

# Resisting Performativity Measures through Local Activism: A Critical Exploration of the 2019 Polish Teacher Strike

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## **Abstract**

*In this paper, the 2019 Polish Teachers Strike (PTS), joined by 75 percent of all public schools and kindergartens for over three weeks, gives rise to an investigation in teacher professionalism that is grounded in local activism. Reading the Polish Teacher Strike (PTS) as a moment of social upheaval (Buchowski, 2017), I claim that the strike deserves anthropological attention to explore its context and meaning for larger socio-political developments at stake. I offer a deeply contextualized reading of the PTS from two angles. First, I analyze the strike under a framework of teacher professionalism that draws on the works of Judyth Sachs (2000; 2016), Solvi Mausethagen and Lise Granlund (2012) to incorporate a locally-grounded understanding of meaningful teacher engagement in social change. Second, I offer an interpretation of the PTS as an act of resistance against performativity measures as part of a number of policy technologies that teachers have been subjected to since 2017 (Ball, 2003), on the one hand, and the notion of the performative as a vital practice in democratic societies (Matynia, 2009a; 2009b) on the other hand.*

**Keywords:** *teacher professionalism, labor unions, teacher strikes, performativity measures, local activism*

## **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

On April 8, 2019, Polish teachers went on a nationwide strike for better working conditions and higher pay that lasted for 21 days. It was the longest strike that teachers had organized in the 30 years history of the Third Polish Republic.

Recognized as a “unique and special event in the history of Polish teaching” (Smolinska-Theiss, 2019, p. 318), scholars remained unenthusiastic about its outcome considering the fact that demands for a better paycheck were unmet (Miko-Giedyk 2019; Madalinska-Michalak 2019). Reading the Polish Teacher Strike (PTS) as a moment of social upheaval (Buchowski, 2017), I claim that the strike deserves critical exploration of its context and meaning in light of the larger socio-political developments that have shaken Polish public life. The PTS joins the company of a number of protests and creative counter-installations by NGOs and civil society that have challenged conservative policy projects of the ruling party Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS). Most prominently, these initiatives include the “Czarny Protest,” the Black Protest in 2016 and the “StrajkKobiet,” the Women’s Strike in 2020 (see: Pronczuk, 2020) that mobilized a historical turnout of demonstrators in defense of abortion rights which the newly appointed Supreme Court had ruled to be suspended amidst the covid 19 pandemic. Similarly, the repeated destruction of Julita Wojcik’s rainbow balloon arch on Warsaw’s Savior Square, “Tęcza” in 2012, four times in 2013 and dismantled in 2015, installed as a symbol for “tolerance, diversity and openness” (Wojcik quoted by Kozłowska, 2013), speaks to the on-going defamation of the LGBTQI+ community. The minority group’s political activism for sex education, gay and trans rights, feminism and queer studies has served as a potent projection sight against which PiS successfully garnered support of its voter base in the 2020 presidential election. Furthermore, the 2018 Sejm squatters, a group of children with disabilities and their parents that camped in the Parliament for 38 days to demand more progressive models of

assistant living and higher financial support (see: Szarota, 2018), marked a critical moment of social organization against drastic policies that infringe on the rights and liveliness of vulnerable groups of Polish society. Drawing on Bradley A. U. Levinson who urges “anthropologists of education to address questions of political order” (2005, p. 329), the PTS draws into doubt the legitimacy of the recent school reform and joins the ranks of a broad resistance development that is led by women, queer and disabled people, and their allies.

I offer a deeply contextualized reading of the PTS from two angles. First, I want to analyze the strike under a framework of teacher professionalism that draws on the works of Judyth Sachs (2000; 2016), Solvi Mausethagen and Lise Granlund (2012) to incorporate a locally-grounded understanding of meaningful teacher engagement in social change. Second, I want to offer an interpretation of the PTS as an act of resistance against performativity measures that teachers have been drastically subjected to since the 2017 education reform (Ball, 2003), on the one hand, and the notion of the performative as a vital practice in democratic societies (Matynia, 2009a; 2009b) on the other hand. As teachers leave the classroom to go on strike, I argue we should follow them, observe their protest and study their discourses to understand better what they tell us about everyday life in schools, the conditions of the labor market, and the politics of educational reform that make it unbearable for teachers to continue their profession.

### **Methodological Considerations**

I frame the Polish Teacher Strike as a critical exploration that overlaps with the definition of a case study, in that I provide “a detailed examination of ... one particular event” (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007, p. 59). Furthermore, I treat the strike as an organization of a group of people “who interact, who identify with each other, and who share expectations about each other’s behavior” (Bogdan

and Biklen, 2007, p. 61). Drawing on Kathleen M. Eisenhardt, case studies can be used to provide descriptions, test theory, or generate theory (1989, p. 535).

