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Coal miners – a privileged social group in Poland under communism

Abstract

Coal was the basic Polish energy resource, and at the same time its export provided the country with the necessary injections of foreign currency. During the entire period of Communist rule in Poland, miners working in hard coal mines were, on the one hand, over-exploited, while, on the other, they were granted numerous social benefits. The profession of miner was considered the most important and valuable for the country, and the miners themselves were treated as national heroes. Over time, miners' social privileges were increasingly extended. In November 1949, the government adopted a document called the "Miner's Charter", concerning special privileges for miners in the coal mining industry. In the same year the "Distinguished Miner of Socialist Poland" decoration was introduced. However, due to the harsh conditions, there was still a shortage of manpower in the mines. To ensure maximum coal extraction, a four-brigade working system was introduced underground in 1978. As a result, the workplace was manned at all times of the day and night. One form of incentive to work in the mines was the promise of a accelerated access to housing. Many mines had canteens, separate shops, and service outlets. The mines organized the delivery of food products at lower prices. From the beginning of the 1980s, Poland entered a decade-long deep social and economic crisis. To encourage miners to make even greater efforts, 'voluntary' work on free Saturdays was introduced, which was doubled in pay and the amount thus earned was tax-free. The miners were the most highly valued occupational group in Socialist Poland, but it was the most economically exploited group. Their life was extremely difficult, although miners' salaries were much higher than in other branches of industry.

Key words: People's Republic of Poland, coal mining, social privileges, "Miner's Charter", "Distinguished Miner of Socialist Poland", four-brigade working system, "G"-booklets

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Górnicy węgla kamiennego – uprzywilejowana grupa społeczna w Polsce w okresie komunizmu

Streszczenie

Węgiel był podstawowym polskim surowcem energetycznym i eksportowym, dostarczał więc krajowi niezbędnych dewiz. Przez cały okres rządów komunistycznych w Polsce górników pracujących w kopalniach węgla kamiennego nadmiernie eksploatowano, ale jednocześnie przyznawano im liczne przywileje socjalne. Zawód górnika uznano za najważniejszy i najcenniejszy dla kraju, a samych górników traktowano jak bohaterów narodowych. W miarę upływu czasu ich przywileje socjalne były coraz szersze. W listopadzie 1949 r. rząd przyjął dokument zwany „Kartą Górnika” nadający szczególne przywileje górnikom w górnictwie węglowym. W tym samym roku wprowadzono odznaczenie „Zasłużony Górnik Polski Ludowej”. Ze względu jednak na ciężkie warunki wciąż brakowało rąk do pracy w kopalniach. Dla zapewnienia jak największego wydobycia węgla w 1978 r. wprowadzono czterobrygadowy system pracy pod ziemią. Dzięki temu o każdej porze dnia i nocy wszystkie stanowiska pracy były obsadzone. Jedną z form zachęty do pracy w kopalniach była obietnica szybkiego otrzymania własnego mieszkania. Przy wielu kopalniach funkcjonowały stołówki, osobne sklepy oraz punkty usługowe. Kopalnie organizowały dostawy produktów spożywczych po niższych cenach. Od początku lat 80. XX w. rozpoczął się w Polsce głęboki kryzys społeczny i gospodarczy. Chcąc zachęcić górników do jeszcze większego wysiłku, wprowadzono „dobrowolną” pracę w wolne soboty, która była podwójnie wynagradzana, a tak zarobiona kwota była zwolniona z podatku. Górnicy byli najbardziej hołubioną grupą zawodową w Polsce Ludowej, ale też najbardziej wykorzystywaną ekonomicznie. Ich życie było niezwykle trudne, chociaż ich pensje były znacznie wyższe niż pracowników w innych gałęziach przemysłu.

