

Government resignation deepens crisis of Swiss democracy

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On July 9, Moritz Leuenberger of Switzerland's Socialist Party (SP) announced that he will be resigning from the government at the end of the year. Leuenberger has been a member of the Bundesrat, the seven-member Swiss federal council, since 1995, serving as energy, environment and transport minister. A second federal councillor, Free Democratic Party (FDP) politician Hans-Rudolf Merz, has since also unofficially announced his forthcoming resignation.

Although these resignations have not caused many waves in the Swiss media, they signify the onset of a major political upheaval. They could herald the end of the so-called *konkordanzdemokratie*, or "democracy based on concordance," in Switzerland. This system of governance was the specific Swiss form of the social compromise that prevailed in all Western European countries in the postwar period. Through a laborious process of compromise in the Bundesrat, where decisions must be approved unanimously, the major parties collectively governed the country and sought to bridge the complex social, regional, linguistic and religious divisions in this Alpine country.

Had he remained in the government, in 2011 Leuenberger would have become president of Switzerland for the third time, as the office is rotated among the parties. The fact that the most senior member of the Bundesrat and a leading social democrat has resigned without giving any reason points to his deep frustration with the government's work. According to one press comment, "political fatigue" was the major factor behind his resignation.

In recent months, the number of political failures and scandals has increased. Growing economic pressures created by crises in the global markets and intensifying conflicts between the major powers, particularly the United States and the European Union, have made it increasingly difficult for the Swiss government to maintain its traditional role in international affairs.

On June 15, the parliament approved a treaty with the US dealing with the handing over of banking information on UBS customers. This amounts to a serious weakening of Switzerland's legendary banking secrecy.

In Leuenberger's own field, the energy sector, bilateral agreements with the EU forced Switzerland to reach agreements with the European electricity and gas companies.

In the last few weeks and months, a number of scandals have brought the Bundesrat into the headlines. At the end of June, a so-called "index card scandal" revealed that despite previous assurances, the secret service was illegally spying on Swiss

citizens and creating index cards on them. It was none other than Leuenberger who, 20 years ago as a special representative, was responsible for the clarification of the first index card scandal.

In addition, there is the ongoing fallout from press revelations that the Swiss army, with the knowledge of the Bundesrat, had plans to send a special army commando unit to Libya to forcibly gain the release of two detained Swiss citizens.

Leuenberger's sudden resignation could have a significant impact on the political fortunes of the Socialist Party. Christoph Blocher, of the right-wing Swiss People's Party (SVP), has loudly claimed Leuenberger's seat in the Bundesrat for the SVP. His party, which launched the initiative to ban minarets, is exploiting this situation to install the ultra-conservative Caspar Baader in the Bundesrat.

If this occurs, the Social Democrats would then lose their second seat in the Bundesrat, which would be the end of the *konkordanzdemokratie* system, in place since 1959. Since then, the Social Democrats have always held two seats in the Bundesrat. The price for this has been their loyalty to the bourgeois state, since collective responsibility means Bundesrat members must support all government decisions with one voice.

During the 15 years of the Leuenberger era, Switzerland has experienced dramatic political and social upheavals. This has included the rapid rise of the right-wing SVP. While in 1995 the Social Democrats were the largest party in parliament, in 2003 they found themselves far behind the SVP, which received almost 30 percent of the votes.

In addition, Switzerland has been transformed by globalisation and growing economic uncertainty. International financial markets and transnational corporations have begun to dominate every sector of society.

The national airline Swissair, which for many citizens was a symbol of national independence, had to be liquidated in 2002. In 2008, the global financial crisis also threatened to plunge the Swiss banking giant UBS into the abyss, because it was deeply implicated in the American speculative boom. The government and the national bank rescued UBS, with a package costing over 60 billion Swiss francs (€44 billion).

As in every country, the costs of this bailout are being passed onto the working population. Poverty, unemployment and social deprivation are again an acute issue in Switzerland. Under these conditions, society's ideological cement is crumbling.

In 2001, the "Bergier report" exposed the propaganda of a

democratic “Alpine Fortress” as a myth. The report revealed how Swiss banks and enterprises had benefited from collaborating with Hitler’s Third Reich. It confirmed that in the years 1942-1943, the Swiss government had turned away thousands of Jewish refugees. The publication of the report disproved Switzerland’s long claimed national identity as a “neutral and defensive democracy” that had defied the Nazi threat based on its own resources.

