

Swiss Unions, strong in the 1990s and 2000s, face new challenges with creative strategies and work with immigrants and women

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Swiss unions, which have been relatively successful in defending their position during the 1990s and 2000s, are now facing new challenges from the changing economic and political situation in Europe. While other unions were in North America, Latin America, and Europe were being beaten down since the 1980s, the Swiss actually succeeded in revitalizing their union movement. A new, younger, and more radical union leadership came to the fore and led the unions in campaigns which improved life for both union members and non-unionized workers. Consequently Swiss unions have a sense of power, excitement and optimism uncommon in much of the world's labor movement today. Today, however, both the employers and the government are attempting to assert their authority and to weaken the position of organized Swiss workers bringing new challenges to Swiss workers.

A Privileged Nation

Switzerland has a unique history and special position among European nations, explains Marco Spagnoli, the chair of the Geneva region of Swiss Public Employees Union [1]. "Switzerland could because of its peculiar history always take advantage of its neutrality both in the two world wars and in the Cold War. In World War II it could make money from both sides, while always making itself economically stronger. It also took advantage of its situation in terms of migration policies. When the employers needed workers, the government opened the borders, and when the situation changed and the labor market tightened it fired the workers and sent them home."

The country's political neutrality and economic security meant that for the native born, Swiss working class the situation was relatively advantageous," says Spagnoli. "Switzerland never had a national unemployment problem. Until 1991 there was no other European country which had such

an economically advantageous situation. This meant, of course, that labor unions had certain success because of the economy." Unions and workers shared in the prosperity of the country to a considerable degree. "Switzerland has very conservative politics, because everyone was attached to our relative advantages, relative to any country in Europe or the world. That reinforced the conservative culture in Switzerland. This also led Switzerland to maintain its autonomy and not become part of European politics," says Spagnoli.

The Bourgeois Strategy: Finance

Beat Ringger, a staff member for the same union in German-speaking Basel explains that the Swiss capitalist class began to steer the country in a new direction in the latter part of the twentieth century. "Switzerland has been for a long time a highly industrialized country, and during the last few decades the Swiss bourgeoisie had two options. They could either continue to strengthen the industrial base of the country through state support or they could use state policy to attract financial capital. They decided for the latter."

"The Swiss bourgeoisie has a clear idea of its strategy," says Ringger, "It wants to position Switzerland as the low tax country as a country with bank secrecy. Both Swiss workers and workers in other countries pay for this, the Swiss workers because the financial economy doesn't provide good jobs and workers in other countries because their governments can't tax the corporate money in the secret Swiss banks."

A New More Radical, More Militant Union Movement

While in other parts of the world unions were taking a beating, in Switzerland the unions grew stronger in the period of the 1990s to 2010. "Historically, because of the country's prosperity and conservatism, the trade unions were weak and so were the trade union bureaucracies," says Ringger. The weakness of the old labor officialdom made it easier for new activists to challenge and to change the unions' social democratic leadership. "The Italian immigrants and immigrants from other countries brought more militant traditions. At the same time, leftists from the Trotskyist groups were able to build a base and become leaders in the unions. Many of the leaders of UNIA, the left labor federation, came from or are still members of the Trotskyist organizations."

With its new more radical socialist leaders and its more militant activist base, the Swiss unions began some interesting campaigns. "Beginning in 1989, the more left of the two federations, the Swiss Confederation of Labor [2] carried out a campaign to raise the minimum wage of all works to 3,000 Swiss francs gross monthly (health care and taxes are deducted from that gross earning)," Ringger explains. "The campaign which was linked to organizing laundry workers was a big success and the law was passed. Now in 2011 the unions are pushing to raise the minimum wage to 4,000 Swiss francs (see below)."

There have been other developments on the left as well, says Ringger. The youth of the Swiss Social Democratic Party which had become quite weak, launched an initiative to limit all salaries to a relationship of no more than 1 to 12, that is no wage could be more than 12 times greater than another. The campaign has gotten a lot of attention and succeeded in reaching many young people who don't usually participate in elections, and so has rebuilt the youth of the SDP as a more activist organization." [3]

The European Union, Immigration, and the Crisis

"The development of the European Union put us in a more difficult situation," says Spagnoli. "While the majority of Swiss people opposed and voted against the European Union, the Federal authorities managed to get special bilateral arrangements that allowed the free movement of workers to and from Switzerland. Any European worker may now enter Switzerland, and this changed the country's historic situation."