Słowa kluczowe: Polska Ludowa, górnictwo węglowe, przywileje socjalne, „Karta Górnika”, „Zasłużony Górnik Polski Ludowej”, system czterobrygadowy, książeczki „G”

Introduction

Mining is a difficult profession, dangerous to life and health, placing physical and mental strains on the human body. For this reason, the mining industry was the first to take special care of its workers. When, in 1918 Poland regained its independence after 123 years of servitude, it was necessary to re-establish trade links between various parts of the country as well as trade links with other nations. It was also necessary to rebuild the country after the damage caused by the First World War, as the Eastern Front passed through much of Poland. The inclusion of Upper Silesia within the country's borders was of great importance for the reborn state, as it was there that rich deposits of hard coal were found. This finally happened in 1922. In the inter-war period, coal was the basic Polish energy resource, and at the same time its export provided the

country with necessary foreign currency. This is why it was often referred to as “black gold” (Łazor 2016: 54, 56). A return to levels of pre-war production of hard coal in Upper Silesia was not reached until 1928 (approximately 40.6 million tonnes) (Jezierski, Leszczyńska 1997: 280; Landau, Tomaszewski 1981: 89, 195).

When the Red Army entered Upper Silesia in 1945, the Soviets devastated the factories by transporting machinery and equipment to the East. At the same time, mass arrests of Silesian miners began. They were deported to work in various parts of the Soviet Union, especially in the mines in the Donets Basin, the Kuznetsk Basin, and the Urals. It is estimated that these deportations involved some 36–38,000 people. As a result, there was a serious labour shortage in the Silesian mines. These shortages were supplemented by the employment of pensioners and young people, as well as using prisoners and German prisoners of war as forced labour (Węgrzyn 2024: 264; Woźniczka 2010: 261–301; Woźniczka 2012: 128–129; Dwilewicz 2016: 94). In an attempt to increase employment in the mines, efforts were made to organize the re-emigration of Polish miners from the West, particularly from France and Belgium. This was to be facilitated by four agreements made with France between 1946 and 1948. The majority of those involved were Polish miners who had emigrated from the country during the interwar period. According to Aneta Nisiobęcka, around 140,000 were expected to return, while Paweł Sękowski cites a figure of 65,000 (Nisiobęcka 2016: 169; Sękowski 2023: 370). In the 1960s and 1970s, many people came to Silesia from different parts of the country in search of work. They mostly found employment in newly opened mines, especially in Jastrzębie-Zdrój. An important incentive for them to take on the hard work of a miner was the possibility of quickly improving their living conditions. Silesians treated newcomers with great distance. They referred to outsiders – as people from outside Silesia were commonly called – with terms like “krzoki” (those who stayed in Silesia), “hoteloki” (those who lived in workers' hotels), and many others, including “słoiki” (those who lived and worked in Silesia but went home during weekends, bringing back bags of food with homemade treats and specialties) (Szczepański 2014).

Despite these difficulties, more than 20 million tonnes of coal were extracted from the mines of Upper Silesia in 1945, and as much as 47.3 million the following year, making Poland self-sufficient in coal production (Jezierski, Leszczyńska 1997: 422). In view of the low productivity and poor qualifications of the forced miners, work on Sundays and public holidays was introduced. The Stakhanovite movement of

competitive work, whose most famous representative was Wincenty Pstrowski, a manual worker in the “Jadwiga” mine and re-emigrant from Belgium, was also utilised for motivational purposes (Chojacka 2018: 158–162; Woźniczka 2018: 271–292; Jezierski, Leszczyńska 1997: 422–423, 425; Dwilewicz 2016: 94).

Applying Soviet solutions to the economy in the years 1950–1955, the so-called Six-Year Plan “to build the foundations of socialism” was implemented in Poland. Its introduction related to accelerated industrialisation, which favoured the intensive development of the raw materials, industry, and means of production. In Upper Silesia, new coal mines were developed – “Ziemowit”, “Wesoła II” (later “Lenin”), “Kościszko-Nowa”, “Julian” and “Nowy Wirek”. The changes that occurred in economic management after October 1956 were conducive to more rational management of the coal mining industry. The mechanisation of mining work was introduced on a large scale, which contributed to a reduction in the number of underground workers. The level of safety was also increased.

In the second half of the 1950s new mines were developed – “Porąbka” in Sosnowiec and “Halemba” in Ruda Śląska, while in the years 1961–1965 the “Szczygłowice” mine in Knurów-Szczygłowice, “Jastrzębie” in Jastrzębie-Zdrój, “Staszic” in Katowice, and “Moszczenica” in Jastrzębie-Moszczenica were commissioned. The importance of the Rybnik Coal District (Rybnicki Okręg Węglowy – ROW) grew, where, despite difficult geological conditions, coking coal was mined. The only new mine opened in the second half of the 1960s was the “July Manifesto” (Manifest Lipcowy) mine in Jastrzębie. As a result, in 1970 domestic coal output amounted to 140.1 million tonnes (Dwilewicz 2016: 99–112).