For the purpose of this paper, I seek to give a detailed account of the strike to contribute to locally-grounding teacher professionalism through an activist stance as proposed by Sachs's research on teachers as activist professionals (2000; 2016). In this process, I have to rely on secondary data, since I was not formally able to interview participants. Hence, I conducted close readings of news coverage, I had informal conversations with Polish teachers, and I witnessed strike activities in one large Polish city. Rolf Johannsson summarizes, "a case may be a relatively bounded object or process ... at a minimum a case is a phenomenon *specific to time and space*" (2007, p. 5). The phenomenon that is investigated here is a nationwide movement of Polish educators that took place during the month of April in 2019. This way, I hope to create knowledge that "can deepen the understanding of teachers' collective efforts to resist, maintain, or renew their work" (Mausethagen and Granlund, 2012, p. 819).

Within this inquiry approach, I draw on Joseph Ponterotto who states: "it is the qualitative researcher's task to thickly describe social action, so that thick interpretations of the actions can be made, presented in written form, and made available to a wide audience of readers" (2006, p. 542). The paper explores the relevance of activism for teacher professionalism and public debate in democratic societies. Ponterotto points out "a central feature to interpreting social actions entails assigning motivations and intentions for the said social actions" (Ibid.). The interpretations and conclusions drawn here stand as an entry into the debate that is intended for critical exchange and further probing into the Polish education-political landscape under five more years of conservative rule in Poland.

### **Context: Prelude, Action and Preliminary Aftermath of the PTS**

Trade unions have played a complex role in Poland's past. After the end of World War II, state socialism restructured Polish political, economic and social life, so that "in 1949, all trade unions were massed together in the Association of Trade Unions (*Zrzeszenie Związków Zawodowych, ZZZ*), under the control and supervision of the Central Trade Union Council" (Czarzasty, 2018, p. 279). Following several bloody yet unsuccessful outbursts of worker revolts against authoritarian rule (1956, 1970s,), the 1980 strike at the Lenin Shipyard in Gdansk was a water-shed moment. It was concluded with the legalization of autonomous unionism and led to the foundation of NSZZ *Solidarność* in 1980/81. This was the first independent trade union in the Warsaw Pact with "9.5 million members in 1981, one-third of the work force" (Czarzasty, 2018, p. 280). A second influential union formed in 1984, the All-Poland Alliance of Trade Unions (*Ogólnopolskie Porozumienie Związków Zawodowych, OPZZ*) which contributed together with other smaller unions to the development of union pluralism in Poland. These state-independent unions proved to be the backbone of the transition process that peaked in democratic rule and the market economy (Czarzasty, 2018, p. 281). However, throughout the transition period of the 1990s, Poland's labor unions experienced difficulties to maintain influence and integrity as they passively observed the Capitalist "shock therapy" that established the rules and practices of the free market economy. Labor unions remained inactive since they had fought for the establishment of liberalizing market dynamics, on the one hand, while the protection of labor rights and welfare policies took a backseat. Furthermore, political ties between the unions and Poland's power elite dwarfed the credibility of labor activism. It was former *Solidarność* leader Lech Wałęsa who was Poland's prime minister (1990-1995) when the "shock therapy" measures were launched. This meant: "trade liberalization swept away almost all restrictions, giving Poland an extremely liberal trade regime ...the anti-inflation wage tax was set at draconian

levels. The government made a commitment to privatization on a massive scale,” (Murrell, 1993, p. 128). Poland’s post-Socialist transition period came at an immense cost for parts of the working class as employment dropped by 25-50 percent in the heavy industry sending individuals into the search for other forms of “economic livelihood” (Sachs, 1994, p. 277ff.). Cultural life and community identification connected to places of labor, such as mines, factories and shipyards died down in the process of restructuring the economic landscape. As a consequence of poverty in rural areas in particular, alcoholism, deteriorating work ethic, low additional funds and reduced general revenues of the local governments translated into lowered expenditures for public libraries, cultural institutions, schools and other places of educational value (CASE, 2001, p. 12). In short, Poland’s current economic disparities have their origins in a time in which labor unions remained inactive or contributed to the diminishment of public sector education, community assets, and fair wage labor conditions.