"In 1991 we began for the first time to have an unemployment problem which had been unknown before," Spagnoli explains. "Since 2004 with the Schengen Agreement which expanded the border of the European Union, as well as creating border controls and greater police cooperation, we have had more competition with other workers. This is a special problem for Geneva, Basle, Lausanne and Italian Switzerland." For example, tens of thousands of workers from the French town of Annemasse which forms part of the Geneva metropolitan area commute to work in Geneva every day.

"The increase in immigrant workers has led to more competition for jobs and also to wage competition, and some believe this led in part to the increase in Swiss unemployment," says Spagnoli. "Unemployment has become a weapon of the employers to weaken the unions. It has also encouraged a rightwing populist political movement against immigrants and against the border commuters. So, Swiss resident workers have had a harder time since the 1990s."

The State of the Swiss Unions Today

"In the public sector," Spanoli explains, "workers can choose to be a member or not of any union they wish. In the public sector we have two different unions and different professional associations, for example teachers. Some teachers are in their associations and some in our unions—they pay less to the associations than to the unions. In Geneva we have created a confederation of the unions and associations in the public sector with between 8,000 and 10,000 work members out of 30,000 employees, which is very high for Switzerland. We fight for laws and regulations to defend the workers, rather than for collective bargaining agreements that is because the laws are stronger than our contracts. We spend much of our time defending workers who have come under pressure or have been harassed by management."

In the last few years, says Spagnoli, "Unions became weaker, contracts were changed and the unions became less effective. The precarious workers (those without full-time permanent jobs) were less organized and the difficulty of organizing this group undermined the position of organized workers. The balance between private and public workers also changed during in those years. Geneva did somewhat better than other areas, but public sector workers lost part of their rights and weakened the unions."

Fighting to Defend Public Employees

So, today, unions are righting to protect public employees jobs just like unions in other countries. "In Geneva we are trying to protect the basic legal situation of the workers, because we still have a law which defines the work situation. In most of Switzerland there no longer exists such a law and that has been replaced by private individual contacts or collective bargaining agreements. In Geneva we want to preserve the advantages we have in the law. We won that law through strikes in the 1990s, we began in 1992 and the big fights were between 1996 and 1999. Because of that the enemies of the public sector, being unable to change the law that we won, have tried to change the real

conditions. They have brought more pressure to bear on the higher levels of the bureaucracy of the public sector, so bosses are now making more demands on workers. For instance, the law protects us against arbitrary firing, but this means that the hierarchy engages in more psychological harassment, which really destroys the health situation of workers.”

“At the moment we are fighting to preserve our retirement insurance, because we have austerity policies in the public sector in a period where the population is growing,” Spangoli says. “At the same time our population is aging and we have greater longevity we have health issues to deal with, immigration brings more children into the schools, and the government is reducing service in order to lower taxes for the wealthy. This is the politics which explains why they are attacking our insurance right now which is a question of hundreds of millions of Swiss francs. The financial institutions have an interest in getting more capital for investment and speculation. Switzerland has compulsory insurance (the Swiss social security system) and other public employee insurance systems.”

Swiss Unions and Women Fight for Equality

Swiss unions are meeting the challenge of the employers and the government by reaching out to organize women and immigrants. Swiss women and UNIA, a major Swiss union, held **a national day of action on June 14 for wage equality for women and for a minimum wage of \$4,000 a month for all workers**. The Swiss franc and the U.S. dollar are about on par, the franc worth a little more than a U.S. dollar. The new minimum wage that the union and women are seeking would be the equivalent of \$48,000 per year. The current minimum wage is \$3,000 per month, which was won in the 1980s. Switzerland has one of the highest costs of living in the world.

The “women’s strike,” as the UNIA labor federation also describes the action, was launched to coincide with the 40th anniversary of Swiss women’s winning of the right to vote in 1971 and the 30th anniversary of an article on gender equality being included in the Swiss Federal Constitution in 1981. **Swiss women make 19.8 percent less than men**, despite the gender equality article in the Constitution. **The union argues that 40 percent of the wage difference can only be explained by discrimination.**

“Thirty years ago the Swiss Constitution was amended to provide for equal pay for equal work. But this exists only on paper, and is not reflect social realities, says Franziska Stier, a UNIA staff member responsible organizing retail and women workers. “Women in Switzerland earn on average 20% less than men. On the one hand, they are over-represented in low-wage sectors and under-represented in management positions. At the same time, there is also a wage discrimination of around 9%. For the same work in the same establishment about 9% of women receive less than their male colleagues.”

