

# END OF THE (MINERS') WORLD?

The social consequences of coal mine closures  
in Silesia.



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The fast-approaching end of the era of fossil-based energy poses a particularly huge challenge in Poland's Silesian Voivodeship, given the prevalence of coal mining there. There are numerous significant sociopolitical problems which need to be solved to ensure a successful and socially just transition.

## Issues in the coal mining sector

Coal remains the main fuel used to generate power and heat in Poland, with the coal mining sector providing employment to over 83,000 miners across the country. Most of them work at pits in the Silesian Voivodeship, where coal mining is the dominant industry.

There are a number of closely intertwined problems faced by the coal mining sector in Silesia. First of all, in geological terms, most of the shallow deposits have simply been depleted long ago. The grandfathers of today's miners were extracting coal from around 200 meters below ground, their fathers had to descend to around 600 meters, whereas today deposits in many mines can only be found at depths of 1000 meters and below. The high temperatures at greater depths mean a higher danger of methane explosions. Deep mining also means greater distances between coalface and shaft, which translates into increasingly difficult extraction conditions and increased costs.



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A second problem is the dwindling profitability of coal extraction in Silesia. The most profitable deposits – those near the surface, the largest and easiest to exploit – have long been depleted, which is in turn reflected in efficiency. If the volume of extracted coal decreases faster than the number of miners, that naturally entails lower efficiency. In 2018, Polish miners extracted an average of 0.4 metric tons of coal per hour, compared to 3.5 tons for their American counterparts, meaning that Polish mining simply cannot compete in terms of efficiency. Poland also cannot compete in terms of labor costs, which are significantly lower in developing countries such as Mozambique. As coal prices fall around the globe, mining in Poland is quite simply becoming an unprofitable enterprise. The scheme by which the entire energy and coal industry functions is at the heart of the problem; since Polish thermal coal cannot compete on the interna-

tional market (apart from coking coal), it is mainly used by coal and thermal power plants domestically.

Tensions between the sectors could easily serve as inspiration for another article – in any case, the roots of the problem are political. This is in fact a third main issue concerning coal mining in Poland: the political significance of the industry. The miners and other personnel employed by mining companies, plus their families, comprise a very numerous group; they form the core of the local electorate in what is historically a “swing” province. Making political decisions concerning the mining industry can lead politicians to see a major loss of support in Silesia, as was the case for former Prime Minister Jerzy Buzek and his Solidarity Electoral Action (AWS) coalition back in the 1990s, following the introduction of reforms to the sector prepared by Deputy Prime Minister Janusz Steinhoff. It is hardly a surprise that successive

Facade of a traditional residential building for Silesian worker families (*familok*), Bytom



governments have largely ignored the sector unless forced to by necessity.

### Thirty years later

All these elements are of course closely intertwined, and together lead to a fourth problem, rooted in social issues. Poland's coal mining industry has been shrinking gradually since 1990. In 1989, at the end of the communist era, the sector employed over 407,000 people, and the number has been declining with every new reform. By the time the first stage of reform initiated in 1993 was completed, the number fell by over 100,000. The most heavily affected region was the Lower Silesian Coal Basin, where the entire mining industry was wiped out over the period of a decade. Redundancy payouts did not last long, and former miners and the entire region were soon left with no future prospects. The main city in the region, Wałbrzych, became a nationwide symbol of poverty, epitomized by the return of small-scale, "artisanal" mining. Paradoxically, this was in a response to the neoliberal economic discourse dominant in the 1990s, advocating individualism. Local miners simply took matters into their own hands and set about doing what they did best: extracting coal from shallow deposits. Although illegal and highly dangerous, for many former miners it was the only way of surviving the period of transformation.

The closure of the last coal mine in Wałbrzych in 1998 coincided with the launch of the next wave of reform in 1998–2002, popularly known as the Karbownik-Steinhoff Plan. As well as providing redundancy

payouts, it also included additional early retirement options and social benefits. Around 102,600 employees took the option to leave the sector. The plans for closing local mines were new and challenging for the miners themselves, as well as for those in charge of implementing the project. A popular opinion arose that miners tended to spend their redundancy payouts rashly on such things as home improvements or new cars. However, that opinion proves to be largely untrue (although the latter purchases might have been the most evident to nosy neighbors), as according to research by Prof. Marek Szczepański and Dr. Małgorzata Tyrybon from the Institute of Sociology at the University of Silesia in Katowice, most former miners actually spent their redundancy money to pay off debt or to accumulate savings. The paid-leave mechanism, which in reality was equivalent to a generous early pension, meant that the sector lost over 35,000 employees who would have had to work for another twenty or so years in other industries before qualifying for a pension.

As Wałbrzych became the landmark/symbol of the social costs borne by the mining community in the Lower Silesia Basin, Bytom became a notorious symbol of economic restructuring in Upper Silesia. The stories of both towns and their most affected districts are invoked every time rumors of mine closures appear. Local communities fear that they will face a similar fate.

### Closing a mine means destroying a local community

For miners, pit closures really do mean the end of the world, bringing everything they have ever known and done to an end. This is because the mining world extends far beyond the pits themselves, including whole local communities. Mining communities have been studied extensively by sociologists in many countries, especially in the UK, and decades of observations have been used to create models of such communities.

Mining communities are socially and spatially isolated; even within large cities mining districts tend to remain distinct social enclaves focused around the mine. The pits provide employment as well as infrastructure such as accommodation, schools, playing fields and even festivals and cultural events. Working down a mine carries a high degree of risk and relies on comradeship and mutual support, giving the profession a distinctive ethos. Since the pits provide extensive infrastructure, the communities show a tendency for passive conservatism and self-containment. Additionally, the culture permeates people's free time, family and neighborly relationships, and the division of labor falls along traditional lines, with men working down pits and women caring for the home and the

Kaufhaus  
– a newly renovated,  
former ironworks  
settlement building  
in Ruda Śląska, 2020



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The town of Wałbrzych, significantly impacted by mine closures

family. This intertwining of professional and social lives makes the mine an omnipresent element of the community's life: it is the subject of conversation at and after work; work colleagues are also neighbors, friends, and relatives.

The British studies concluded that mine closures bring about the destruction of mining communities. The mining microcosm disintegrates; following job losses, the entire infrastructure begins to fall apart. There is no more demand for mining schools, miners lose their jobs and the prestige they once carried. The daily rhythm marked by the stamping boots of miners returning back from the early shift and heading out for the late one is lost. Those able to find other jobs generally need to travel outside the community and eventually leave altogether. Those who are unable to do so end up as “forgotten people” in “forgotten places” (to paraphrase the title of a Polish publication dedicated to mining communities).

## Upper Silesia without coal?

Western Europe's experience with coal mine closures predates that of Poland. We could, and sometimes did, learn from the mistakes made and solutions applied as the industry was being restructured in other countries, and can likewise now learn from them in

terms of closing down the industry as a whole. The University of Sheffield carries out periodic research into former coalfields in the UK. The problems involved in shutting down the entire sector eventually boil down to two questions: what will former miners do now, and what will their children do later? The second question turns out to be more pertinent, since the British miners frequently relied on early retirement, support in finding employment and social benefits. Mine closures created vast, permanent gaps in the local economy, and the only realistic opportunities for the children of former miners were minimum-wage jobs driving fork-lifts at warehouses or working in call centers (both industries that soon moved into post-mining regions). The high number of former mining regions in the UK allows researchers to make meaningful comparisons among them, looking for factors conducive to success or failure. The conclusion seems to be that remote regions situated far from major transport hubs, where mining was at the heart of the local economy and employed the majority of the local population, face far greater difficulties following mine closures. Such regions are sometimes referred to as “European rust belts.” And it is true that many post-mining regions in Europe have above average levels of unemployment and difficulties in attracting investment; young people leave to seek jobs else-



The Queen Louise Adit passageway – an element of the Coal Mining Museum in Zabrze, 2017

where, and social unrest tends to be higher than in other regions.

Does this mean that Poland's Upper Silesia soon faces a similar fate? Not necessarily. The situation is very different to when the Karbownik-Steinhoff plan was being implemented twenty years ago. There are just twenty mines left out of the original seventy, and unemployment in the region is lower than the national average (4.8% and 6.1% respectively; data as of 30 November 2020). In 2019, coal mining accounted for just 8% of industrial output, down from 20% in 2002. The region has avoided deindustrialization with numerous investments from a range of sectors, and many companies even have to supplement their workforce with staff from Ukraine.

Mining communities are slowly evolving, and today's miners frequently live in a different city than where their mine is located. It is also difficult, in the Internet era, to talk about the social or spatial isolation of mining towns. Today's young miners are no different from their peers, apart from the fact that their smartphones have no signal deep underground. Their wives and partners are far more likely to have jobs of their own, and the former closely-knit nature of the communities is dissipating. Rather than hitting the pub after work with their colleagues, miners now go home to their families. Mining is turning into something of a regular job rather than a whole way of life unto itself. According to studies by the Institute of Structural Research, educational attainment among miners has also changed dramatically: most have completed secondary education, and many have university degrees. Miners operate equipment worth

millions of zlotys and their extensive skills and knowledge are transferrable into sectors such as the machine industry, mechatronics, electronics, renewable energy, transport and construction.

The Silesian city of Katowice has undergone a successful transformation into a city focused on business services. New venues such as the International Conference Centre, National Polish Radio Symphony Orchestra and the Silesian Museum reflect the changes the region is undergoing. Upholding the heritage of the former Kleofas coal mine is a perfect example of preserving the past for future generations. The vision of Silesia as a monolith entirely dependent on coal is disappearing, and public awareness of the health and environmental problems caused by mining is increasing. Communities of many local towns, such as Imielin, Rybnik, Mysłowice and Bytom, have even participated in protests against building or expanding mines and continuing extraction.

## “Restructuring” vs. “just transformation”

Restructuring experiments in the region now stretch back some thirty years, and they and the term “restructuring” itself are not thought of fondly. There is a temptation to replace it with the catchier and more attractive concept of Just Transition, but it should be remembered that the processes are not equivalent and Just Transition not a euphemism for restructuring and liquidation. According to the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD), Just Transition is a vision and process based on dialogue and plans drafted by employees, the industry, the local community and the authorities which need to be negotiated and implemented in geographical, political, cultural and social contexts. It certainly cannot be boiled down to a tripartite commission making major decisions on restructuring (like in Poland back in the 1990s). When we talk about a “just” transition, we must consider who the target of this justice is, so to avoid making errors in the restructuring process. Former miners should not be favored and supported above other underprivileged groups, since this would simply redistribute unemployment. Focusing exclusively on mine workers ignores workers employed in other sectors in the region.

The prospects for coal mining in Silesia are not great, but the problems are not caused by the EU's decarbonization policies. Quite the opposite: EU programs offer specific funds to finance processes which would need to be completed sooner or later anyway. Should Silesian communities be invited to participate in this transition, solutions will be found. In contrast to coal, the region's resources of ingenuity and creativity are far from being depleted. ■