

Swiss building workers strike in Ticino and Geneva

Marianne Arens
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Thousands of construction workers participated in partial “warning” strikes in the Swiss cantons of Ticino and Geneva last week. Workers are opposing “wage dumping,” i.e., outsourcing to low-wage contractors, and excessive working hours. The workers are also intent on defending their hard-won pension system, which allows them to retire at the age of 60.

On September 15, around 3,000 construction workers marched to the headquarters of the Swiss Association of Builders in Bellinzona, the largest city in the canton of Ticino. One day later, another 2,500 workers blocked the Mont Blanc Bridge in Geneva and decided to extend the strike several more days. A poll this summer of 20,000 construction workers found that 93 percent would be prepared to strike to defend early retirement.

The existing three-year contract (LMV) for around 80,000 workers in the construction industry is due to expire at the end of the year. Due to the close cooperation between the employers and the builders’ unions, Unia and Syna, workers have not received any wage increases for three years, although the construction industry and profits are booming.

Contractors have now announced that they will increase wages by 150 Swiss francs (US \$150) a month starting next year. However, in return they are demanding an increase in flexible working hours from 100 to 300 hours a year. This would mean that construction workers would be required to work an average 10-hour day in the summer without receiving any overtime pay. Factoring in travel times to work and back many workers would in effect be obliged to complete a 12-hour working day.

At the same time, workers contributions to their pension plan are to be increased, while employers’ contributions are reduced. The national pension fund

terminated its contract with the construction industry in May, because, allegedly, too many construction workers were taking early retirement.

The right to retire at age 60 was won by construction workers 16 years ago following a nationwide strike. The plan has remained a thorn in the side of employers ever since.

Recently, the unions agreed a new contribution structure that penalises workers and favours employers. According to the new plan, employer contributions to the FAR (Flexible Retirement Scheme), which regulates early retirement, are to be reduced from 6 to 5.5 percent while worker contributions increase from 1.5 to 2.25 percent of their gross wage.

The construction industry is one of the most lucrative industries in Switzerland and employs around 100,000 workers, including many cross-border commuters from Italy. Temporary work and subcontracting are increasing on construction sites. Older workers over fifty are being released and can only find work on a temporary basis. As temporary workers, they often end up working for the same companies they had previously been employed at for decades.

According to one study, the number of temporary employed workers on Swiss construction sites has risen by more than twenty percent in just three years, with the greatest increase among the over-50s. Frequently these temporary workers are unable to find work in winter, can no longer pay their pension fund contributions and lose their entitlement to the early retirement scheme.

The Unia and Syna unions approach the problem of wage dumping as a purely national issue. To protect Swiss wages, they are demanding measures to be taken to restrict foreign workers. In so doing they divide and disarm workers faced with the employers’ attacks. The

unions have gone so far as to support police raids on construction sites.

Unia and Syna are in constant negotiations with the building employers and are striving to conclude a new contract on November 9. In negotiations in August and September, they already agreed to the paltry 150 franc salary increase with strings attached, claiming it was a victory in the fight for the early retirement.

The unions are now organising toothless protests and lightning strikes to dissipate the militancy of workers. The protests are a blatant maneuver aimed at crippling the workforce and preventing the development of a broader movement of the working class.

In September, Unia and Syna trade union delegates decided on this week's short term strikes after concluding that construction workers would never accept such a massive increase in forced overtime in exchange for the poisoned bait of the 150 franc wage increase.

The 150 franc increase, coming on the heels of three years of stagnant wages, is not just a ridiculous pittance but a dangerous fraud. The threatened extension of working days in summer is a frontal attack on workers' health and lives. As is well known, work on construction involves the risk of back and joint ailments, arthritis, etc. Any extension of working hours not only increase such health risks, it also massively increases the risk of falls and other potentially fatal accidents.

The latest strikes and protests express the extent of the discontent prevailing in factories and on construction sites. However, what is required is a new political perspective. The *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Committee of the Fourth International call for workers to set up action committees, independent of the unions, to unite native born and immigrant workers and workers in Switzerland with workers across national borders. Contact the Socialist Equality Party (Sozialistischen Gleichheitspartei, PSG) in Germany to connect the struggles of Swiss construction workers with fellow workers across the globe on the basis of a socialist program.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit: