



**Dariusz Zalega**

## Silesia exports coal and brains

Under the current Polish government, the traditional coalmining industry in Silesia is being phased out, adding to the mass unemployment caused by commercial transformation in the area. Almost half of all students to graduate from higher education in Katowice and the surrounding area seek work abroad, often on the building sites of the UK and Ireland. If Silesia is to harness its potential, investment in industrial modernisation is necessary.

Landslides had forced the train to slow down, as usual; suddenly a group of people shot out from behind buildings and scrambled aboard the train's coal trucks, where they managed to grab eight tonnes of the precious freight. The train moved on, only to be raided again the same way a few hundred metres down the track. The transport police went into action, batons against thrown stones; the shooting started, first into the air, then directed at the raiders, wounding one. This wasn't a scene from a thriller. It really happened in April near the centre of Katowice, which is the capital of Polish Silesia. Such open confrontations are common.

Coal made upper Silesia wealthy and is still a significant economic force, which is why thieves target the freight trains. In 2005 the Polish state made \$400m from coal. Despite a continuing deficit, the sector has benefited from the economic upturn and, especially, from Chinese demand. This slight improvement cannot last.

Boguslaw Zietek, leader of the Sierpien 80 trade union, explained: "The way in which the new PiS government has set about reforming the coal industry is reminiscent of previous rightwing governments. Once again there is talk of selling off the mines."

The new deputy economic minister, Pawel Poncyliusz, has indeed announced: "We have to reduce the amount of coal mined, and I can't promise that we won't have to sell off some mines"<sup>1</sup>

The right's earlier restructuring of the industry has left sad memories: there were 100 000 redundancies between 1998 and 2002. Now, because of the Chinese boom, the mines are short-handed but are legally forbidden to take on new workers.

The miners, through their *Solidarnosc* union, helped the right to victory in the legislative and presidential elections of September and October 2005. So they were stunned when, during last December's celebration of the feast of Barbórka,<sup>2</sup> Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz, the prime minister at the time, announced the possible privatisation of the industry. Little actually happened,

but Poncyliusz subsequently repeated the undertaking, proof that nobody in the government has a clear vision of the future of the mines.

This was confirmed this spring when the miners' demand for a share of profits was supported by Marcinkiewicz but attacked by Poncyliusz. The unions responded by calling for a demonstration in Warsaw on 14 June, but cancelled it at the last moment when the government announced that it would accept their demands.

"What's the point of provoking the miners?" asked Zietek. "The authorities have made a crude attempt to set the country against the miners, whom it depicts as too greedy. Few people are aware that miners' wages have been frozen for six years. Even so, this manoeuvre hasn't achieved anything: 53 per cent of Poles regard strikes as a good way to settle disputes".<sup>3</sup>

Everyone is aware that the miners quickly lost the advantages they had fought for before 1989 as compensation for their exceptionally harsh working conditions. Since the beginning of the economic and social transition, their monthly salaries have fallen compared with others. "Right now," said a miner who has worked for more than 15 years at Bobrek mine in Bytom, "I make just over \$500 a month, the national average for underground work. But what matters is that I've got work and the mine is still operating." Others earn much less as the companies get round the law through sub-contractors, whose employees do the same work as the miners for half the pay.

Silesia's mines employ 123 000, compared with 404 000 in 1989: proof that it is regarded as a marginal part of "free Poland", polluted by outdated heavy industry. Miners' demands conflict with neoliberal dogma in a province that failed to integrate itself with the reality that the new regime claimed to create.

According to a report, "Principles of the development strategy for the province of Silesia",<sup>4</sup> prepared for the local assembly: "The region's traditional economic sectors are the source of its many ecological, economic and social problems and are causing it to lag behind in development." The conclusion seemed foregone: close down traditional sectors. In exchange for what? The report proposed the creation of a Polish Silicon Valley, leading to "the development of technologically advanced enterprises, as well as the expansion of the intellectual services sector" and "of small and medium-sized enterprises".

Since 2004 the previously indebted mining sector has made profits of more than \$657m. Mittal Steel, the world's biggest steelmaker, has made a profit of more than \$328m in factories that it recently bought. As Jacek Srokowski of the weekly Trybuna Górnicza (Mining Tribune) explained: "Previously governments of all political persuasions wanted to destroy local heavy industry. New clean technologies have brought coal back into favour, but the Polish government continues to undervalue it and is trying to force nuclear energy or gas on us."

The former social democratic senator, Jerzy Markowski, has longstanding links with Silesia and points to its role in the European Union: "Europe must now secure energy supplies in politically unstable regions. EU demand for electricity will increase by at least 56% over the next 20 years. Europe needs our coal and we can make ourselves the leading supplier. But that won't happen unless we invest in the modernisation of Poland's mines and energy resources".<sup>5</sup>

## Profits before people

There is more to Silesia than mining and smelting. There is a car industry: Fiat has been there for more than 30 years, with factories at Bielsko–Biala and Tychy, and in the past few years Isuzu and Opel have started manufacturing at Gliwice.

