

Switzerland: Defeat for right wing on immigration referendum

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The right-wing Swiss People's Party (SVP), led by the billionaire industrialist Christoph Blocher, suffered a serious defeat in the national referendum held June 1. Some 63.8 percent of voters rejected the SVP's recent initiative to implement new rules for immigrants seeking to become naturalised Swiss citizens.

The referendum failed in every one of Switzerland's 26 cantons (federal states) except the canton of Schwyz. The "No" vote clearly exceeded predictions, which two weeks before the poll had estimated the referendum would lose with 56 percent voting against. In particular, voters in French-speaking Switzerland and in the large cities voted "No" in great numbers.

Under Blocher's demagogic initiative "for a democratic naturalisation system," municipalities would have had the final say regarding applications for Swiss nationality, including the right to hold their own local referendums on such requests. This would have paved the way for an entirely arbitrary system; those foreign citizens whose naturalisation applications were rejected in a referendum would have had no possibility of seeking any legal redress.

The SVP was attempting to overturn a 2003 decision by the Federal Supreme Court, which had proscribed referendums concerning naturalisation as unconstitutional and stipulated that referendums rejecting naturalisation appeals had to be justified and legally contestable. The court was reacting to an obviously arbitrary result of a referendum at that time. The municipality of Emmen in the Lucerne canton had accepted all applicants coming from Italy, but had rejected all those from the Balkans.

Both the Swiss and international press regard the result of the June 1 referendum as a severe blow for the SVP and Blocher. The Austrian daily *Der Standard* wrote that the clear "No" was "a serious defeat for the right-wing conservative SVP." Germany's *Spiegel online* called the result a "debacle for the people's tribune Blocher," and several Swiss newspapers spoke of a "Waterloo" for the SVP. The result reveals "the outlines of a reversal in political sentiments" (*Neue Luzerner Zeitung*).

"When brown hands are reaching for a Swiss passport, it is no longer enough to mobilise sufficient voters or appeal to their emotions," wrote *Die Aargauer Zeitung*, alluding to the SVP's referendum campaign centring on a poster on which numerous dark-skinned hands were trying to grasp a Swiss passport.

At the same time as the naturalisation proposal was defeated, two further SVP initiatives were also rejected, one demanding a "more economic" public health policy and another "less official propaganda." The rejection of all three initiatives has provoked an open crisis in the SVP.

Just one day after the referendum defeat, splits appeared in

Blocher's party. Defence Minister Samuel Schmid (SVP), together with 36 prominent SVP members in Berne, demanded the regional organisation withdraw from the SVP, citing the behaviour of the party leadership around Blocher towards the SVP's second cabinet member, Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf, who hails from Graubünden, the largest and easternmost canton of Switzerland.

Shortly before the referendum, Widmer-Schlumpf and the entire SVP organisation in Graubünden were expelled from the SVP. Last December, the Graubünden regional party had refused to dissociate itself from Widmer-Schlumpf, after the Swiss parliament elected her justice minister in place of Christoph Blocher.

On Tuesday, Peter Spuhler, an SVP deputy in the National Council (the lower house of the Swiss parliament), demanded Blocher's resignation. He told the press that he hoped Blocher would "take the decision to resign at the right moment." Elsewhere, Samuel Schmid and the Berne "dissidents" indicated they were ready to create a new party because they only have the support of a minority in the Berne regional organisation.

The crisis in the SVP, which had won the most votes in the parliamentary elections six months earlier, is clear indication of a change in political mood. Under Blocher, what had formerly been the smallest of the four government parties, with its roots particularly in Protestant, rural areas, had grown to become the most influential Swiss party, by channelling social fears in a xenophobic direction. Now, for the first time, it has clearly failed with an anti-foreigner initiative.

What brought about this change?

Since the beginning of the year, and particularly since the outbreak of the international banking crisis, social contradictions, concealed for a long time behind nationalist propaganda, have become far more apparent.

The UBS scandal brought the practices of the major Swiss banks into the limelight. Protected by Swiss banking secrecy laws, UBS had helped the super-rich in many countries evade taxes. The public has taken into account the fact that a privileged upper layer uses the Swiss tax haven to boost their own wealth at the expense of the world's poor. It is no accident that Christoph Blocher is a good friend of UBS boss Marcel Ospel, who was recently forced to resign.

Class conflicts are also openly breaking out after a long period of relative calm. In March and April, the railway engineering workshops of SBB Cargo in Bellinzona (Tessin) were closed by strike action and were occupied for four weeks, in order to prevent a permanent closure and mass sackings. The strikers' action received overwhelming support from the general population. At about the same time, thousands of building workers on several large construction sites in

Switzerland walked out to defend their contract.