UNIA’s Demand for Wage Equality and a Higher Minimum

The UNIA labor federation argues that the right to a living wage is anchored in the Swiss Constitution and calls for the Confederation and the cantons (Switzerland’s “states”) to adopt measures to protect workers’ wages. UNIA calls upon the government to ensure that collective bargaining agreements be based upon the accepted minimum wages in localities, industries, and professions. The union federation demands that legislators establish **a minimum wage of 22 francs an hour**, the equivalent of 4,000 Swiss francs per month based on a 42-hour workweek. The minimum wage, says the union, should be indexed, that is, linked to the cost of living. Cantons

themselves might set higher minimums in particular regions.

UNIA has taken up gender equality seriously. Beginning in December of 2008, the union opened its doors to women, offering them free consultations on wage equality. It also organized a national campaign to educate the Swiss public about the issue and to encourage women to fight for wage equality. The labor federation also published a brochure titled “Equal Pay for Work of Equal Value: Women and Equality — How to Defend Yourself.” And the union published a Wage Inequality Calculator where women workers could see just how out of line their wages were. UNIA, in addition to organizing the women’s strike, is also active in the parliament to put forward legislation to prevent women from suffering wage discrimination.

UNIA points out that the Swiss government’s Office of Equality between Men and Woman has also called upon employers to equalize wages and suggested **simple ways to find out if the wages of their men and women employees are unequal**. The government has also set up National Research Program 60, also commemorating the Constitution’s gender equality article, to investigate the issues of inequalities between men and women.

Why Do Women Make Less?

The union argues that women make less for a variety of reasons. First, typically women’s work is less valued and therefore paid less than men’s work. Since women’s work is often seen as supplementing a family’s income, women work part-time more often than men do (57% for women and 12% for men), and this affects their opportunities for promotion. Women in the workplace are less likely to have key positions or managing positions than are men (23% for women as against 37% for men). And, women generally earn a lower wage or salary than male colleagues at the time they enter their field of work, with lifetime implications for their earnings.

Says Franziska Stier, “We believe that women should receive equal wages and have equal status in society. We want to eliminate discrimination by both class and gender. We see this as part of a broader fight for women’s rights in our society. The day of action gives us the opportunity to fight sexism, oppression, and discrimination and also to fight an exploitative economic system.”

Immigrant Workers and the Labor Movement

Immigrants workers in Switzerland, like those in other countries fight for the right to live and work in the country to which they have immigrated, and they have found that unions can be some of their strongest allies.

Their principal battle for the last several years, says Ynes Gerardo, herself a Dominican immigrant to Switzerland, is to win a collective bargaining agreement with the Swiss employers association in the service sector to cover domestic workers. They have been fighting for five years and the battle continues.

In Switzerland undocumented immigrants face many of the same problems as immigrants elsewhere. Having no papers, they may be subject to deportation. They often face discrimination on the job where they may not be able to find steady work, may receive lower wages, and face worse conditions. And in the society at large they may face racist attitudes from the native population—even though many of them are the children and grandchildren of immigrants themselves. Ultimately, of course, immigrants want to have the legal right to live and work in Switzerland.

Switzerland's highly stratified immigration system with its hierarchical system of acceptance of first European, then Australian and American, and finally Latin American, Asian and African immigrants, and its 25 some visa categories, contributes to the status consciousness and racism of the society, says Gerardo.

Fighting for a Contract for Immigrants

Since 1996, Gerardo works with the Geneva Collective in Support of the Undocumented [4] which in turn receives support from the Inter-Professional Union of Men and Women Workers [5].

Gerardo explains, "Our organization—the collective—is made up of political, union and social organizations. It includes all of the major parties from the Socialists to the Christian Democrats, the UNIA labor federation, and many other social organizations. Our first goal was to find out exactly who were the immigrants, so we conducted an investigation to learn about the immigrants, the jobs, conditions, and their survival strategies."

While we think of Switzerland principally as a German, French and Italian land of native-born workers, in fact the country has a long history of immigration dating from the end of World War II when Italian, Portuguese and Spanish workers began to arrive in search of work. Today, workers come throughout the European Union and Turkey, but also from several countries in Latin America.

"Our survey of the immigrants told us who they were," says Gerardo. "We found that Latin American immigrants come from Brazil, Colombia, and Ecuador, but also from Bolivia, Peru, Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, the Dominican Republic and Venezuela. Most of these immigrants are women who come from cities in Latin America and first attempted to find work by migrating to another city in their own country. When they couldn't find work at a living wage, they then decided to go abroad to seek work. They are mostly mothers with high school educations and often some college who left their children home when they came to Switzerland to find work. Once they find work in Switzerland they send for their children and then their husbands."

Altogether, Gerardo explains, there are between 200,000 and 300,000 undocumented immigrants in Switzerland (not all of them from Latin America). And between 30,000 and 35,000 in Geneva. Most women work in restaurants, hotels and domestic work, while the men work in agriculture. While about 15 percent have permanent full-time jobs, the rest work by the hour and generally more than 40 hours a week.