As Magdalena Bernaciak, Anil Duman and Vera Sspanovic point out, “unions’ political affiliation is a double-edged sword,” making it difficult to push protest against government policies if union members hold party offices (2011, p. 372). A case in point might be the endorsement of Law and Justice (PiS) by Solidarność members in the run-up of the 2015 election campaign that brought about a Ministry of Labour headed by a Solidarność member and similar arrangement in other posts in government (Ostrowski, 2018, p. 312). Yet, a strong and uncompromised labor union is crucial to challenge policy projects that undermine the public sector. According to Polish law, only unions have the right to strike as a means of collective bargaining (Act on the Settlement of Collective Labor Dispute, 23 May, 1991; Warneck, 2007, p. 56-57). Furthermore, while employment relationships cannot be cancelled during strikes, participants have no right to remuneration which means strikers go

without payment (Warnek, 2007, p. 57). Within the union landscape, teachers are particularly strongly organized in unions (39 percent) with 24 percent of all trade union members in Poland belonging to the education sector (Ostrowski, 2018, p. 301). They are more likely to choose the largest teacher union for representation, i.e. the left-wing Związek Nauczycielstwa Polskiego (Polish Teachers' Union, ZNP), affiliated with OPZZ (Bernaciak, Duman and Scpanovic, 2011, p. 370).

### **Zooming in on the PTS**

The swift rollback of the 1990s education policies was at the heart of the “Good School” reform that National Education Minister Anna Zalewska announced in a rapid legislative process in 2017 (Wojniak and Majorek, 2018). Despite increased workload through schooling in morning and afternoon shifts, salaries stagnated. Polish teachers' salaries rank among the lowest income groups in an OCED comparison, with an annual gross statutory salary in primary education between 5421€ and 7142€ calculated for the 2016-17 school year (EC, 2018, p. 78). The European Commission's Eurydice report on Europe's salaries for teachers and principals shows that “statutory salaries of school teachers in Eastern Europe are substantially lower than in Western Europe” (EC, 2018, p.15). In comparison, Poland's teachers in primary education earn one-seventh of what Austrian teachers earn. Polish colleagues made roughly 5,421€ as annual gross statutory salary in the 2016-17 school year, while Austrian teachers received 34,595 € (EC, 2018, pp. 76-78). Bearing in mind that in Poland, statutory salary at the lower secondary level barely differs from other levels in education, Poland is one of the seven countries within the EU that offer a “starting salary [which] is half of the EU-average” (EC, 2018, p. 15). Teacher unions and Education Minister Anna Zalewska met in January 2019, discussing an increase of salary of PLN 1000 (232€) which Zalewska answered with an offer of “raising teacher wages by PLN 121-166 (28-39€) (polandin,

2019). However, Solidarność had already signed an agreement with the Ministry that accepted a 5-percent-salary increase in January 2019 and 9.6 percent in September, 2019 (Grzegorzcyk, labornotes, 2019).

As a consequence of growing frustration in view of precarious labor conditions and fruitless talks with government officials in the beginning of the year, the ZNP organized a referendum among teachers that was concluded on March 25, 2019 (polandin, 2019). A majority of 78 percent of members of staff in 20,000 schools and kindergartens voted in favor of a strike, meeting the criterium that more than 50 percent of union members had to opt in. As a result, the Polish Teachers' Union (Związek Nauczycielstwa Polskiego, ZNP) and the Trade Union Forum (Forum Związków Zawodowych, FFZ) initiated a nation-wide strike that started on April 8, 2019. The staff of over 15,000 schools and kindergartens participated – 75 percent of all public schools in Poland (Augusiak and Ratajczak, Jacobin, 2019). With slogans such as “Walczymy o Lepszą Edukację” (We Fight for Better Education) (Rybnik.com) or “Edukacja+Godność=Przyłość” (Education+Dignity=Future), (info.wyborcza.pl) teachers demanded not only better pay but expressed concern for the ethical conduct with which they provided education. Polish teachers also rallied for a change in the assessment of teachers' work, modification of the teachers' promotion path and the dismissal of Minister of Education Anna Zalewska (china-cee.eu, 2019). Throughout the strike initiatives in support of the teachers took place across the country. Jakub Grzegorzcyk reported on students protesting in support of their teachers on April 10, a fund that was established for the striking teachers on April 11, and on rallies across the country in support of teachers on April 12 (Grzegorzcyk, labornotes, 2019). In Wrocław, for example, Gregor Gowan described a student initiative titled “Strajk Uczniowski!” (student strike) which demonstrated in front “No-Logo” strategy, no party affiliations were found on the protest



banners to focus on the message and leave party politics out of the conversation. On April 23, 2019 (day 16 of the strike), protest efforts peaked as teachers from across the country demonstrated in Warsaw in a mass protest and in 22 cities across the country, The Toronto Star reported (Gera, thestar, 2019). However, pressure on the strikers intensified as the final exams of the ninth graders approached. The strike was put on halt for the time of the exams and was due to commence again in September, 2019, ZNP leader Slawomir Broniarz announced. During the strike, ZNP and FZZ offered a compromise, stating that the pay could happen in two steps of each 15 percent salary increase during 2019. The government rejected this option.

