



COE111258

- 1 -

JOC (76) 5

## HISTORY OF THE LABOUR MOVEMENT IN SWITZERLAND

### Origins of the labour movement

The first factory workers in Switzerland were spinners. Their wages were so low that they could make a living only if the whole family worked. Life was hard. The working day was 14 to 16 hours, sometimes even 18 hours per day; the slightest lateness or mistake was sanctioned by docking 25% from the day's wage.

Social and hygiene conditions were highly unsatisfactory; mortality was very high; social security (sickness, accident) was non-existent. There was no compensation for lay-offs; no notice of dismissal was required.

After 1830, German craftsmen began to form associations. The central feature of these was political education. Early socialist ideas were received and spread.

Although the work of these political clubs was confined to instruction and discussion, even that was too much for the ruling bourgeoisie: the craftsmen were expelled from Switzerland for dabbling in politics.

Before the formation of the Internationale in 1864, Swiss workers were organised only locally or not at all. Only the printers (1858) and the journeymen tailors (1863) had formed national organisations.

The first Internationale was joined particularly by the watchmakers of Geneva and the Jura.

In Switzerland the Internationale brought together a wide variety of labour organisations and groups. Printers and watchmakers, building and textile workers discovered their common class interest and now combined for the first time in joint action. The wave of strikes which resulted fostered workers' solidarity in Switzerland and class consciousness among the workers.

In 1870 Herman Greulich attempted to found a social democratic party. It was joined by only a few party sections in German speaking Switzerland.

At the same time the first Swiss Labour Federation was formed. It comprised local trade unions, sections of the Grütliverein (a patriotic, liberal organisation of journeymen craftsmen), German and international workers' associations, the sections of Greulich's party and others. In French-

43.859  
00

./.

speaking Switzerland and among the specialist trade unions it had little success. Its most valuable work was in spreading trade unionism politically, primarily through its campaign for the first federal factory act, which was passed by a small majority in 1877. After this success, the Labour Federation began to disintegrate.

Reasons: weak organisation, financial difficulties (accentuated by the economic situation) and lack of unity within. The attempt by political and trade union groups to combine under a single umbrella organisation had failed. Separation was necessary.

### The Swiss Federation of Trade Unions

The Swiss Federation of Trade Unions was founded in 1880. Its aim was to continue the work of the Labour Federation. For the first few years, this remained no more than a good intention, as the trade unions could not be persuaded to join.

First success: in 1886, in conjunction with the Grütliverein, the Federation formed a General Swiss Workers' Reserve Fund. In 1891, this fund was taken over completely by the Federation of Trade Unions. By this means, it was able to strengthen its own strike policy and exert more influence over individual organisations, for which the reserve fund was often the main incentive to join.

Over the years 1896-1907, membership increased from about 9,200 to 77,619. This made the federation, which had been no more than a marginal group with nuisance value, into an economic force of the first order. During this decade a number of employers' organisations were formed for the purpose of combatting the trade unions.

An important reason for this increase in membership was economic expansion (especially in the engineering industry and the building trades). Firms in these branches were able to increase their profits, but tried to keep wages down. They met with resistance from the trade unions. In numerous, mostly successful strikes, the unions fought for improvements in working conditions and wages. Their successes, however, were less due to their own strength than to the favourable economic situation, which made long work stoppages expensive to the employers.

The proof: In 1901-02 and 1907-08 the trade unions were not able to prevent mass redundancies.

Before the First World War, unionisation was still relatively low: in 1910 only some 9.3% of all industrial workers belonged to the Federation of Trade Unions; the figure

for the more militant engineering workers was 13.7%. This picture would have been even more dismal, had not the foreign workers brought into Switzerland during the boom been particularly active in the trade unions.

The relatively low degree of organisation in trade unions is probably very closely connected with the still fairly strongly decentralised "rural" industrialisation which was an obstacle to organisation of the labour movement and the development of class consciousness.

### The Social Democratic Party (SPS)

In 1880 a second attempt was made to form a social democratic party, but without success. In 1888 Albert Steck succeeded in forming a viable party. Not until it merged with the Grütliverein in 1901 and until local workers' unions joined collectively, however, did the party acquire a large membership. The petit-bourgeois Grütliverein was a hindrance to progressive forces in the party.

Not until the Workers' desperate predicament during the First World War did "radicalisation" of the labour movement occur. The SPS took part in the Kienthal Conference, at which Europe's leading socialists discussed the formation of a new Internationale. In 1917, the SPS rejected war credits and so underpinned the newly-awakened resistance to the bourgeois state.