In the 1970s, the “Ziemowit” and “Szczygłowice” mines were expanded. In 1971, the “Borynia” mine in Szeroka was opened, followed three years later by the “30th Anniversary of the People's Republic of Poland” (XXX-lecia PRL) mine in Jastrzębie-Pawłowice and the “Silesia” (Śląsk) mine in Ruda Śląska. In 1975 the “Piast” mine in Tychy-Bieruń Nowy was commissioned. As a result of the activities that were undertaken, in 1975 output reached 171.6 million tonnes of coal. The construction of new mines in the Rybnik Coal District was also initiated, and in 1975 a decision was taken to establish the Lublin Coal Basin (Lubelskie Zagłębie Węglowe). In view of the rapidly growing national debt in the second half of the 1970s, a large stream of investment was again directed towards the mining industry, on the assumption that increased coal exports would make it easier to repay loans. These plans

never came to fruition due to the developing socio-economic crisis. Although over 200 million tonnes were mined in 1979, output fell to 193 million the following year. At the same time, work disorganisation continued and dissatisfaction among mine workers grew. As a result, when, in the early 1980s, in the conditions of a national crisis, miners in Silesia began to strike, the most modern Jastrzębie mines played a key role in the industrial action (Dwilewicz 2016: 124–130).

The “Miner's Charter” and “Distinguished Miner of the People's Republic of Poland”

After the Second World War, the seizure of power in Poland by the Communists resulted in the dominant ideology of the superiority of the working class over all social groups. Even the name of the party of the Polish communists contained the term 'workers' – the Polish United Workers' Party. The miners were elevated to the status of elite amongst the workers. Just as in the inter-war years, under communism coal was the main Polish export commodity. Its sale provided the inefficient communist economy with foreign currency, which is why – as was often said - coal was 'the most important Polish currency'. At the same time, the Soviet Union demanded ever greater supplies of coal. The pressure on coal was so great that as much as possible was extracted at all costs. During the entire period of Communist rule in Poland, miners working in hard coal mines were, on the one hand, over-exploited, while, on the other, they were granted numerous social benefits. The profession of miner was considered the most important and valuable for the country, and the miners themselves were treated as national heroes. On average, Polish coal mines collectively employed a total of around 400,000 miners.

Over time, miners' social privileges were increasingly extended. In November 1949, the government adopted a document called the “Miner's Charter” (Karta Górnika), containing special privileges for miners in the coal mining industry. It provided numerous entitlements for those working in the mining industry. Underground workers and coal mining technicians and engineers received a special quarterly wage of 10 to 20% of their basic salary. The employees of the coal mines were decorated with state orders for their faultless and continuous work underground. The type of decoration, from the Bronze to the Gold Cross of Merit, was dependent on the length of service. In 1949, the “Distinguished Miner of Socialist Poland” (Zasłużony Górnik Polski Ludowej) decoration was introduced, then changed in 1955 to the “Distinguished Miner of the

People's Republic of Poland" (Zasłużony Górnik Polskiej Rzeczypospolitej Ludowej). This was a distinction for those who, during their many years of work in underground mining, stood out by their achievements in the field of productivity, increase in output, initiation, and development of labour competition. The "Distinguished Miner" received a ceremonial traditional miner's dress, together with a badge, free of charge. He was entitled to 21 days paid holiday, and once a year he and one member of his family received a free train ticket to any destination. At the age of 55 and after 25 years of work in the mining industry a miner could receive a pension which was much higher than the average level of statutory state benefit. The pensions of miners who received the "Distinguished Miner" award were raised by a further 10%. Sick pay in mining was also much higher than in other industries (M.P.1949.A-100.1175). In 1958, another amendment to the Pension Act introduced further financial allowances for holders of the honorary title "Distinguished Miner". Gradually the retirement age for miners was lowered. From 1986 it was set at 50 years, with a total service of 25 years, including 15 years in mining. From 1989 meritorious miners received a special bonus equal to 25% of their current pension (Przybyłka 2018: 48–58).

1970s – the period of success propaganda

In the era of the People's Republic of Poland, the toil of miners was elevated to the status of a national hero. In December 1970, Edward Gierek became the leader of the Polish Communists and, therefore, the most important person in the country. Not only did he himself come from Silesia, but in his youth, he worked as a miner in the French mines in the Lille region. That is why, during the 1970s, miners were treated by the authorities as celebrities, eagerly venerated by artists. Miners had a better life than other social groups. They were carried on people's shoulders, given privileges, glowingly praised in the press, and shown on television. Every year on Miners' Day on 4th December, there were grand ceremonial galas attended by the most important people in the country. The miners' banners were decorated with, for example, the Order of the Banner of Labour of the First and Second Class. There were also concerts of miners' orchestras and marches through city streets. The holiday was also a good opportunity to commission housing estates, streets, or other important buildings, and to establish the coal mining plan for the next year – for example, 200 million tonnes of "black gold". Thanks to these efforts, the role of miners in socialist society grew; even children in schools were taught about the demanding work of miners.

But work in the mine was very difficult, dangerous, conducted in unhealthy conditions and in darkness for many days a month. A large part of its labor intensity resulted from the low level of mechanization, much worse than that of miners in Western countries. Collapses and explosions often occurred, as well as disasters that claimed many lives. The largest disaster in Polish mining after World War II occurred in 1954 at the “Barbara-Wyzwolenie” mine. The number of victims was estimated at between 80–120, but the exact figures were never revealed. The rescue operation lasted for 50 days. The following year, 42 miners were killed in a fire at the “Sośnica” mine. In 1958, 72 miners from the “Makoszowy” mine died from carbon monoxide poisoning. In 1974, a methane explosion claimed the lives of 34 miners at the “Silesia” mine. In 1990, another methane explosion took the lives of 19 miners at the “Halemba” mine (“Historia Do Rzeczy” 2022).

These dangers were the cause of a constant shortage of people willing to work underground. In 1976, the shortage of manpower down in the mines was estimated at around 3,000 persons (Jurkiewicz 2021: 37). The growing demand for coal meant that miners had to work seven days a week, 24 hours a day. In order to ensure maximum coal extraction, a four-brigade working system was introduced underground in 1978. It consisted of workers replacing each other at the same workstation. As a result, the workplace was manned at all times, day and night. The employed miners were divided into 4 groups (brigades). Each brigade had to work three shifts: morning, afternoon, and night. When three groups exchanged jobs during the day, the fourth brigade rested. This arrangement led to a complete disintegration of family life, keeping in mind that, for decades, mining families lived according to a set routine and any disruption was highly detrimental. Miners were the sole breadwinners for their families, as their wives generally did not work. Work in the mine guaranteed respect among neighbors. A miner was proud of the profession, generally continuing a family tradition of working in the mines, and the opportunity to spend time with fellow miners (Jurkiewicz 2021: 35–41).

To encourage people to work underground and to attract as many workers as possible to Silesia, an entire system of incentives was devised. One form of incentive was the promise of a accelerated access to housing, since one of the main social problems faced by Poles during the communist period was the inability to own their own property. Miners who took up work in the mines in Żory and Jastrzębie could get a flat after three months, while the average citizen of the country had to wait around 20 years. Young men in the profession were given a deferment of

military service. Miners also received so-called “jubilees”, a special bonus payment equivalent to three months' salary. The first such award was granted after 15 years of work, and every 5 years thereafter.

Many mines had canteens, separate shops, and service outlets. The mines organised the delivery of staple food products at lower prices (e.g., potatoes). Miners and their family members had swimming pools, sports clubs or libraries dedicated for their exclusive use. An important privilege of the miners was the organization of their own health care. Initially there were only doctors at each workplace. Then the Provincial Coal Industry Health Clinic (Wojewódzka Poradnia Ochrony Zdrowia) was established in Katowice. In 1952, the Central Outpatient Clinic for Health Care in the Mining Industry (Centralna Przychodnia Ochrony Zdrowia w Przemysle Górniczym) was established, to which all mining health centres were subordinated. Subsequently, it was replaced by the Provincial Miners Clinic (Wojewódzka Przychodnia Górnicza) and regional clinics for miners. This solution was changed in 1974, when the Mining Health Care Complex (Górnicy Zespół Opieki Zdrowotnej) in Katowice was established, to which field health care teams were subordinated. The mining sector also had its own rest homes and miners' sanatoriums. These were modern facilities of a high standard. This situation lasted until the end of the People's Republic of Poland (Przybyłka 2018: 55).

