

Initiative to restrict immigration passed in Swiss referendum vote

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11 February 2014

With an extremely slim majority, Swiss voters backed the initiative of the right-wing Swiss Peoples Party (SVP) “against mass immigration” last Sunday. The electorate voted 50.3 percent in favour, 49.7 percent against. In the end, less than 20,000 votes decided the outcome.

The initiative commits the Swiss government to renegotiate the agreement on freedom of movement with the European Union (EU) within three years. While until now EU citizens were permitted to move to Switzerland without special authorisation if they had a job, in future, restrictions are to apply that will be determined by the national government and regional administrations together with business. In addition, the initiative obligates employers to give preferential treatment to job applicants with a Swiss passport.

The freedom of movement agreement is part of a comprehensive treaty from 1999 that regulates relations between Switzerland and the EU. It encompasses several other areas, including commercial standards, free movement of freight lorries, etc.

The so-called “guillotine clause” applies to the treaty: if one section is abandoned, the whole agreement is invalid. Thus, the abolition of freedom of movement calls Switzerland’s entire relationship with the EU into question.

The result of the vote came as a shock and a surprise. Only a few weeks ago, all polls had predicted a “no” vote. The news dominated the headlines yesterday not only in Switzerland, but in several European countries.

The initiative was proposed by the right-wing populist SVP. Although their prominent leader, the wealthy industrialist Christoph Blocher, did not appear much publicly, he funded the campaign to a considerable extent, with 3 million francs from his own pocket.

All of the other parties, from the business-friendly FDP, to the Christian democratic CVP, the Greens and the Social Democrats promoted a “no” vote. Employers’ organisations and trade unions also took the same position.

Yet the arguments of those in favour of the initiative and those against differed little. While the supporters made immigrant workers responsible for all social problems, the opponents argued from the standpoint of the interests of Swiss business, which is dependent on cheap immigrant labour. Not a single party defended the freedom to choose where one works and lives as a basic democratic right connected with the defence of all of the social and political rights of the working class.

Social Democratic justice minister Simonetta Sommaruga explained that the Swiss health care system, agricultural and building sectors could not function without immigrant labour.

Along with the St. Gallen employers’ association, the business association *economiesuisse* argued that the acceptance of the initiative could have a severe impact on the economy. The skills shortage was already a problem for small and medium-sized businesses, they said.

Under these conditions, the SVP was able to manipulate growing social tensions, the unease about the EU and the mounting anxiety in the face of rising poverty and unemployment and channel them in a reactionary, anti-immigrant direction. It was most successful in rural areas where the immigrant population is at its lowest.

In general, there was a clearly discernible difference between rural and urban communities. In Zurich, the wealthier districts near the lake voted against the initiative, while the rural districts voted in favour. In Zurich itself, particularly in the traditional working

class districts, it was strongly opposed. In districts 4 and 5, only 21 percent voted in favour of the initiative. As a whole, the canton of Zurich opposed the initiative with 52.7 percent voting no.

A divergence also emerged along linguistic lines, between the German-speaking and French-speaking cantons. In the French-speaking cantons of Geneva, Vaud, and Neuenburg, the initiative was rejected by close to 61 percent of voters, and in Freiburg and Jura with well over 50 percent.

The strongest support came in Ticino canton, where more than 60,000 workers commute over the Italian border daily.

Participation stood at almost 56 percent, the highest percentage in a referendum for years.

Although Switzerland is one of the richest countries in the world in terms of its GDP, this wealth is very unequally distributed. For average earners, the cost of living is extremely high. Immigrant workers are deliberately employed to force down wages, and the government and business associations intend to dismantle pensions, social security and health insurance, which have all been described by the media as too expensive and bureaucratic.

As the *St. Galler Tagblatt* wrote shortly before the referendum, “Switzerland has maintained an outrageously expensive social and health care system which is in a dreadful state, with ill-equipped, incompetent people in power, who are totally in the wrong place.” This “stable” finally had to be “cleared out and slimmed down.”

The increase in poverty stands in contrast to the growing wealth of a privileged layer of millionaires. In Switzerland, over a million people are at risk of poverty and almost 600,000 are considered poor. On the other side of the social divide, in a land of 8 million, there are 395,000 households with private wealth of more than \$1 million.

On the financial advisers list from Boston Consulting in May 2013, which is based on the number of millionaires, Switzerland is in fifth place globally and second in Europe only to Britain. Since 2012, the percentage of millionaires in Switzerland is the second highest behind Qatar; 116 households out of 1,000 possess wealth of more than \$1 million.

Christoph Blocher, the originator of the initiative, is a member of this super-rich club. With an estimated

wealth of 2-3 billion francs, he is counted among the 50 richest people in the country.

The business-friendly FDP called immediately after the referendum for “a comprehensive economic reform to oppose the threatened isolation of Switzerland, in order to strengthen our global competitiveness.” Although the FDP had opposed the initiative, they said that Blocher should lead negotiations with the EU.

In the capitals of Europe, the growing opposition to the EU expressed in the referendum provoked an atmosphere of alarm. The German daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung* commented that the Swiss decision could emerge as a beacon against the union: “The Swiss have opened Pandora’s box, which could serve the interests of others opposed to freedom of movement.”

In some countries it is expected that right-wing opponents of the EU will be significantly strengthened in May’s European elections, such as the National Front in France or the United Kingdom Independence Party in Britain. But the governments have prepared the way for these parties by stirring up extreme anti-immigrant chauvinism, particularly against immigrants from Romania and Bulgaria.

These right-wing forces can only be fought by a party that opposes the EU from the left and unites workers in all European countries on the basis of a socialist programme. Only the sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Germany) and the Socialist Equality Party (Britain), are campaigning in the European elections for this perspective.



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