

Switzerland after the National Council elections

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The Swiss parliamentary elections on October 18 initiated a shift to the right in government policy that will be carried out at the cost of the working population. The attacks on wages, working hours, living standards, retirement, social security and fundamental democratic rights will go further and will be accompanied by an increasingly nationalistic propaganda campaign. Workers do not have any representation either in parliament or in government.

The right-wing Swiss People's Party (SVP) gained almost 3 percent, winning a total of 29.4 percent of the votes cast. As a consequence, the SVP will receive 11 additional seats in the 200-person National Assembly, with a total of 65 seats. The second highest number of votes went to the Social Democratic Party (SP) with 18.8 percent, which corresponds to 43 seats in the National Assembly. The third highest number of votes went to the pro-business party Liberal Party (FDP), which received 16.4 percent, followed by the Christian Democrats (CVP), who received 11.6 percent of the vote.

The composition of the Council of States, in which every state has two seats, has not yet been decided, since in many states a second ballot is necessary.

Although the exact configuration of forces in the national parliament has not been definitively determined, the manoeuvres and intrigues aimed at government power are well under way. In particular, the SVP, which has a right to at least two government ministers because of its election victory, is negotiating behind the scenes to bring another powerful minister into the government in addition to the acting SVP National Council member, Ueli Maurer.

The seven-person Federal Council traditionally consists of representatives of all the large party fractions. All the parties represented take part in its secret consultations and power intrigues.

In several newspaper interviews, Social Democratic president Christian Levrat appealed to the business party FDP not to collaborate with the SVP. It would have to decide "whether it would like to play at making a blockade or further the reforms", he said. In the Bern newspaper *Bund*, Levrat said, "The rational forces will have to come to the foreground in the middle class in order to secure a certain balance."

Practically all the members of parliament in Switzerland are high-income earners, and the large majority belong to the richest 10 percent of the population. Some individuals among them even belong to the richest one-tenth of 1 percent.

The Swiss government prides itself on a special closeness to the people, since political offices are normally occupied part-time. In reality, this system leads to a situation in which practically the only people who can run for political office are well-off. In the countryside,

in particular, it is difficult for parties that are not very rich to find suitable candidates for the elections. It is above all businessmen and their subordinates who are in a position to be politically active for many years and to finance their own election campaigns.

If one takes a look at the relationship between the interests of the representatives of the people in parliament and the government, then one sees in a single glance that the overwhelming majority directly represent the interests of Swiss companies and large corporations. Above all the SVP and FDP representatives, but also the parliamentarians of other fractions, often sit on management councils and, as lobbyists, directly represent the interests of the corporations in parliament parallel to their political mandate.

The SP parliamentarians who do not have a management mandate or are independent contractors are often high-level union functionaries and, in this capacity, protect the interests of the trade associations of large corporations.

Without a doubt, the financial means of the parties have played a role in the election results. The financially strongest parties, the SVP and FDP, won increases in the election at the expense of the smaller parties.

In Switzerland, parties' election spending is kept secret and there is no possibility of finding this out, since the parties are not required to reveal either their income or expenditures during an election campaign. Nevertheless, it is no secret that the expenditures on election propaganda have massively increased in comparison with earlier elections.

According to a study carried out by the Swiss police and justice department in 2011, the right-wing business parties SVP and FDP spend much more on election ads than, for example, the SP or the Greens, which spend about 60,000 CHF (Swiss francs) on each seat in parliament. The SVP spent an average of 215,000 CHF per candidate and the FDP an average of 208,000 CHF per candidate.

These differences have no doubt only increased in this year's election. The study said: "In general, the further to the right a party is, the higher its ad expenditures per parliamentary seat, and also the other way around." It concluded: "The money is located on the right-side of the centre."

For these reasons, it is not surprising that the large majority of the working class were not interested in this election. There are simply no parties that they could elect to represent them. The interest in the elections was very limited this time. The voter turnout amounted to only 48.4 percent, only slightly below the level in 2011.

Anyone who takes a closer look at the voter turnout will notice a strikingly higher participation in the election in the better-off communities surrounding Lake Zurich. On the other hand, in the

poorer communities in the outskirts of Zurich, where a lot of workers live, the voter turnout was much lower than the national average. This can also be observed in many other large cities and their surrounding communities.

In the absence of alternatives to the bourgeois parties, many workers did not participate in the elections at all, if they even had the right to vote. A large section of the working class consists of immigrant workers who do not have the right to vote because they are not Swiss citizens. This section of workers suffers the most from austerity measures and cuts to social programmes, but no fraction in parliament represents their interests.

