

Are Poland's football ultras really supporting the Women's Strike?

Michael Cole
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Did Poland's notorious far-right football fans find solidarity with a popular protest stemming from the liberal left? Not quite.



'Women's Hell' is one of the most prominent slogans of 'Strajk Kobiet'
Michael Cole, Krakow May 2020

The picturesque squares of Poland, practically empty just a few months ago due to the growing threat of COVID-19, were set ablaze in impassioned protest. The colours on the street were red white and black, with a scattering of lightning bolts thrown in for good measure. Days earlier the constitutional court, under the watchful gaze of Jarosław Kaczyński, chairman of ruling party Law and Justice (PiS) and Poland's de facto leader, had moved to tighten anti-abortion laws in a country already compromised with some of the harshest restrictions in the European Union.

Strajk Kobiet (Women's Strike), the women's rights movement spearheading the resistance has been gaining momentum ever since. Support has come not only from those who have long been disenchanted with Poland's gradual slide into autocracy, but also amongst more traditionally conservative circles, with farmers, coal miners and taxi drivers all joining in on the side of the protestors.

Ever defiant under fire, Kaczyński's response was a call to arms, as he urged patriotic Poles to fight back against the 'nihilistic' protests and defend the country's Catholic churches at all costs. In the days that followed, clashes erupted between Strajk Kobiet participants and nationalist groups, who were apparently heeding Kaczyński's call.

In Wrocław, football ultras connected to local club Śląsk - who also happen to be members of far-right organisations - assaulted female protestors, as well as journalists reporting on the strike. Things got

violent in Poznań too, when a similarly volatile concoction of nationalists and football fans attacked the crowds while chanting “Hands Off Our Church,” which seemed like a catchy twist on the pro-choice slogan “Hands Off My Uterus”. And there’s more than a hint of irony in seeing outraged Lech Poznań fans furiously scrubbing Strajk Kobiet graffiti from their city’s monuments, considering how fond Polish ultras are of defacing important buildings to mark their territory. But then, the plot began to thicken.

Men in black

On the evening of 27 October, a gang of masked men all dressed in black, gathered outside the entrance of Białystok’s Cathedral. They were supporters of Jagiellonia, the city’s top-flight football club, better known for the connections between its fan base and the Polish far right than for any success on the pitch. But despite their intimidating appearance and worrisome reputation, the Jagiellonia Białystok ultras were not there to escalate the violence. Instead, they carefully unveiled a homemade banner and posed behind it for a photo. The words it displayed met with a mixture of shock and surprise on social media. Its caption read: “Women, we are with you!”

Fans of other clubs followed suit, displaying similar slogans of support for Polish women in towns and cities across the country. “Women should decide for themselves about their bodies!” said one sign held up at the gates of their local church by ultras from fellow top-flight side ŁKS Łódź. Supporters of Elena Torun, a club in the Polish third division were equally committed to the cause, vowing in their own custom-made display to, “...protect real women!”

Meanwhile, back in Wrocław the ‘Greater Śląsk Fans Association’ took to Facebook to condemn those earlier attacks on protestors and journalists. ‘No real fan of Śląsk Wrocław beats women’ they stated unequivocally in a popular post, which went on to explain that despite their differences, the true enemy of both Polish football supporters and the country’s women is Jarosław Kaczyński and his ruling party, PiS.

Solidarity at last?

So, does this mean that even Poland’s notoriously nationalistic and far-right leaning hard-core football supporters have found solidarity with a popular protest stemming from the liberal left? Well, not quite.

While Polish ultras might claim to be in perfect harmony with the country’s women, when it comes to Strajk Kobiet, the reality is, they’re still singing from a different hymn sheet. Because, like other football supporters ‘defending churches’ across Poland, those fans in Białystok made sure their banner included an important caveat: ‘Fight with PiS’, they warned, ‘not our traditions’.

But what’s the difference? After all, separating the ideological position PiS promotes, from the values of the country’s Catholic Church, where most of these traditions originate, is no easy task. Yet Polish football fans seem confident about making the distinction.

To get a better idea of where Polish ultras really stand, I spoke to Professor Rafał Pankowski of the Warsaw-based ‘NEVER AGAIN’ Association. Pankowski, who is an expert on Polish football, and active campaigner against discrimination in the sport, suggested that hopes for genuine collective allegiance towards the Women’s Strike from ultras groups were mostly wishful thinking. Those fans showing support for women’s rights are being careful to remind people that they still hate Antifa, and ‘the left’. In fact a closer look at supporter group statements about Strajk Kobiet shows that other than the ‘Women we’re with you’ part, most of what Poland’s ultras are saying is consistent with an even more extreme form of right wing nationalism than the one promoted by PiS.

In the northeastern city of Olsztyn, one football ultra expressed concern that Polish women were "...being used by leftist organisations to attack churches, monuments and cultural heritage sites". Hence the refusal to openly endorse Strajk Kobiet. A member of Wisła Krakow's supporter group 'Armia Białej Gwiazdy' backed him up in an online forum, stating that guarding churches "...is not about whether someone is a believer or not. It is about defending our traditions against Bolshevism."

Always right

These ultras' views align neatly with the words of Robert Bąkiewicz, a former member of far-right group ONR, who claims to have formed a 'national guard' to combat the Women's Strike. Bąkiewicz is even more adamant than Kaczynski that Poland's churches be protected, calling for Strajk Kobiet protesters to be "turned to dust" for their incitement of a "Leftist Bolshevik Revolution," and assault on "Catholic civilisation". He's also one of the main organisers of Warsaw's Independence Day March, which takes place annually on 11 November to commemorate Poland's re-emergence as a nation following the First World War.

The march has become an ugly explosion of nationalism under the guise of patriotism and frequently results in violence, with the 2020 edition considered particularly brutal. Independence Day is also one of the key fixtures in the Polish football calendar, as ultras and hooligans attached to the country's biggest clubs join forces with Bąkiewicz and others holding radical right wing views on a rampage through the streets of the capital.

The synergies between football ultras and the far right may not always be so obvious as they appear on Independence Day, but they're often there if you know where to look. Another glance at that Białystok banner for instance, reveals an anarchist sign being hung from the gallows – a far-right symbol used in Poland since the early 1990s.

It's certainly possible that despite fan group beliefs Strajk Kobiet is being hijacked by the 'radical left', individual supporters may genuinely want to support the rights of their wives, mothers, girlfriends and daughters. However, a 2018 study of Polish football supporters attitudes toward women concluded that for the most part, female fans were usually marginalised, patronised or instrumentalised by their male peers. Although male fans were generally open to women joining them on the terraces, they still largely expect them to conform to traditional subservient gender roles when they do so. And with this in mind, it seems that that banner in Białystok really ought to be taken with a heavy dose of salt.

Because even though Poland's ultras are keen to assert that they have women's best interests at heart, it's unlikely they've changed their tune overnight. It may instead be more prudent to ask if their apparent tactical switch isn't simply a case of transferring their attitudes towards women in the football arena to the political one, at a time when opportunistic instrumentalisation could benefit them far more than violent resistance.

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<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/countering-radical-right/playing-both-sides-are-polands-football-ultras-really-supporting-the-womens-strike>