While the PTS was suspended due to summer holidays, nothing has changed with regard to teachers' salary demands. In light of the government's no-tolerance policy to the salary bargaining, dialogue among the members of the tripartite system - government, employers, and employees – has drastically decreased. Should Polish teachers not achieve any favorable response by the government, one essential tool that workers have to represent their interests is undermined. This way unions run the risk of appearing as simple decoration in a quasi-democratic set-up. Considering the larger European context, bargaining has helped to increase teacher salaries in many EU member countries. The European Commission summarizes:

In 2016/17, teachers' statutory salaries were raised in most European countries. A policy reform or a change in the pay scales brought an increase of 4 % or more (compared to salaries in 2015/16) in Ireland and eight other Member States from central and eastern Europe (Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Hungary, Austria, Romania and Slovakia). Collective bargaining brought salary rises of more than 3 % also in Denmark, Malta, Sweden, Iceland and Montenegro (EC, 2018, p. 9).

As can be seen above, Polish teachers did not experience a raise in statutory salaries. Collective bargaining is a tool that employees can use to exercise labor rights. Larger European bargaining trends did not play out successfully for Polish teachers which stands in the way for greater social cohesion within the country and the whole of the European Union.

### **Activism and Teacher Professionalism**

Competing discourses seek to define the core principles that make teaching a profession (Mausethagen and Granlund, 2012; Talbert and McLaughlin, 1994; Sachs 2016). I add to this international scholarship that attention should be paid to locally-grown teacher activism and that literacy of movements like the PTS should be integrated in the understanding of what it means to be a teacher. I interpret the strike along three closely intertwined lines. First, the strike shines a light on notions of accountability versus agency that teachers experience under global, testing regimes and that Stephen Ball discusses as an element of performativity measures (2003, 2016). Second, the PTS contributes to re-shaping the subjectivity of teachers as public intellectuals, instead of technical workers (Ball, 2003; Giroux, 1994; Cochran-Smith, 2006). Last, I want to comment on the PTS as a performative event (Matynia, 2009a,b) that invited and allowed for participation in democratic debate.

### **Resisting Performativity Measures: Agency over Accountability**

The Polish Teacher Strike attracted attention away from the dominant rhetoric of teachers as service providers who are accountable, first and foremost, for student learning outcomes. Instead, the PTS showcased teachers that claimed agency over the education that they provide for their students and the conditions of their labor. With the introduction of the first large scale assessment format, the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2003, teacher professionalism has been increasingly linked to accountability measures

(Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia, Beck, Sembill, Nickolaus and Mulder, 2009). Marilyn Cochran-Smith summarized this development as follows: “it is now broadly assumed by policymakers ... that the objective of teacher education is to produce demonstrable pupil learning growth, defined primarily in terms of test scores” (2006, p. 186). This development is applicable to the Polish context. The 2014 PISA report summarized that from 2003 to 2012 Poland increased its share of top performers and reduced its share of low performers in mathematics, achieving equal results with students from Canada, Finland and the Netherlands, and significant improvement in reading performance (OECD 2014, p. 4). The then-Prime Minister Donald Tusk of the Civic Platform party commented on Poland’s outstanding PISA results:

Polish lower secondary school students are among the best in Europe. [...] the education system, criticized so often, delivers good outcomes. Today, the Polish school does not need a revolution, and Polish teachers have good reasons to be satisfied with their work (en.men.gov.pl, 2015).

According to former Prime Minister Tusk, the teachers’ job was done in light of the positive results that Polish students had shown in large-scale, high stakes testing on mathematics, reading and natural science. Stephen Ball draws attention to truth regimes, such as the OECD that produce data according to which we believe a certain truth about our schools and our teachers. It is less important whether this truth is accurate than what it does to the workings of schools, the subjectivity of teachers, and how it maps the realm of student productivity within certain subjects and skills that “count.” Drawing on Foucault, Ball highlights that “truth is a system of exclusion” (2016, p. 1132). What falls into the dance of performative measures that teachers need to exercise, is closely linked to the assessment tools and the standards that ought to be met. What is excluded from the dance, such as critical thinking skills, creativity, problem-solving, debating, community engagement, multilingualism,

solidarity, etc., speaks to the manufacture of truth through a very narrow angle of apparently objective rationales, i.e. test scores in the core subjects. All other areas of education are left to private interpretation so that teachers are less and less required or wished to take a principled stance on matters of respect, tolerance, moral dilemmas, democratic values etc. Ethnographic school research by Beth Rubin and Hana Cervinkova has shown how Polish teachers shied away from encouraging or taking a stance on political issues in class to avoid tension among students and to prioritize more secure grounds of factual learning (2019, p. 185).