Otherwise, the party's policy was confined to demands for improvements in the workers' predicament: establishment of purchasing and sales monopolies for potatoes and coal, minimum wages, etc. Most of these demands failed owing to resistance from the bourgeoisie. The SPS's policy of keeping the peace soon met with resistance from its left wing which, thanks to the influence of militant emigrants, was especially strong in Zurich. The left turned against not only the right wing of the party, the "social chauvinists", who unconditionally supported national defence, but also against the "centrists", who sat on the fence between left and right.

As a result of initiatives from the left, a conference was called in Berne in September 1915, to organise opposition in all countries and to prepare international action against the war. At this conference a manifesto was drawn up condemning imperialist war and calling for an international class struggle against war and militarism. Representatives of Zimmerwald's left wingers in Switzerland were a few years later to be among the founders of the Swiss Communist Party (KPS).

### Formation of the Olten Action Committee (OAK)

In 1918 the Federal Council attempted to conscript all men not liable to military service into a compulsory auxiliary civilian service under army command. The workers realised that they had to organise solid resistance. The OAK consisted of three social democrats and four trade unionists.

### 1918 general strike

During the four years of the First World War, the labour movement made a truce with the bourgeois state: it voted the war appropriations. The workers' class consciousness was displaced by national consciousness. They were soon disabused. The workers' material and political situation deteriorated rapidly, working hours were increased, wages were drastically cut. Inflation made their predicament worse. The workers realised that other sections of the population, especially farmers and entrepreneurs, were profiting from the crisis: agriculture was prosperous, many entrepreneurs made huge profits.

The general strike began on 11 November 1918. Some 250,000 workers all over Switzerland downed tools. The strike was run quietly and without violence by the workers. Nevertheless, there were clashes with troops in the large towns, such as Zurich. Altogether, some 100,000 soldiers had been called up.

It soon became clear that the workers' front was not united. In Western Switzerland and among the railwaymen, it began to crumble. By 13 November, the Federal Council felt sufficiently in control of the situation to set the OAK an ultimatum. The OAK capitulated in the belief that civil war would otherwise have been unavoidable and that the workers were bound to lose.

### Foundation of the Communist Party.

The "old guard":

In October 1918, Jakob Herzog attempted to continue a successful strike of Zurich bank employees against the will of the strike-leaders. He was expelled from the SP for "indiscipline". He then founded the Communist Party on 6 October. (Members of this party later came to be known as the "Altkommunisten", or old guard). The old guard took a very radical line: they rejected participation in bourgeois parliaments and demanded the immediate formation of workers, peasants and soldiers' councils. Their successes however, remained few.

At the founding congress of the IIIrd Internationale, Switzerland was represented by Fritz Platten (SPS) and Leonie Kascher (old guard Communist). The 1919 SPS party congress subsequently decided to leave the IInd Internationale and join the IIIrd Internationale. In a ballot, however, the party membership rejected this move. Statutes and principles were formulated at the second Comintern Congress in Moscow in 1920. Guidelines were adopted governing conditions for acceptance into the Communist Internationale. These were intended to keep the Internationale free from "opportunist and centrist" influences.

At an extraordinary Party Congress of the SPS in December 1920 in Berne, the delegates decided by 350 votes to 213 not to join the IIIrd Internationale because of the 21 conditions. Thereupon the left wingers left the SPS and decided, together with the old guard communists, to join a Swiss section of the Comintern. The merger took place in Zurich on 5-6 March 1921.

#### Theory and practice of SPS and trade unions in the 1920s

According to the declaration of principles in the party programme, the SPS regards itself as a working class organisation, whose activity in the present circumstances takes the form of a class struggle. The ultimate objective of this class struggle is the elimination of any form of class power and exploitation, the acquisition of political power.

Where practice was concerned, the SP waged the class struggle only with the means placed at its disposal by bourgeois democracy (eg elections, votes, petitions and referendum). This reformist policy immediately encountered increased resistance from the bourgeoisie. Admittedly some of the labour movement's demands were quickly conceded in 1919 in order to prevent further unrest: introduction of the 48-hour week.

The trade unions:

Radicalisation occurred primarily among the rank and file: the leadership remained faithful to the reformist cause. General strikes and political mass demonstrations were advocated by the trade union functionaries only as a last resort to be used in defence against reactionary excesses by the capitalist adversary.