Switzerland is today a deeply divided society. The country has the highest per capita wealth in the world, but it is very unequally distributed. Ten percent of the population own virtually three quarters of all private wealth, as the economist Hans Kissling has showed, placing Switzerland ahead of the US in this measure of inequality.

The number of millionaires as a proportion of the total population is only higher in Singapore and Hong Kong. At the same time, in the last 15 years, a drastic redistribution of wealth has taken place.

For example, in the Canton of Zurich, the richest 1 percent of the population has been able to increase its wealth by more than 70 percent, while the bottom third of taxpayers have no savings at all.

According to a study by Caritas in 2006, one in seven people cannot survive on their own resources. A quarter of a million children below the age of 18 live in poor households. One in six elderly people is considered poor.

The SVP, under the populist multimillionaire Christoph Blocher, has particularly benefited from the uncertainties facing large sections of the population. This right-wing party has sought to mobilise farmers and middle class layers against foreigners and Muslims, driving a wedge into the working class.

Moritz Leuenberger and the Social Democrats bear responsibility for this development. They did nothing to fundamentally oppose the jingoistic propaganda of the SVP or defend the interests of the working class and the socially disadvantaged.

Even when Christoph Blocher entered the Bundesrat in 2003, the SP remained in the government and defended its seats all the more vehemently.

This history of social partnership in Switzerland goes back far beyond the last half century. Its beginnings lay in the end of World War I and the social democrats’ sellout of the general strike of November 1918.

Inspired by Russia’s October Revolution, the Swiss Social Democrats, who were then still adherents of Marxism, decided in 1917 to oppose the war credits and military service. Their leader was Robert Grimm, the organiser of the Socialist Congress in Zimmerwald (1915) and Kiental (1916), at which Lenin and Trotsky also took part.

At the end of the war, when ever-rising food costs and bitter, widespread poverty had driven many workers onto the streets, Grimm and the “Olten Action Committee” he had established called a nationwide general strike for November 10, 1918.

The military immediately occupied the major industrial cities, and there were violent clashes between workers and soldiers in Zurich, which claimed several lives. In response, up to 400,000 workers joined the strike. Exactly one year after the October Revolution, public life in Switzerland was completely paralysed.

But Grimm, who now opposed the views of Lenin and the Bolsheviks and rejected any use of force in the class struggle, signed a government ultimatum after just four days and declared the general strike over. Workers returned to their factories under military guard. The leaders of the strike, among them Grimm, were sentenced to several months’ imprisonment.

In the following period, the SP became a party of the state. It refused to join Lenin’s Third International in 1920, whereupon several members left the party and founded the Communist Party of Switzerland (KPS). The SP even supported the violent suppression of the so-called “communist riots” of 1929 and further strikes. Several trade unions excluded communists from their ranks.

In 1935, Grimm wrote a new SP party programme that no longer contained the aim of establishing the dictatorship of the proletariat. In 1937, the party officially agreed to the defence of the nation, and the unions it controlled accepted “industrial peace”, which virtually amounted to a ban on strikes. In return, workers received some minor concessions on wages and holidays.

In 1943, Ernst Nobs was the first social democrat to join the Bundesrat. In 1959, at the height of the Cold War, social democracy was finally recognised by all the bourgeois parties as a party of state and was given two permanent seats in the Bundesrat.

The boom and economic stability of the postwar period formed the basis for these arrangements, which effectively permanently introduced a government of national unity and tied the working class to the state through various concessions and reforms.

But the global financial crisis means this period is definitely over. Switzerland is no longer able to isolate itself. On the contrary, the financial crisis is having a massive impact on the Swiss banks. The various social-partnership agreements brokered at the national level have lost their objective basis.

Despite the strike ban, industrial disputes are on the rise. There have been several strikes in construction since 2002. SBB Cargo was occupied in March 2008, and the recent strike by airport employees at Geneva-Cointrin are harbingers of new, more violent class struggles.

The government is imposing new austerity measures and cuts, placing the entire burden of the crisis on the workers. The Swiss Social Democratic Party is actively involved in all these processes.

In this situation, an international socialist perspective becomes increasingly important. This must be based lessons of history and strive for the unification of Swiss workers with the working class throughout Europe and worldwide.



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