Nonetheless, despite leading test results, Polish teachers took to the streets to voice protest and openly criticize all elements of the reform agenda. Mausethagen and Granlund argue the “new accountability regimes in education,” have fueled public and policy distrust toward teachers and school management (2012, p. 818). Where distrust enters professional relationships, deadlock stands in the way of honest and meaningful change as recent studies demonstrate (Schultz, 2019; Rusnak, 2018, forthcoming). Judyth Sachs advocates for building “active trust” among teachers and the larger school community to develop a joint agenda for socially just education based on partnership and practitioner research (2000). Sachs distinguishes, where the intent of government is compliance and control, accountability takes the shape of surveillance and punishment of educators through external agencies or internal monitoring. Where the intent is the use of collective wisdom, accountability is organized through process-oriented feedback, building on self-regulation and bottom-up problem-solving (2016, p. 416). Sachs warns of the erosion of trust and agency in the face of external accountability measures, leading teachers to resort to “safe” practices, such as teaching to the test, giving way to an understanding of the teacher as a “technical worker” (Sachs, 2016, p. 417). Indeed, the Education and Training Monitor 2016 remarked that the

Polish school system was “centered on transferring knowledge using passive learning methods and preparing students for testing by imposing ready-made solutions, rather than supporting independent problem-solving, critical thinking and creativity” (2016, p. 4). By stepping out into the public domain, teachers exercised agency over their workplace. Accountability regimes did not silence teachers’ voices as they advocated for improving conditions for learning and teaching. The PTS disrupted the dominance of positive testing results as the only vantage point from which to assess teacher professionalism. It showed that student outcome in three subjects could not be the only criteria for developing public education and that teachers’ voices and trust were not marginal but essential to implementing reform agendas.

### **Re-Shaping Subjectivity: Teachers as Public Intellectuals**

Participating in strikes, demonstrations and other activities of civic engagements has the strong potential to change subjectivities and consciousness of those involved (Pusey, 2016; Gutstein and Lipman, 2013). The PTS, I argue, did not only imbue teachers with a sense of agency but also uplifted their professional self through public intellectual involvement. Teachers in Poland “carry the weight of the austerity measures and immiseration” (Cervinkova and Rudnicki, 2019) as they range in the lowest income group of educators across the European Union. In 1982, William K. Falk, Michael D. Grimes, et al. investigated “teacher militancy” and considered teacher strikes as a result of power imbalances in bureaucratic settings. They argued that teachers struck because they wanted more autonomy to realize their goals and concluded “strikers are more professionally-oriented than non-strikers ... and desire greater authority to govern their work activities” (p. 558). Polish teachers chose confrontation with the government at the expense of no salary. The fact that 80 percent of them would choose their profession again (OECD, p. 11) speaks to the professional ethos of teachers who remain faithful to teaching but unable to

sustain their families with the pay they receive. Stepping away from being “technical workers,” teachers acted as “public intellectuals” who stimulated thinking and consciousness-raising with regard to wider social inequalities (Giroux, 1994; Cochran-Smith, 2006).

Giroux positions teachers as active participants in democratic life inside and outside of schools, underlining that “democracy is not a set of formal rules of participation but the lived experience of empowerment for the vast majority” (1994, p. 43). According to Giroux, schools hold the potential to stimulate “a wider revitalization of public life,” (1994, p. 44) which initiatives around the globe have exemplified (e.g.: Toth, Meszaros, and Marton 2018). To close the “gap between the school and the real world” (Giroux, 1994, 44) would then be reflected in calling out the conditions of labor as unethical and unsustainable if teachers can barely survive with the money they earn. Cochran-Smith rebuts the notion that teacher professionalism and teacher education can be reformed through policies alone (2006, p. 191). Instead nurturing the teaching profession within the spirit of teachers as public intellectuals allows for a transformative change that is communal and oriented towards social justice. Cochran-Smith urges to exercise one’s right to oppose if “policies and practices ... will not serve the best interests of schoolchildren, families, and teachers” (2006, p. 203). Yet, “policy technologies of market, management and performativity leave no space of an autonomous or collective ethical self” (Ball, 2003, p. 226), so that successful union organization is a tremendous challenge. Activist professionalism cannot occur depoliticized. It requires teachers to understand themselves “in relation to the society in which they live” and to build partnership and collaboration with unions, parents, politicians, teacher colleagues, neighborhood representatives (Sachs, 2001, p. 93). Teacher unions can provide the place for such politicization where alternative discourse to understandings of teacher professionalism can potentially circulate and emerge.