The struggle against communists in the trade unions began first in the SMUV. In December 1921 six communist party members were expelled from the SMUV. In the following years 1922-24 communists were systematically eliminated from the trade unions. At the 1924 Lausanne Congress of the TU federation a motion to maintain the same relations with the CP as with the SP was rejected and the committee decision of 22 April 1921 confirmed by 136 votes to 35.

Once the last revolutionary forces had been neutralised the Swiss Trade Union Federation set about amending its rules: in 1927 the class struggle paragraph was deleted. The demand for nationalisation of the means of production remained, but this was merely one stage towards final recognition of the capitalist economic system.

In 1934 the SGB mounted its "anti-crisis" campaign. This was aimed at the crisis policy of the property-owning classes: every citizen was to be guaranteed a livelihood. Wage and price protection were to guarantee a sufficient income for workers, employees and farmers, work creation proposals were put forward to remedy mass unemployment.

The policy pursued affirmed the "principles of democracy", attempted to secure the "labour the highest possible share in overall profits", sought to achieve "the economic, social and cultural advancement of all sections of the wage-earning population". The trade unions no longer stood for class struggle as under their rules of 1906, but regarded themselves as religiously neutral and politically independent.

In 1937, peace was made between entrepreneurs and workers in the Swiss metal industry. The peace treaty took the form of a procedure for settling differences and disputes over working conditions. Central to it is absolute industrial peace, ie renunciation of strikes and lock-outs. The treaty guarantees the disciplining of workers by workers. A few of the reasons why the peace agreement came about:

- The agreement became possible after the crisis had shaken the supremacy of capitalism and the metal workers' union had been purged of non-revisionist comrades. The union leadership conducted secret negotiations, which reflects undemocratic opinion-forming and decision-making within the union.
- Had Capital and labour not been able to reach agreement in wage negotiations, their differences would have been sent to arbitration by the Federal Economic Department.
- Psychological factors included the workers' fear of unemployment and the employers' fear of loss of production. Compromise was also favoured by the international political situation, especially the threat from international facism.
- The revisionist left and a relatively progressive wing of the capitalist camp needed little effort both to get what they wanted after the hard years of crisis: adequate wages and unthreatened profits. They were satisfied with that.

At the same time, a compromise had been reached between the SP and the bourgeois parties. In 1943 the social democrat Ernst Nobs became a member of the Federal Council.

A further step towards integration in the bourgeois state was taken by the SP when, after Hitler's invasion of Austria, it advocated national defence in a common declaration with the other parties.

During this period, social democracy came to terms with the liberal wing of the bourgeoisie, the farmers and tradesmen. It helped protect bourgeois democracy, because it provided a relatively good, safe life.

#### Situation towards the end of the war

Whilst capital was making profits, real wages fell during the war years by over 10%. Furthermore, conscripted soldiers had to accept heavy reductions in earnings, which the state did not do enough to offset.

Labour's mood had accordingly become more radical by the end of the war. In 1944 the old guard communists and the left-wing of the SP formed the Labour Party, (successor to the now banned Communist party), which formulated unequivocal socialist aims.

During the war the old workers' demand for the establishment of an AHV was taken up again. The bill was passed with a large majority in 1947.

#### Influx of foreign labour in the post-war boom

The first Swiss post-war boom brought many workers somewhat higher wages. The reason for the extent of this boom in Switzerland was the favourable starting position of the Swiss economy: Switzerland was almost the only European country to possess completely intact if somewhat outdated production machinery; no factories had been destroyed.

The rationalisation which was carried out after the war in the other European countries passed Switzerland by; technical progress was much slower than elsewhere; economic growth was achieved through additional manpower.

Although wages in Switzerland rose less than abroad, the workers remained more passive than their colleagues in other countries, as they wished to maintain their position vis-à-vis the foreign workers, whilst the latter were forbidden to engage in political activity.