To a certain extent, the result of the referendum signals a kind of “Enough is enough! Thus far and no farther.” But, at the same time, it would be wrong to be the slightest bit complacent. Working people in Switzerland do not have any political representation that can express their needs and defend them against further attacks on democratic rights and living standards.

The Social Democratic Party (SP), founded exactly 120 years ago as a workers’ party, has been completely integrated into the bourgeois establishment. The recent strike movements took the SP by surprise. In the end, the occupation in Bellinzona was strangled through an intervention by Transport Minister Moritz Leuenberger (SP), who made some so-far-unrealised promises.

Far from launching an offensive on behalf of the independent interests of the working class, the SP today sees its major task as saving Switzerland’s so-called “concordance democracy.” This is the specifically Swiss form of social compromise, at the heart of which for the last 50 years has been the all-party government, including one or two representatives from each of the important parliamentary groups: the Social Democrats (SP), the Liberals (FDP), Christian Democrats (CVP) and the Swiss Peoples Party (SVP).

After Samuel Schmid’s resignation from the SVP, the party no longer has any representative in the government. This means the end of “concordance democracy” in practice.

In the name of “unity against Blocher,” the SP is reacting to the SVP’s right-wing threat by seeking an even closer alliance with the Liberals, Christian Democrats and the SVP “dissidents.” The Social Democrats’ defensive and right-wing attitude is expressed in their comments on the referendum. The SP representative Daniel Jositsch explained: “Of course it is not a matter of more or less naturalisations.... No one is speaking about a right to naturalisation.”

This alliance between the SP and the other bourgeois parties takes on grotesque forms. In mid-April, Foreign Minister Micheline Calmy-Rey (SP) called for a solidarity campaign to support Widmer-Schlumpf, the new justice minister, who was being bullied by Blocher—even though the latter had declared she would continue the policies of Blocher, or even seek to implement harsher ones.

After 100 days in office, Widmer-Schlumpf expressly said that she would follow a hard line in questions of foreign and asylum policy—like her predecessor in office, Blocher—and would essentially continue the previous policy in the justice and police departments. Her main priority was the fight against “youth violence” and the question of “criminal foreigners,” and, additionally, the fight against terrorism and violent extremism. Foreigners who commit crimes would have to be expelled; young people would even be deported together with their parents.

As justice minister, Widmer-Schlumpf did not lift any of the regulations that Blocher had substantially tightened; quite the opposite, she intends to further restrict the criteria by which a deportation is judged as unreasonable.

Nevertheless, the Social Democrats are actively participating in the campaign of support for Widmer-Schlumpf, which culminated in a demonstration of more than 12,000 in Berne on April 12. “We welcome the action against the un-Swiss and undemocratic actions of the SVP,” said SP spokesman Peter Lauener.

The government coalition of SP, CVP, FDP and SVP “dissidents” is no more progressive than Blocher’s rump SVP, which now finds itself in opposition. These are tactical differences within the Swiss ruling elite. The present coalition fears that Blocher’s aggressive and brazen

policies threaten to destabilise Swiss economic and political life, and they plan to make certain “corrections.”

For example, contrary to Blocher, the government parties support the continuation of personal freedom of movement and residence and for its expansion to cover Bulgaria and Romania, because this is important for the stabilisation of the economic situation. The agreement covering the free movement of goods and persons is the most important bilateral economic agreement with the European Union, declared Widmer-Schlumpf.

The government is pursuing a neo-liberal policy of deregulation and privatisation in the interest of the banks and corporations. The separation of rail goods traffic into the SBB Cargo subsidiary is only one of the more well-known examples; further examples are the privatisation of the post office and telecommunications, care for the elderly and the health service.

Within Europe and internationally, Switzerland has no room to extract itself from the free market. Any attempt to lessen the ties to the market would threaten the country with isolation from the European Union. For the banks and large-scale enterprises—e.g., the construction industry—the EU’s directive on free trade in services offers the possibility of playing off workers from different countries against each other and implementing cheap wages.

Blocher’s SVP had been able to exploit this development for its own demagogic purposes. While the billionaire chemicals entrepreneur Blocher profited economically from globalisation, he sought to divide workers with nationalist slogans and mobilise the most backward sentiments.

Today, however, the possibility is emerging for a common European-wide fight by working people against wage dumping and welfare cuts. This has been revealed in the strikes of construction workers, railway workers and even dairy farmers, who carried out simultaneous strikes in several European countries.

Such a development requires the building of a new workers’ party, which represents the interests of the international working class and offers a progressive solution to the social crisis that is the breeding ground for right-wing parties and demagogues.



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