Mausethagen and Granlund's discourse analysis on the concept of teacher professionalism put forward by the Union of Education Norway compared to those introduced by Norwegian education policies shows that "education policy discourse and constructions ... can be described as dominant ... whereas perceptions that come from within the teachers' union act as a counter-discourse or as negotiation with the government" (2012, p. 827). They also found that where the union placed emphasis on research, abstract knowledge, and professional ethics to underpin its concept of teacher professionalism, it gained more credibility as a bargaining partner whose goals are not limited to higher salary negotiations but to becoming an active political partner (2012, p. 829). The PTS could build only in part on the historical capital of union activism that had contributed to the collapse of Communist rule in Poland. The fact that Solidarność entertained affiliations with the governing party weakened the force of the strikers. Solidarność agreed to a bargaining contract before the strike even started, creating a sideshow that diverted attention away from the demands of the teachers and toward inter-union politics. While many Solidarność members left their union, ZNP as the largest teacher union led its members into strike activity for nearly a month, articulating public outrage over the gross financial injustices that exist in Polish society. As Pawel Marzewski points out the economic divide in Poland is painfully drastic as "20 percent of the wealthiest Poles earn five times as much as the poorest 20 percent" (Marzewski, 2014; <http://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/countries/poland/>).

### **PTS as a Performative, Participatory, and Locally-Grounded Event**

Taking a look at the German neighbors to the West of Poland, the teaching population is fragmented into civil servants and employed teachers. As civil servants have no right to enter into strikes or wage negotiations, a mobilization of the scale that Polish teachers have achieved would hardly be possible in Germany (Schuster, 2012). Also in Austria, the right to strike is not a given for

teachers. Major labor struggles have not been documented since the 1970s. In the United States, on the other hand, the 2012 Chicago Teachers Strike took place in the third largest school district of the United States, backed by 98 percent of the teachers that are members of the Chicago Teachers Union in which 90 percent of Chicago teachers are organized. It lasted for 12 days and took place in a city which Pauline Lipman called the “epicenter of the pushback” against “the neoliberal, corporate reform agenda of high stakes testing paying teachers based on test scores, ... disinvesting in neighborhood schools, failing and then closing them and turning them over to charter schools” (Democracy Now! Interview with Amy Goodman on Sept 10, 2012 accessed from <https://www.democracynow.org>, on July 19, 2019). Also on European grounds, teachers and students sparked a strike in Hungary in 2016 that the country had not seen since the time of the 1989 transition period. Demands focused on a number of issues that were not only related to wage negotiations but to inspection systems, career models, curriculum changes, school reforms etc. (Toth, Meszaros, Marton, 2018). Looking at the strikes, it can be said that wage bargaining is often the entry point through which larger critique and discontent with existing conditions of schooling, education, and society can be expressed. Henry Giroux speaks of the potential of schools to revitalize public life. The PTS entered public discourse through rallies, teach-ins, and off-side activities that were organized and joined by local citizens and that broke with what Elzbieta Matynia describes as “democratic lent” (2009b, p. 8), and what I interpret, as a time of political deadlock between positions in the face of fear of the Other and illiberal advancements to control and power. What makes her scholarship so compelling for the interpretation of the PTS is the way Matynia foregrounds “the life experience and imagination that local people bring to the system” (2009a, 271). It is the locally-grounded activism that stems from the lived experiences of teachers in schools which gives legitimization to the claims and demands they are expressing. Based on research that shows how vast



differences between schools as working places can be as a result of regional funding, student population and socio-economic environment of the school, different demands and challenges constitute the life of teachers in schools. Therefore, professionalism, Joan E. Talbert and Milbrey M. McLaughlin argue, should potentially be developed context-specific. The authors mention teacher networks as places of consensual understandings of the profession and conclude from their study that “norms of teaching practice are socially negotiated within the everyday contexts of schooling” (1994, p. 141). Hence, the PTS could be seen as informative of locally-grounded teacher professionalism that articulates affectively the concerns and motivations for development.