In the state of Neuenburg, Denis de la Reussille won the only National Council mandate for the ex-Stalinist Party of Labour (PdA). He had committed himself to the working class in the election and promised to fight for state retirement and a more just system of taxes. He won almost 11,000 votes, or 12.2 percent, with this platform. However, de la Reussille does not represent a socialist alternative. Significantly, in a newspaper interview, he praised the Greek Syriza party, which betrayed the Greek working class in July, in the highest possible terms.

In Switzerland, it is possible to bring any legislation that is accepted by parliament to the people if 50,000 signatures are gathered among eligible voters within a hundred days. This provision would not represent an insurmountable hurdle even for smaller parties that wanted to force legislation to be put to a vote by the people. However, there is no party that takes advantage of this opportunity in order to defend the interests of workers.

The referendum provision has been used above all in the recent period by the SVP headed by multimillionaire Christoph Blocher, which has engaged in a constant propaganda battle to spread chauvinism and resentment against immigrants. With its most recent initiative, “Swiss law instead of foreign judges”, the SVP is even demanding the withdrawal of Switzerland from the European Human Rights Convention.

In the election, the SVP encouraged fears about the loss of jobs as a consequence of immigration and, together with the FDP, about the exploding costs of the asylum system. It claimed that immigration from Muslim countries represented a particular danger and placed the internal security of the country in question. At a time of economic insecurity, it is trying to assign responsibility for the loss of jobs and rising costs to the weakest members of society—immigrants and refugees—because it wants to divide the working population, undermine their international solidarity and encourage the most reactionary layers of society.

No party has opposed the inhumane propaganda against war refugees from Syria, and all have avoided addressing the plight of these refugees whenever possible. Not a single party spoke in favour of opening the borders to people who are in danger of losing their lives as a consequence of imperialist war. Nor has any party mentioned the lucrative export of arms and weapons to, for example, Qatar.

There is a great deal of solidarity with refugees among the working population. This is demonstrated by the donations that have been gathered by aid organisations such as Swiss Solidarity. However, these sentiments could not be expressed in any way through the elections.

The fear-mongering efforts serve merely as a distraction from the real problems that have threatened the lives of workers since the financial crisis of 2008.

Switzerland has a liberal market economy. The workers have virtually no right to influence policy within the corporations, not to mention protections against dismissal. Wage cuts and increases in working hours are on the agenda. The loss of buying power has taken on unprecedented proportions in Switzerland in the past few years, while health insurance premiums have risen every year, sometimes even by double-digits.

Rent prices in the housing market have reached a level that makes it impossible for workers in the larger cities to find an affordable place to live. Although immigration is repeatedly raised as a reason for the rise in prices, the real cause is the continuing privatisation of apartment buildings in the interests of institutional investors such as banks, insurance companies and pension funds.

The repercussions of the financial crisis of 2008 continue to be felt to the present day in Switzerland, whose export industry has had to contend with the consequences of the upward reevaluation of the Swiss franc in January of this year. The losses bound up with this will now be shifted onto the population. Many corporations in the export economy have carried out wage cuts and lengthened work schedules.

All parties support the nationalistic course of Switzerland with regard to the EU in one or another form. This has led to a serious decrease in the purchasing power of the population in the past few years, since many products in Switzerland are more expensive than they are abroad because of the lack of competition and the import bans. There is also no indication that this situation will change in the near future.

Instead, since the vote on “mass immigration” last year, it has been debated whether Switzerland should distance itself even further from the EU and whether even the existing contracts with the EU concerning personal freedom of movement should be dissolved in favour of returning to the system of controlled immigration quotas.

The FDP and the SVP are farthest apart on the question of to what extent Switzerland should open itself up to the EU. While the FDP represents above all the interests of finance capital and therefore demands a certain liberalisation of the market, the SVP pursues a course that is aimed at isolating the country in order to protect Swiss industry and agriculture from foreign competition. Neither of these two policies corresponds to the interests of the working class.

All of the parties in parliament are in agreement that the competitiveness of the Swiss economy must be increased at the cost of the workers. To this end, the weakest layers of society will be hit hard in the next four years with austerity measures and cuts in the health industry, unemployment insurance, social security and retirement.

The only way forward for Swiss workers is to build a new party that fights for socialism and against capitalism in close collaboration with their fellow workers in other countries. This party can only be the Fourth International under the leadership of the International Committee.



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