The crisis of the 80s

From the beginning of the 1980s, Poland entered a decade-long deep social and economic crisis. As a result of the permanent shortage of basic products in shops, rationing of goods was introduced. Working people were given coupons with marked quantities of specific goods which they could buy within a month. The ration card system was used to regulate the sale of basic commodities such as meat, fats, sugar, but also sweets, cigarettes, vodka, shoes, and petrol. To encourage work underground, mine workers received additional rations of food and consumer goods. The miners received the largest ration of meat and the shops around the mines were the best stocked in the country. Under the food ration-card system, a white-collar worker was entitled to 2.5 kg of meat per month, a labourer to 3.5 kg and a miner to as much as 10.5 kg.

In September 1981, in the face of Poland's total economic collapse and two months before the imposition of Martial Law, the Polish government passed Resolution no. 199 on measures to ensure increased coal mining. On the one hand, the daily working time underground was re-

duced to 7.5 hours and a 37.5-hour working week was introduced. However, in order to encourage miners to make even greater efforts, 'voluntary' work on free Saturdays was introduced, which was paid double time and the amount thus earned was tax-free. For this purpose, special miner's books were introduced (called "G"-booklets – from the word "Górnik" (Miner)), on which the wages for working on Saturdays were deposited. The money in the "G" booklet could be used to buy foreign currency (mainly dollars and West German Marks) at an extremely low exchange rate. However, the greatest benefit of owning such a booklet was the entitlement to purchase attractive durable goods not available to other citizens. These goods were sold in separate shops. These were clothes – especially luxury goods that were scarce in those days – tiles, fittings, vacuum cleaners, TV sets, washing machines, bicycles, scooters, etc. In the absence of these goods in the shops accessible to other groups of workers, they were then resold at black-market prices in markets and exchanges.

This is how one of the miners recalls the situation: "In 1981 they introduced mining shops, we called them "giewexes".² We had G-booklets, where you accumulated amounts for hours worked at weekends and only with such a booklet could you go shopping. What was to be found there? Washing machines, fridges, tiles, curtains. No attraction for men, what do men need curtains for? But you can imagine such a situation in a block of flats: two ladies are standing there, one has new curtains and a washing machine, and the other doesn't have one. Why not? Because her boyfriend doesn't want to go to the mine on Saturday. So, she comes home and says: "Go, because I want new curtains too." So, I say it was a subtle form of pressure on the miner via his wife. Weekend rates were a hundred per cent higher than during the week, but they went entirely to the G-booklets." (Boćkowska 2017: 2)

Unfortunately, by the end of the 1980s these special shops were also running out of goods and demand far exceeded supply. Therefore, the miners' purchases for the G-booklets were finally decided by the mine's social committee. Towards the end of the 1980s, the institution of auctioning began to function, i.e., cars were purchased by those miners who had the largest sums of money accumulated on their G-booklets. The last auction for cars in one of the mines was held on 25 May 1989. Nearly 150 miners took part, but the chances were one in five, as there were

² The name referred to the name of the 'Pewex' shops, where you could buy goods by paying with foreign currency, especially dollars. These goods were not available in shops accessible to the general public.

only 30 cars. The system of additional earnings for working on free Saturdays with a G-booklet and the associated special privileges divided the miners from society, and internally among the crews themselves, as the special privileges only applied to those working underground (Gacek 2013).

The authorities constantly encouraged miners to take up work in the mines. Two weeks after martial law was imposed, Prime Minister Wojciech Jaruzelski signed a regulation on special privileges for miners. Thanks to this regulation, miners were entitled to a bonus on the occasion of the miners' holiday called "Barbórka" (Saint Barbara's Day), an annual bonus, jubilee bonuses for length of service, premiums, and allowances under the regulations, subsidies for holiday trips, payment for the purchase of school supplies for children and the so-called "coal allowance", i.e. a benefit in kind amounting to 6–8 tonnes of coal per year, or the cash equivalent of this allowance. Married miners working underground could receive a loan of 100,000 PLN, which was written off after 5 years (Przybyła 2018: 55).