### **Exploring the PTS in the Context of the “Good Change”**

During the revision process of this paper, the covid 19 pandemic brought regular schooling to a halt. Health officials mandated the closure of schools in early March 2020 which lasted for nearly three months (Nalaskowski, 2020). Where teachers were able to negotiate a common agenda for the strike in 2019, 2020 brought about extraordinary obstacles to engage in any extra activities besides managing online teaching and inventing make-shift solutions for remote learning. The pandemic was met by containment measures from social distancing to closing the borders to non-Polish citizens. Communication, organization, and solidarity was discouraged on the basis of a greater national goal to keep those foreigners out who brought the disease in (Cervinkova, 2020). The effects that the strike would have had on Polish teachers and schools that Smolinska-Theiss hoped to observe in the following school year were shattered through the paralysis that the pandemic brought about all institutions of public service (2019, 322-323). Especially, in such unusual times, silent teachers cannot be interpreted as complicit in their current work conditions but rather as a testimony to the overwhelming pressures that keep public discourse subdued. To better understand the meaning of the PTS and the efforts that

teachers undertook to navigate the strike in the current political climate, I want to offer a glimpse in the education political landscape that the ruling party's agenda of the "Good Change" has implemented.

### **"Good Change"**

In July 2020, the Polish presidential elections confirmed Andrzej Duda (PiS) in office. Despite a marginal win for PiS, the results point at content with the current governance of the country and reinforcement of the status quo. Under continued PiS leadership, the PTS runs the risk of being considered a hick-up in the larger scope of reform advancements that Duda's government has pursued. Since 2015, the "deep reform of the state" is under way to bring the "Dobra Zmiana," the "Good Change" as the election campaign promised (Balcer, Buras, Gromadzki, and Smolar, 2016). Since 2015, when PiS first won the majority in the Polish parliament, rapid reforms have restructured essential parts of Polish democratic rule, including infringements on the independence of courts, the media and the protection of human rights (Gebert, 2016). The NGO Freedom House Poland points out that the European Commission initiated its first-ever probe into a European Union (EU) member state's commitment to the rule of law in 2016 and again in 2019 due to the Supreme Court law that undermined the independence of Polish judges from political influence (<https://freedomhouse.org/country/poland/freedom-world/2020>). Also, Freedom House warned of attempts the government had undertaken "to discredit academics who challenge its [the ruling party's] preferred historical narrative" (ibid.).

### **"Good School"**

In a similarly fast-paced fashion, the 2017 "Dobra Szkoła," the "Good School" reform substantially reorganized Polish primary and secondary education, as well as changed teaching content and textbooks (Wojniak and Majorek, 2018).

In November 2016, the Council of Ministers adopted the draft school reform, which was implemented only ten months later. Within less than a year a reform was signed into law which extended primary education to eight years and eliminated the Polish middle school. This education reform reduced 10 years of full-time compulsory education (introduced through the 1999 educational reform) by one year. Before September 2017, Polish children attended kindergarten for one year, followed by six years of primary school and three years of middle school (gimnazjum); now preschool and primary school, amounting to nine years, are the compulsory steps in Polish education.

Furthermore, amendments to the Teachers' Charter were made which included the withdrawal of housing benefits to teachers and a salary bonus for starting teachers. Also reaching the next professional level corresponding to higher salary was prolonged from 10 to 15 years (labornotes, 2019). Within months of the Dobra Szkoła reform, primary schools experienced an extension of their student bodies, as they would run now from first to eighth grade. Teachers worked morning and evening shifts in overcrowded school buildings to ensure that two cohorts of students could be educated: 370,000 eighth graders and 350,000 middle schoolers (Augusiak and Ratajczak, Jacobin, 2019). In addition, school closures, especially in rural areas, and the mushrooming of private academies and schooling projects have increased pressures on public schools and their teachers to function on tiny budgets, limited resources and precarious pay (Mendel 2018; Cervinkova and Rudnicki, 2019; OECD 2015).

One forgets that behind these easily listed number games of school years, cohorts, and reform timelines, actual families, children and adults, teachers and their families and school communities stand that have to shift their entire schedules and their way of being with each other to fit a new reality that was implemented over night. Ball points out: "... the technology of performativity appears as misleadingly objective and hyper-rational. Central to its functioning

is the translation of complex social processes and events in the simple figures or categories of judgement” (2003, p. 217).

The elimination of the *gimnazjum*, and the transfer of teenagers to extended, make-shift primary schools, ridiculed the work, the space and the professional focus that was characteristic for the former middle schools. On paper, the idea of extending a comprehensive, general education may have its advantages and can surely be discussed as a plausible model. However, the turn-over of this, breath-taking reform agenda” (Ball, 2003, p. 217) of drafting, ratification and implementation within one year, begs the question of how much of this process was also tied to „mechanisms of reforming teachers ... and for changing what it means to be a teacher” (Ball, 2003, p. 217). Turning the labour-power of teachers into a type of ”auditable commodity” that can be easily placed from one type of schooling into the other (Rikowski, 2017; Ball, 2003), disregards the context-specific quality of teaching, the need to organize school staff into a strong and collegial collective with a congruent school culture, and the fact that teachers acquire school-type specific skills over years of working with the same age group. The experiences of teachers were rendered insignificant, their agency ignored to the point of being docile instructors, interchangeable, rankable, and disposable.

