

Swiss referendum opposes purchase of fighter jets

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On May 18, Switzerland voted in referendums on the introduction of a minimum wage and the purchase of 22 Gripen fighter planes. Over three quarters of the referendum's participants (76.3 percent) opposed a legal minimum wage of 22 Swiss francs (€18). The defeat of the government on the issue of the fighter planes is even more noteworthy. With a high rate of participation by Swiss standards of 56 percent, 53.4 percent expressed opposition to the purchasing of new fighter jets.

Business associations and bourgeois politicians led an unprecedented campaign against the minimum wage, which they alleged acutely endangered "Switzerland as an economic location." The trade unions, Social Democrats (SP), Greens, and the Alternative List (AL), who initiated the minimum wage proposal, were not able to offer much resistance. They advanced nationalist slogans, such as the Unia trade union's appeal: "strong country, fair pay."

In addition, the immigrants who are most disadvantaged, who make up between 25 and 40 percent of the workforce among lower level employees, were not allowed to vote.

The "no" vote opposing the purchase of 22 new fighter jets is part of the global opposition to the growth of militarism. In the face of the campaign for war against Russia and the threat of a third world war, the referendum result is of great significance.

Opposition was especially strong in all urban and industrial areas, including the cities Basel, Zurich, Geneva, Bern, Winterthur, Aarau, Baden and St. Gallen, and also in Jura, French-speaking Switzerland, lower Valais and Ticino. By contrast, in the farming areas of central Switzerland there was overwhelming support.

The government and parliament voted in autumn 2013 for the purchase of 22 Gripen fighter planes from

Swedish producer Saab, after which the Group for a Switzerland Without an Army (GSoA), with the support of the Social Democrats and Greens, called for a referendum against it.

The government, right-wing parties and the media also mobilised their entire well-funded propaganda apparatus on this issue. The vote was dramatically portrayed as a "commitment for or against the defence of the country," and critics of the Gripen deal were personally insulted in the media.

An incident with an Ethiopian Airlines plane in February came at just the right time for the Gripen supporters. When the co-pilot took the plane hostage in Geneva in order to apply for asylum in Switzerland, the media was dominated by discussion over the readiness of the Swiss air force, not immigration policy.

It was immediately declared that readiness within 24 hours could only be guaranteed with the additional 22 Gripen planes. The Ethiopian plane had been escorted by French and Italian interceptor planes because the incident happened at 6 a.m. and the Swiss air force was only ready to deploy during "normal office hours."

According to its data sheet, the Gripen has an operational range of 800 kilometres, meaning it could hit targets as far away from Switzerland as London, Budapest or Sardinia. This alone is proof that the issue is not the readiness of the Swiss air force, but rather that Switzerland wants to fulfil its "responsibility in Europe and in the world," as it has been so nicely summed up, or its imperialist interests in alliance with the EU and NATO.

Notwithstanding its oft-cited neutrality, Switzerland is closely bound by its economic interests to the major global capitalist powers. It is no accident that with almost every environmental catastrophe, it emerges that a firm based in Switzerland was involved.

This was the case with the explosion of the Deepwater Horizon oil platform on the US Gulf Coast, which belonged to the offshore transportation firm Transocean, and the sinking of the Prestige oil tanker off the coast of Galicia, Spain, which was owned by Crown Resources. The latter also deals in offshore transport and belongs to the Russian oligarch Alexei Kusmichev.

The importance of oil and gas in every conflict (Iraq, Iran, Libya, and now in Ukraine) is well known. A problem that is almost as big is the arms trade. In relation to its size, Switzerland is also over-represented in this area. According to SIPRI it is in 13th place among global weapons exporters, even ahead of Canada.

Influence can also be brought to bear with weapons imports like the Gripen. Countries like Switzerland, which are not dependent on a particular supplier, can influence others through their purchasing policy. Unlike other neutral countries such as Finland and Austria during the Cold War, Switzerland never bought fighter planes from Sweden, which was also neutral, but rather from NATO members Britain, France or the US. Since during a war or the danger of one the producers must be relied upon for updates or replacement parts, this sent a clear signal: we belong to you.

This time the negotiations over the Saab Jas39 Gripen were conducted to replace the F-5E from American producer Northrop Grumman, which is now owned by Boeing Aerospace. That only European competitors were acknowledged, and the competition from the US, Russia or China was not shortlisted in spite of better production prices, was in turn a political statement: we belong to Europe.

The repeated reference to Switzerland's neutrality was and is pure propaganda aimed at deceiving the public. The Swiss government has always made personnel available for peacekeeping missions, including the KFOR NATO mission in Kosovo, even though the participation in so-called blue helmet UN missions was opposed in a referendum in 1994.

Soldiers from "neutral" Switzerland are currently participating in the Jawtex military exercise in northern Germany, which ends today.

On May 7, Swiss President Didier Burkhalter visited Russian President Vladimir Putin in his capacity as

chairman of the OSCE (Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe). As a neutral, he was given the job of convincing Moscow to agree to the demands of the "international community". The question is posed: how credible is a "neutral mission" of a head of state, whose soldiers are at the same time involved in a major NATO military exercise?

The opposition to the purchasing of the Gripen planes will not result in the government changing its policies. On the contrary! This will be ensured by politicians seen as "left," the Social Democrats and the Greens. They are the firmest defenders of bourgeois Switzerland and its integration into imperialist alliances. They promote and organise participation in NATO "peace" missions and the cooperation with the EU.

Social Democrat President Christian Levrat spoke out in response to the referendum result in favour of closer collaboration with neighbouring countries. Meanwhile, the right-wing populist Swiss Peoples Party of Christoph Blocher intends to use the 3 billion francs set aside for the Gripen purchase to rearm ground troops and for drones.

Neither the isolation of Switzerland nor cooperation with the EU or NATO offers anything for the working class. To resist the danger of war, they must unite with the workers of all European countries and take up the fight for the United Socialist States of Europe.



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