PRINCIPAL DATES IN THE HISTORY OF THE SWISS LABOUR MOVEMENT

- 1868 Child labour banned in Basel.
- 1870 Foundation of the first women's trade union in Geneva.  
Foundation of the Labour Union.  
Citizens of Canton Zurich refuse reduction in working hours (12 hours for adults, 6 hours for children under 16)
- 1880 Dissolution of the Swiss labour federation, founded in Olten in 1873.  
Foundation of the Swiss trade union federation
- 1890 1 May celebrations all over Switzerland. Federation requests the cantons to observe and report.  
Appointment of a workers' commission at Sulzer Winterthur.  
Legislation drafted in several cantons governing the training of apprentices.
- 1891 Introduction of the 10-hour day in the engineering industry.
- 1894 First unemployment fund in Berne and St Gallen.
- 1899 Foundation of the Christian woodworkers' trade union.
- 1900 Rejection of compulsory sickness and accident insurance.
- 1902 Congress of the Assembly of Swiss Trade Unions again advocates political and denominational neutrality of trade unions. Introduction of unemployment insurance, prohibition of nightwork in bakeries.
- 1904 Failure of amalgamation between the Christian trade unions and the federation of trade unions.
- 1906 Revision of rules by Swiss federation of trade unions. Class struggle article accepted.
- 1913 Congress of Swiss federation of trade unions rejects general strike as tactic.



- 1914 Outbreak of war: wages fall, unemployment, rising prices.
- 1918 General strike - 250,000 strikers in 107 districts of Switzerland. Demands include: votes for women, 48-hour week, re-organisation of army as a people's army. Introduction of old-age and disability insurance. One third of army (138,000) called out.
- 1919 Congress of Swiss federation of trade unions demands 48-hour week.  
Foundation of evangelical workers' association.
- 1920 Economic crisis.  
Abt motion demands increase in working hours, violent reaction by trade unions.
- 1922 Rising unemployment in Switzerland.
- 1927 Congress of Swiss federation of trade unions: amendment of rules, deletion of class struggle article.  
No right to strike for federal employees.
- 1931 Rejection of federal AHV Act.
- 1934 Campaign against extension of recruits' school
- 1936 Over 120,000 unemployed in Switzerland.

INTERNAL OPERATIONS OF THE SWISS ARMY 1860-1968

- 1860 26th WK Battalion ordered to Lausanne in anticipation of "incidents at political demonstrations in connection with the "Savoy Question"".
- 1864 Recruits disarm demonstrators holding the Geneva Cantonal Council prisoner. Reinforcements called from Lausanne.
- 1869 Building workers strike in Lausanne. 12th WK Battalion, then 11th Battalion, ordered to Lausanne to police building sites.
- 1871 Army breaks up "Tonhallekrawall" in Zurich. Several killed.
- 1875 Gotthard tunnel workers strike. Employers' militia kills 4 workers. Government sends in company of conscripts as reinforcements.
- 1876 Federal Council calls out Thurgau Infantry Regiment in connection with "Tessiner Wirren" in Stabio. Ticino Government sends cantonal units as reinforcements.
- 1889 Electoral disturbances in Ticino. 23rd Infantry Regiment called out against 300 irregulars. Two Ticino companies mobilised. Subsequently two federal companies ordered to Ticino as provincial government ignores instructions of federal governor.
- 1890 Liberals mount coup in Ticino, followed by conservatives. 1,400 men of 38th and 39th Berne Battalion ordered to Ticino.
- 1893 Heavy troop commitment against Berne "Käfigturm demonstrators". Several injured.
- 1896 Recruits and soldiers used during "Italian disturbances" in Zurich.
- 1897 Lucerne streets patrolled by infantry and cavalry with loaded rifles to break building workers' strike
- 1898 Geneva building workers strike. Government calls out troops, threatening to use force if necessary to maintain order.
- 1901 Simplon tunnel workers strike. Troops mobilised "to protect those wishing to work".
- 1902 Large numbers of troops used against Geneva general strike. 50 injured. 125 soldiers refuse to obey orders.

- 1903 Bricklayers strike in Basel. Soldiers guard building sites and close Rhine bridges to strikers' processions.
- 1904 Troops used against striking building workers at La Chaux-de-Fonds
- 1905 Building workers strike at Locarno. Ticino Government calls out one company of 95th Battalion
- 1905 Troops used against striking foundry workers in Rorschach.
- 1906 Metalworkers and bricklayers strike in Zurich. Cavalry charges and infantry attacks. Several injured.
- 1907 Troops used against general strike in Canton Vaud
- 1907 Troops called in against strikers in St Moritz and Pontresina (building of Bernina railway).
- 1907 General strike in Hochdorf LU. Government mobilises troops.
- 1911 Bricklayers strike in Zurich. Troops called out
- 1912 General strike in Zurich. Troops called out.
- 1913 Troops called out in Basel during dyers' strike.
- 1913 Troops called out against striking tunnel workers at Grenchen.
- 1914 Watchmakers strike in Grenchen. Troops called out.
- 1915 Troops break up anti-German demonstrations in Ticino.
- 1916 Infantry Battalion on duty for Zurich "Colonels' trial"
- 1916 Troops break up demonstration in Lausanne in connection with "Colonels' trial".
- 1916 Fribourg Government requests troops in connection with "Colonels' trial".
- 1916 Troops on stand-by throughout Switzerland to prevent demonstrations on "red Sunday". Troops break up demonstrations with live ammunition at La Chaux-de-Fonds.
- 1916 Five striking printing workers in Lausanne conscripted and compelled to break strike.

