeguard the solidarity-based pension system and raise the minimum pension. The goal should be a pension system that allows seniors to cover the costs of living so that there is no need to "work on the side because the pension is too small".

7. A freeze on rents and mortgage payments. Suspend evictions and provide free access to basic utilities for all (electricity, gas, running water, and heating). Provide immediate relief for the tens of thousands of people who are facing the crisis of homelessness.

8. Nationalize the banking and financial sectors, along with industries critical in the time of epidemic such as health and transport, or subject them to other restrictive forms of social control.

9. Prioritize financing the public health care system in the state budget.

10. Establish a financial support program for the care sector so that it meets the needs of both dependents and their caretakers.

The extra costs of these programs cannot come out of working people's pay checks. Over the past 30 years, employers seized more than half of the wealth generated by the economy in the form of profits. Today, when money is needed for unemployment benefits or the health care system, we should look for it in the pockets of bosses, millionaires, CEOs, and bankers. Only the dividends paid to shareholders last year by the 13 largest companies listed on the Polish stock exchange amounted to 12.3 billion PLN. This is ten times more than the funding allotted to the Guaranteed Employee Benefits Fund, which secures workers' salaries in case of an employers' bankruptcy.

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