### **“Bad Teachers”?**

When Polish teachers started striking in 2019, PiS party officials defamed the strikers and their actions. Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the head of the party, compared teachers to “współpracowników Gestapo,” to collaborators of the Gestapo (Wielinski, 2019). In a similar vein, Deputy Minister of Justice, Patryk Jaki drew comparisons between the methods of the protestors and the German Wehrmacht (Wielinski, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 2019; Santora and Berendt, *New York Times*, 2019). Alluding to historical tropes of this magnitude belongs to

the repertoire of “traditional Polish patriotism” (Grudzinska Gross, 2019). Hana Cervinkova has interpreted the repressive and manipulating discursive mechanisms through which the neoconservative Polish leadership attempts to silence political opposition as a process of producing “docile, precarious, and potentially perilous citizens which are being militarized against the Other” (2016, p. 44). The discursive means that PiS officials drew on equated the right to wage bargaining with anti-patriotic sentiments. Even more so, conflating the right to organize and voice opposition for the sake of better conditions for education with anti-patriotism, undermined public debate and placed the strikers as anti-Polish, anti-patriots at the offside of the political spectrum. Such affective and ideological campaigning was noticeable also with regard to the former mayor of Gdansk who was killed months before the strikes began. During a charity Christmas event in January 2019, Pawel Adamowicz, a member of the Civic Platform, (Platforma Obywatelska – PO), was stabbed on stage (Buras, The Guardian 2019). Adamowicz had been in office for 20 years and was known for his initiatives in support of refugees and intercultural understanding. Though the murder was not proven to be politically motivated, Adamowicz represented a different voice in Poland that fostered European solidarity with people in need and a human rights agenda that was not tied to citizenship privileges. To contrast the depiction of strikers as fascist bullies, one must have a look at the statistics on the Polish teaching force. Polish teachers are on average young, female, and highly ambitious. With 81 percent of women in health and social services, also a total of 74 percent of female teachers in Poland exceed the OECD average of 67 percent of women in the profession (2015, p. 11). Furthermore, Polish teachers are leading in professional development as the OCED remarks. The 2013 OCED Teaching and Learning International Study survey shows that 94 percent of Polish teachers took part in professional development programs compared to 88 percent elsewhere (OECD 2015, p. 11). In line with these statistics, it can be said that the majority of

strikers were women who founded their protest on their everyday experiences in schools under immense pressures to abide to swift managerial, reform agendas.

### **Concluding remarks**

I acknowledge the limitations that an analysis on the basis of secondary data holds. Nonetheless, in this critical exploration, I have tried to give context and meaning to the concerted efforts of Polish educators to call out and resist performativity measures that doubtfully led to better educational opportunities for students and working conditions for teachers. As Ball stresses, the teacher's soul is a contested site of political efforts in the neoliberal world. Resisting subjectification measures is a strong sign that should not be cynically dismissed even if the strike was not met by the wage bargaining that it attempted to achieve. Teachers are painfully underpaid and reside on the forgotten end of Poland's general economic upturn. Historical implications of labor unions in the deep, neoliberal restructuring of the country have impacted the possibilities for strengthening teachers' positions in wage negotiations. However, even more than a rightful claim for better pay, the PTS is a movement that is over proportionally led by women who seek agency over their workplaces against a trend of undermining their financial liveliness and their pedagogical ethics. The PTS, as so many recent civic uprisings, challenged an increasingly oppressive policy regime that silences pluralism and gathers support on the basis of upholding privileges for the heteronormative, able-bodied, Catholic majority population. From an anthropological standpoint, the 2019 PTS allowed for social actions and engagements that commented on larger socio-political matters than salaries. It is therefore a hopeful example of the ways that local activism can strengthen and inspire a type of teacher professionalism that draws on bottom-up consolidations for the purpose of socializing emancipated and critical educators. Its significance for wider public engagement in which vital democracies are grounded cannot not be underestimated. Drawing on Paulo

Freire “educational change must be accompanied by significant changes in the social and political structure in which education takes place” (McLaren on Freire, 1999, p. 49). For that, it requires an understanding of teacher professionalism that recognizes teachers as moral beings that ought to criticize, oppose, and probe questions when the foundations of a democratic society are at stake.

## Notes

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