- 1917 Strike at aluminium works in Chippis. Troops in action - several injured - workers conscripted and compelled to work.
- 1917 Social democrat Paul Graber freed from prison in La Chaux-de-Fonds. Troops intervene.
- 1917 2,300 troops in action against striking munitions workers. 4 killed.
- 1918 Street fighting between troops and civilians in Bienne. 1 killed, several injured.
- 1918 General strike in Ticino. Troops in action.
- 1918 Troops gathered around Zurich for 1 May.
- 1918 General strike in Zurich. Government asks Federal Council for troops and retires to Zurich barracks. Troops sent in. Protest strikes all over Switzerland (national general strike).
- Berne patrolled by army units
- Demonstration broken up by force on Fraumünsterplatz in Zurich, several injured.
- Strikers block railway line in Bienne, troops in action (several injured)
- On last day of national general strike troops enforce order in Gränichen: 3 dead, several severely injured.
- 1919 Basel dyers' and metalworkers' strike leads to general strike. Troops open fire (5 dead, 12 seriously injured) and occupy socialist printing works.
- 1919 Troops used against strikers in Zurich (general strike) 1 dead, several injured.
- 1927 3rd Infantry Regiment called out for Sacco and Vanzetti demonstration in Geneva.
- 1929 Two grenadier companies of Infantry Regiment 1/5 called out in Bellinzona to prevent the "Red Rally" in Ticino.
- 1929 "Red Rally", transferred to Basel, prevented by troops on "active service". Troops occupy socialist printing works.

- 1929 International anti-facism day banned throughout Switzerland. Concentration of troops. Clashes in Basel (several injured).
- 1930 Communist demonstration in Zurich. Troops called out around the town.
- 1930 Troops break up youth rally in Basel, several injured.
- 1930 Troops mobilised to prevent "Red Rally" in Schaffhausen.
- 1932 Troops called out to prevent communists' solidarity demonstration for International Disarmament Conference in Geneva.
- 1932 Armed troops called out to prevent anti-fascist demonstrations in Lugano.
- 1932 Officers act against demonstrators in Fribourg. Cavalry squadron placed on alert.
- 1932 Recruits placed on duty to protect fascist mass demonstration in Geneva. Force used against counter-demonstrators: 13 dead, 39 injured. Solidarity demonstrations planned throughout Switzerland. Troops mobilised in Vaud. Troops called out in Berne and Fribourg. Recruits remain on duty in Geneva, with further reinforcements.
- 1933 Mito RS called out to protect Geneva arsenal and barracks from "anti-German demonstration".
- 1933 Whitsun rally of socialist youth in Bienne. Troops called out. Speaking ban on Nicole, against whom Geneva fascist demonstration (q v) had been directed. 2,300 troops on stand-by against 200 young socialists.
- 1934 Troops on stand-by during fascist demonstration in Bellinzona.
- 1936 Unemployed demonstrate in Liestal. UOS 11a Engineer's Regiment placed on stand-by.
- 1942 Labour dispute in Chippis VS (Aluminium works). Troops called out to help keep order.
- 1942 Angry farmers attack federal officials in Steinen SZ. Federal Council holds troops in readiness close to village

- 1945 Popular wrath against known fascists in Ticino. Troops called in and use force against demonstrators.
- 1945 Troops called out for banned communist demonstration in Berne.
- 1946 Revolt in Urserental UR against building of power station. 17th Company of Fortress Guards in action.
- 1953 Valais farmers protest against apricot imports and block roads and railway lines in Saxon. Artillery Regiments called out in Bière and Sion.
- 1964 12th Motorised Dragoon Battalion and several companies of Military Police placed on stand-by in Lausanne for a Jura demonstration on Berne Day at EXPO '64.
- 1968 WK troops placed on stand-by and issued with live ammunition in anticipation of "spectacular attacks" by Jura separatists on 1 August.