Conclusion

Coal as an energy resource has many disadvantages, but for decades, mining was the hallmark of the Polish economy. Coal ensured Poland's energy security and also, thanks to the low price of energy produced from coal, the competitiveness of the Polish economy. Approx. 88% of energy produced in the country still comes from hard coal and lignite power plants. The communist authorities sought the favour of miners until the very end of their rule. One could say that the authorities saw them as the sheikhs of the People's Republic of Poland. And it wasn't because they were rich, but because they provided "black gold" – the country's main export commodity, and thus "brought" dollars to the country. The cities of Upper Silesia were the fastest-growing regions. Shops around the mines were the best stocked in the entire country. Therefore, pressure on the miners was systematically increased.

As a result of the economic reforms conducted at the turn of 1990, industrial production collapsed, and enterprises were liquidated en masse. Coal and miners also became far too numerous. However, little was done to change the outdated structure of the Polish energy sector. Instead, successive governments have decided to trim the size of the mining industry to meet new needs. In 1998 a reform of the hard coal mining industry was implemented. Its authors set themselves the goal of

reducing employment by 118,000 people by 2002. However, for fear of miners' protests, no collective redundancies were enacted, but incentives were created for voluntary redundancies from the mining industry. The programme to slim down the industry was financed with a World Bank loan. The miners could take advantage of five years of paid leave counted towards retirement and continue to benefit from the "Miner's Charter." They were offered one-off severance payments – an average of 44,000 PLN each. Miners leaving their jobs had to sign a pledge that they would never again apply for a job at the mine. It soon became apparent that a third of the miners who left the mine were unemployed and fewer than one in ten had an income higher than when they worked in the mine. In many cases the severance payments became the cause of much human drama. Most miners ate it up, buying cars, furniture, or household appliances. Soon those made redundant found that their lives had changed completely. In the past, they had followed the rhythm of the mine. The liquidation of the mines, which were an urban factor, was accompanied by the degradation of public space, local communities, and interpersonal ties. One job in mining generates two to four jobs in the surrounding area. Shops, restaurants, and service points went out of business after the local mine was closed. Mine cinemas, community centres and sports clubs disappeared. Wage increases were gradually restricted, and miners' social rights were abolished. Coal allowances were also withdrawn. However, when in 2005 the government wanted to eliminate miners' right to retire after 25 years of work, several thousand miners descended on Warsaw armed with firecrackers, pickaxes, sticks, bolts, and stones. On 26 July, there was a running battle with the police in front of the parliament, who responded with batons, tear gas and water cannons. The following day, parliament passed a bill preserving miners' pension privileges (Pilawski 2013).

Gradually, mines were closed or merged, reducing output and employment, which fell to just 50,000 workers in 2020. While in the 1970s as much as 200 million tonnes of coal were mined, in the middle of the second decade of the 21st century the output was less than 80 million tonnes. The calendar that was prepared assumes the liquidation of all Polish hard coal mines by 2049. Dismissed miners are to receive large cash severance payments. The mines being closed are being replaced by other industrial plants or cultural and entertainment institutions. For example, the Katowice coal mine ceased operations in 1999. During its 176 years of operation, it produced over 120 million tonnes of coal. In 2001, the process of revitalising the post-mining area began. Eighty-six surface facilities have been decommissioned, leaving a dozen or so of the high-

est historical and monumental value. Together with the whole area of the mine, these objects constitute Katowice's "Culture Zone", where the International Congress Centre, the Silesian Museum and the home of the Polish National Radio Symphony Orchestra have been built (Pawulon 2009; Pawełczyk et al. 2015: 1-93; Chybiorz 2021).

The situation in Polish coal mining changed in 2022 after Russia invaded Ukraine. The embargo imposed on the export of Russian coal caused a serious shortage in Poland. In the face of such a development, the closure of Polish mines was suspended. It is likely that the process will be resumed once sufficient energy can be produced from renewable sources.

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