

Konin, 20 April 2021

**Dear Mr. Timmermans,
Vice-President of the European Commission**

Dear Mr President,
Mijnheer de Voorzitter,

In reference to our meeting at the *Polityka Insight* conference in February this year, during which we had the opportunity to participate in the panel on the just transition, I am writing to you with an appeal to support the community of workers in the brown coal mining and electricity sector in the Eastern Greater Poland area. Our region (the Konin-Turek Basin) is at the forefront of the process of just transition not only in Poland, but also throughout Europe, but the pride in this respect has not yet translated into the real support that we urgently need.

During the aforementioned discussion panel, inter alia, you talked about energy poverty and the geopolitical consequences of decarbonisation, the chances of slowing climate change, as well as the benefits of implementing the European Green Deal and international cooperation. As you claim, Europe, by indicating which strategy to follow, has set itself up as a leader in climate transformation, and is not alone in this role. You highlighted the historical development and specificity of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, as well as the possibility of the emergence of new specializations, also in Poland.

Regrettably, as employees of the ZE PAK lignite plant facilities in Konin, we have been left without support, and the fact that Eastern Greater Poland has been numerously mentioned in Brussels, and among EU decision-makers, has not made us feel more confident about the future of our children and grandchildren.

In a region that is still agro-industrial, strong economic laws are unfortunately vital – we will not feed our families by being quoted in the Financial Times or POLITICO. Ambitious declarations to abandon coal by 2030 and achieve climate neutrality in 2040 – a decade before the EU target – do not directly generate jobs, but even distract attention from the challenges that we face.

During the presentation, you said: “I have spoken to trade unions recently and I can say that there is no future for coal, but the question remains as to how to move away from it. It has to be a just transition or there will be no transition at all”. Your referring to the talks with trade unionists is in line with the model of broad consultations and the implementation of the partnership principle applied by the European Commission. Almost after two years from the appearance at the meeting of Platform on Coal Regions in Transition, and dozens of meetings as part of public consultations, we do not feel a progress. We are even concerned that from the Brussels level we still do not see any subtle nor significant differences between all six provinces where hard coal and lignite mining is carried out. Other countries forced by the EU to become independent from coal have one, or only a few sub-regions, however Poland has over a dozen of them, and we feel that still only Silesia and Bełchatów are visible in the eyes of the Commission.

I also regret that Mr. President did not meet with our authorities and trade unions, although such a meeting was planned for September last year. Therefore, on behalf of all Trade Unions of KWB Konin, KWB Adamów lignite mines and Zespół Elektrowni Pątnów-Adamów-Konin power plants, we have decided to present the situation in our region. The Trade Unions operating at the Mine and Power Plant understand the need to take action to combat climate change and improve the level of environmental protection – but we have serious concerns that this transformation will take place primarily at the expense of people.

The specificity of our business activity requires a separate approach to our industry. Poland, next to the Czech Republic, is the last EU country with hard coal mining, but one of a dozen or so with a still active lignite mining sector – Poland is part of the so-called lignite triangle, which is also composed of the Czech Republic and Germany. Why are we different? Firstly, mines and power plants are located in poorly urbanized and interconnected areas, with limited alternative sectors in which one can find employment after the transition. Our region has a mainly agricultural and industrial profile and we must rely on attracting a few large investors from outside, and not on developing the existing business base. Secondly, lignite is up to half more emissive than hard coal, thus the increase in the CO2 tax has affected us more rapidly and in an unexpected way.

In addition to hard coal, there are three more lignite basins in Poland, and it is us – Eastern Greater Poland – who are the ones with a clearly set date of departure from coal; we abandoned the idea of exploiting new deposits (Ościsłowo and Dęby Szlacheckie). The owner of the ZE PAK power plant complex is a private investor, and we cannot count on the generous support from the government treasury, which our counterparts from Silesia, Belchatów and Turów can expect. That is why, the planned dates of departure from coal in those regions reach 2044 (Turów), or even 2049 (Upper Silesia).

Our employer, in autumn of last year, made it clear that most of the coal activities (two open-cast pits and a half of the old power plant) will be closed by 2024, and by 2030 we will completely abandon coal¹. Moreover, another increase in the prices of CO2 emission allowances to the level of EUR 40/t indicates that we will end all activities not in 10, but in 5 years.

According to the regional authorities, Eastern Greater Poland region will also achieve climate neutrality by 2040, i.e. a decade before the EU target.² Even the government in Warsaw does not want to vouch for it, but we in Eastern Greater Poland expect that the transformation towards a zero-emission economy is an opportunity in the long term.

Nevertheless, these ambitious declarations have not translated into any concrete support, neither from national, regional nor European funds – the promised Just Transition Fund will unfortunately be another pool of EU grants, which the real victims of this ambitious transformation will not see on time or will not see at all.

All signs indicate that with the shut down of the next open-cast pit in KWB Konin - Józwin mine, at the turn of 2021 and 2022, approx. 800, of the currently working 3,800 people, will lose their jobs. Over the past decade, the ZE PAK corporation has reduced employment by more than 60% – the Adamów Power Plant was closed at the end of 2017, and the last ton of coal from KWB Adamów mine was extracted a few months ago.

The increase in the prices of CO2 emission allowances has accelerated our pace of closing our coal business. Until now, approximately 500-700 people have left their jobs annually, also as a result of natural retirement. Furthermore, the scale of these lay-offs has spread over the two pillars of the company complex; Konin-Pątnów and Turek-Adamów. Thus, we expect this process to speed up in the coming years – in our view, the pace will not be two, but four times faster than it has been up to now.