"As we learned more about the immigrant population, we began to educate the public about the situation, to develop demands for the movement, and to organize the immigrants into unions when we could," says Gerardo. "In Switzerland, the unions can play a role in defending immigrants both in the workplace and from the authorities. As we conducted our survey and organized the immigrants, it became possible to locate them and to invite them to meetings. We also worked with the churches and the community leaders."

Gerardo explains that the collective developed the strategy of attempting to win a pattern agreement from the employers association which would cover the hotel, restaurant and domestic workers. The employers association is made up of the large hotel and restaurant chains, but they could come to an agreement which would then establish the basis of domestic wages as well, or at least that's the idea. So, the collective has been building a movement and using the media to pressure the employer and the government to establish minimum standards of social security for these workers, including on-the-job accident insurance. The winning of such employer recognition is linked to a broader campaign for the legalization of undocumented immigrants.

The collective has succeeded in getting the Geneva regional canton, the local level government

something like a state in the United States, to take the matter to the Swiss federal government. Immigrants have found most support in French Switzerland, where even the conservative parties have come around to support them, but they still have a long way to go.

“At the moment,” says Gerardo, “we are at an impasse. We have to find a way to move ahead. And we will. We want to be legal.”

New Ideas for New Times: The Think Network

Even as they fight for the union, work with women for equal pay, and support immigrants fighting for the right to live and work in Switzerland, the labor left in Switzerland also understands the need to come up with new ideas to meet the challenges of globalization and neoliberalism.

Denknetz or Think Network [6] is a leftwing think tank created in 2004 by a group of labor union activists, staff members, and others to address policy issues. The fundamental principles of the group are the promotion of freedom, justice and solidarity and the view that those three things must be fundamentally linked to each other.

“We think that a collective like Denknetz can make a real contribution,” says Beat Ringger. “We recognize that some people work through building leftist political organizations and parties, and we think that’s fine—some of us are members of such groups. But we think this sort of project, that is, organizing political discussion and carrying out serious analyses, and developing alternative proposals can make a unique contribution. Since the 1990s, the Swiss German-speaking left has been fragmented, and we believe that this sort of project can help re-establish a common language, methods and ideas. We develop analyses and alternatives and offer them to the left.”

The group now has 750 members, most of the German-speaking Swiss but also some French-speaking Swiss and others from Germany and other places. The group publishes articles and books and organizes about 5 to 10 forums a year on social issues of importance to the Swiss labor and social movements and to the Swiss people in general.

Since its founding Denknetz has created working groups on various issues which have published articles, position papers and books. The working groups tackle issues such as a guaranteed national income (called a “conditional income” in Europe), taxation policy, education issues, social security, informal and precarious work, the status of women and the “care economy”—child care, elder care and other issues. The organization has published a variety of position papers, six yearbooks, a book dealing with social insurances and a book on taxation to appear this summer.

Developing Policy for the Left

“For twenty years we have had attacks on our social security system,” says Ringger. “We have a big problem with the general direction our society is heading. We argue that we have to take back money from the financial institutions and redistribute it to the society as a whole. Our first two books take up these issues.” *The Great Reform: A General Earnings Insurance (Die grosse Reform: Die Allgemeine Erwerbsversicherung)* analyzes the current, complex Swiss workers’ insurance system and argues that it be streamlined and simplified by creating one insurance for unemployment, on-the-job injuries and health issues. A second book which is in the works *The Right Course—The Right Taxes (Richtig Steuern)* argues that the Swiss people should take back five percent more of the annual GDP of the wealth of the rich to pay for social and ecological programs.

The Denknetz group also published proposals for the reorganization of the financial markets. “We believe that regulation is not enough,” says Ringger. “We think that basic banking functions such as savings and checking accounts should be in the hands of publicly owned financial institutions,” meaning something like our American credit unions.

“We need a new direction in our society,” says Ringger. “We believe that this project will help to begin to set us on a better course.”

Dan La Botz

P.S.

* Dan La Botz is a Cincinnati-based teacher, writer, and activist. Some parts of this article previously appeared in Labor Notes, New Politics, ZNet, and MRZine.

Footnotes

[1] Syndicat des Services Publiques - SSP at <http://www.ssp-vpod.ch/>

[2] <http://www.sgb.ch/f-index.php>

[3] <http://www.juso.ch/fr/node/2357>

[4] <http://www.sans-papiers.ch/site/index.php?id=122>

[5] <http://www.sit-syndicat.ch/spip/>

[6] www.denknetz-online.ch