However, the most obvious symbol of commercial transformation is the presence of supermarkets. "The concentration of these stores in our region is an event of national significance and has forced a huge number of shops out of business," complained Zbigniew Graczko, who owns a small grocery in Ruda Slaska. Municipal authorities took a gamble and lowered local taxes to attract major retailing chains, in the hope that they would create new jobs in the service sector rather than in dirty industry. It was an illusion. Each supermarket destroyed hundreds of the jobs of small traders, flouted labour laws<sup>6</sup> and barely paid workers the minimum wage.

New malls also significantly changed the traditional religious devotion of the Silesians. Catholicism is still the last refuge in times of trouble, but attendance at mass now has to compete with the lure of shopping. In the 240–store Silesia city centre in Katowice, the largest shopping area in this part of Europe, the church has responded by opening a chapel where mass is celebrated every Sunday, before and after shopping.

For decades pigeon breeding has been an integral part of Silesian working class tradition, an escape from the daily life in the familoks,<sup>7</sup> a chance to forget the monotony of the towns and the backbreaking work. During an international pigeon–fanciers' convention in January this year, a build–up of snow on the roof of a hall owned by Katowice International Fair caused the building to collapse, killing 65 people and injuring dozens.

Jan Czarski, a Katowice journalist, said: "This disaster is a symbol of the real face of Polish capitalism as we recognise it in Silesia: the quest for the maximum profit as quickly as possible, with no account for people."

Katowice International Fair is a company set up by the state but taken over after 1989 by local businessmen with links to the authorities. After the disaster, the directors admitted that they had stopped clearing snow from the roof because, they claimed, money was tight although in 2005 they had made a profit of almost \$1m. Compulsory annual technical inspections had not taken place, and nobody even knows who built the hall: successive contractors have denied responsibility and many have disappeared.

Czarski thought this was "a classic case of the appropriation of state money by the local bourgeoisie, helped not by the invisible hand of the market but by their relationship with the authorities. It is a clear example of the dilution of responsibility, the lack of control, the taint of corruption and the disrespect of safety procedures. If the accident had not happened, would anyone have cared what was going on inside Katowice International Fair? All the snow did was to fall, same as it did every year."

## Should I stay or should I go?

Not far away from the Fair building, the Rebel Bar in Chorzow is often packed with young people. One, just back from western Europe, bought a round; beer and whisky flowed freely. "Half the people I was at university with work

abroad, mainly in London," said Peotr Wolski, who graduated in political science from the Silesian University in 2000. One of the victims of the July 2005 London Underground bombing was from Chorzow; he was working in England to pay for his studies.

However, the most popular destination among the young is Ireland. One said: "I work on high tension electricity lines and manage to put enough money aside to lead a normal life. In my line of work, that would be impossible on Polish wages." He comes home from Dublin several times a year to see his partner and child in Chorzow.

This massive emigration was made possible by a revolution in education. In the 1960s only 9 per cent of miners wanted their children to study; now that figure is more than 50 per cent. Today there are 27 third-level institutions in the region, with more than 150 000 students. It is a pity that this enormous potential is squandered on the building sites of London and Dublin.

Districts of Silesian towns are turning into no-go areas where poverty destroys all hope. In Zabrze, Ruda Slaska and Bytom, many people make a living by raiding coal trains while their children collect scrap metal from closed, crumbling factories. At the other end of the scale, there are Silesians who have done well. The centres of Katowice and Gliwice are turning into modern cities, with luxury shops, state-of-the-art advertising and areas protected by barriers and private security.

Professor Jacek Wodz of the University of Silesia pointed out a few years ago: "This is a sign of rapidly developing social segregation. The system does not compel the rich to take any account of society as a whole. Their only concern is to make a profit. That's one of the weaknesses of this system".<sup>8</sup>

Silesia has enormous potential. Industrial modernisation would allow the service sector to develop. It is a crossroads for communications in all directions. Robert Binias, a lawyer who plays in the hip-hop band Hasiok, founded the organisation Open Silesia with his friends.

He said: "The success of this region will also be decided by its population. We want to prove that it would be a mistake to leave a place that is so open to other cultures and that deserves to be promoted across the world." The words to a Hasiok song go: "No one wants to live in my familok / I no longer hope for anything in my black familok / But I'm not leaving."

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<sup>1</sup> "Things must be put right", *Nowy Przemys*, Katowice, June 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Every 1 December miners commemorate their patron Saint Barbara, known as Barborka.

<sup>3</sup> Pentor poll, 7 June 2006, [www.pentor.pl/43802.xml](http://www.pentor.pl/43802.xml)

<sup>4</sup> "Zalozenia strategii rozwoju województwa Slaskiego", eds. Andrzej Klasik and Bogumi Szczupak, Katowice, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> "Silesia is changing", *Nowy Robotnik*, Katowice, June 2005.

<sup>6</sup> "Report by the inspector of labour", Warsaw, <http://www.bip.pip.gov.pl/pl/bip>

<sup>7</sup> Poor quality rented accommodation built to house workers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

<sup>8</sup> "Without civic solidarity", *Robotnik Slaski*, Katowice, April 2000.

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