¹ <https://ri.zepak.com.pl/aktualnosci/1469-zielone-kierunki-strateaii-ze-pak-sa-zaakceptowane-koniec-z-eneraia-z-wegla-naipozniej-w-2030-roku.html>
<http://instrat.pl/wwf-wielkopolska-wschodnia/>

² <http://arrtransformacja.org.pl/publikacie/>
<https://www.euractiv.com/section/enerav/news/west-poland-subreaion-aims-to-be-first-in-the-country-to-hit-net-zero/>

In the light of the acceleration we are going to face, we reckon with the fact that in 5 years the Group will employ not 3,800, as it does currently, or not even 1,500, as the company has recently estimated, but less than 700 people. This means that **3,000 people will leave their jobs in less than 5 years, of which only a small part will retire.**

That is why we are requesting your assistance – the Just Transition Fund was supposed to help mitigate the effects of the transformation, especially the social ones. In our opinion, these funds will again be directed to investments where jobs are created for other people and not for us who need support. Already now, at the construction site of a new photovoltaic farm in the region, most of the workers are economic migrants from the East. That is why, we turn to you with a request to give us a special right to co-decide on a just transformation in Eastern Greater Poland.

We appeal:

- 1) **so that the funds from this Fund were directly allocated to employees** – in order to create and equip new jobs, train new employees, and not to severance pays and benefits; we want to be sure that the funds for the transformation will go to those employers who undertake to hire current employees of ZE PAK, and keep them employed for at least 2 years
- 2) **to (exceptionally) mobilize funds from the JTF (or other sources) already this year** – standard procedures, a schedule of programming funds and their contracting will ensure that the aid we need in a few months will be effectively granted in at least 1.5 years, and not to us at all
- 3) **for trust that social side control over the process of spending funds from the JTF at the regional and national level will make this transition fair** – we operate in strong partnership with the Management Board of the ZE PAK Group, but still the national authorities do not allow us to speak and co-decide about it, what to spend money from JTF

We inform Mr. President that we have developed a plan under the Territorial Plan of Just Transition. Our project of supporting employees and creating new jobs fits into this model – we have developed it together with the Management Board of ZE PAK, and the first employers who see an opportunity in our skills show interest in its implementation. We wish to develop it together with labour market experts and turn it into action – will you give us a guarantee that our plans will not remain only 'on paper'?

According to your statement, looking at the scale of threats, and not necessarily the "opportunities arising from the implementation of the European Green Deal, and the benefits of international cooperation", we fear for our future and a repeat of the unsuccessful history of transformations, e.g. Wałbrzych, which, just like us, will receive money for the transition but definitely too late.

We appeal to your heart of a Social Democrat and European – let us not repeat the story of hungry children and broken families, fathers standing in the queue in front of the office asking for benefits. The Polish reality of state support for the unemployed is far from those known in Western Europe. We ask you for special attention and immediate support from the Just Transition Fund – for activities and investments that fit this goal.

I am pleased with your dialogue and your many years of acquaintance with Poland and Poles – the hometown of your father, Breda, was liberated by Polish soldiers under the leadership of gen. Stanisław Maczek. But apart from commemorating Poles dying in the battle for the Western lands, we count on your solidarity and response to our appeal. We appeal to your hearts, conscience and minds for a just transition

– we are the man who, according to your words, is to stand at its centre. We are extending our hand to you, because we are drowning.

Kind regards,

On behalf of all ZE PAK CG Trade Unions

Alicja Messerszmidt

President of the Kadra PAK KWB KONIN mine Trade Union

ORGANIZACJA MIĘDZYKŁADOWA
NSZZ „Solidarność”
GÓRNICWA WĘGLA BRUNATNEGO
ZAGŁĘBIA KONINSKO-PARKOWSKIEGO
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Niezależny Związek Zawodowy
Pracowników Ruchu Ciągłego „RUCH”
KWB KONIN w Kłęczewie S.A.
Przewodniczący

Maciej Kazmierczak

Międzyzakładowy Związek Zawodowy
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„KADRA” przy PAK Kopalnia
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PRZEWODNICZĄCA

Gracyna Zabierek
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CC:

Directorate-General for Energy – Commissioner Kadri Simson

Ministry of Climate and Environment – Minister Michał Kurtyka

Ministry of Funds and Regional Policy – Deputy Minister Małgorzata Jarosińska-Jedynak

Ministry of State Assets - Deputy Minister Artur Soboń

Ministry of Finance – Minister of Finance

Ministry of Development, Labour and Technology – Minister Jarosław Gowin

Social Insurance Institution – President, Professor Gertruda Uścińska

Marshal's Office of the Greater Poland Region – Marshal Marek Woźniak

Agencja Rozwoju Regionalnego S.A. (Regional Development Agency) in Konin – President Maciej Sytek

City of Konin – Mayor Piotr Korytkowski

Konin District – Governor Stanisław Bielik

Turek District – Governor Dariusz Kałużny

Member of the Polish Parliament – Tomasz Nowak

Member of the Polish Parliament – Ryszard Bartosik

Zespół Elektrowni Pątnów Adamów Konin S.A. – Piotr Woźny, President of the Management Board, and Zygmunt Solorz, Chairman of the Supervisory Board