

# Referendum in Switzerland: A vote for the fight against the coronavirus pandemic

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Amid an explosive new coronavirus wave, a clear majority of 62 percent in Switzerland voted on Sunday to keep the COVID-19 law in place. The turnout was unusually high at more than 65 percent. This should not be interpreted as approval of the government's coronavirus policies but rather as a vote by the population for a truly effective fight against the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic.

At the centre of the vote was the COVID-19 law, the legal basis for the official "3G" certificate documenting a person's status as vaccinated, recovered or tested negative. The referendum was initiated by a committee of "friends of the constitution," close to the right-wing populist Swiss Peoples Party (SVP). The committee claims the certificate is an "attack on personal freedoms" and should be abolished because it leads to "health apartheid" in Switzerland. There were loud demonstrations for a "No" vote with cowbells and the waving of Swiss flags.

Despite all the propaganda, the result on Sunday was clear. Only two cantons, Schwyz and Appenzell-Innerrhoden, rejected the coronavirus measures. Several major cities—Basel, Bern, Zurich, Lucerne—approved them by over 70 percent. This reflects the growing will of the most advanced layers of the population to fight the pandemic effectively.

In this country of 8.7 million people, case numbers have been climbing steeply for weeks. Nearly one million, or 11.32 percent of the population, have already been infected, according to official figures, and 11,471 coronavirus patients have died. The seven-day incidence rate per 100,000 inhabitants was over 500 on voting day, meaning that 5 out of every 1,000 residents had been infected with coronavirus in the past week. The vaccination rate is also below the European average: just 65 percent are fully vaccinated. The first

suspected cases of the Omicron variant are now forcing the government to tighten entry regulations.

The clear vote in favour of the COVID-19 law should not be seen as giving the Swiss government policy a blank cheque. Rather, it shows that people want to oppose the right-wing lobby, which is pursuing a profits-before-lives policy under the slogan of "national freedom." Under pressure from big business and the banks, the government was one of the first to lift pandemic measures last spring. Cinemas, theatres, restaurants and entertainment establishments were reopened, while commercial businesses were never closed and the recommendation to work from home was being implemented only very half-heartedly.

The Pandemic Act would indeed allow the Bundesrat (federal executive) to establish nationally applicable rules up to and including a lockdown. But with an eye on the business associations and the SVP, which sits in the all-party government, Health Minister Alain Berset (Social Democratic Party of Switzerland, SP) has so far refrained from imposing any drastic measures.

Schools in particular have long been open without restrictions and have deliberately dispensed with mask wearing, testing and social distancing rules for the younger grades. The Swiss Society of Paediatrics (SGP) has explicitly endorsed this herd immunity strategy.

Concerned parents have responded by joining forces on social media in advocacy groups such as #ProtecttheKids, "Safe School," or "Protect Children—Now!" They published an "Open Letter to Swiss Paediatricians—Protect the Kids" with 15 questions, the last of which reads, "How do you justify your current recommendation to abandon virtually all attempts at containment in children—especially since vaccination for children under 12 will only be available

in a few months?”

The paediatric association’s policy has also drawn open criticism from scientists, including Geneva-based virologist Isabella Eckerle. She has written a document, “A science-based public health strategy for SARS-CoV-2 should guide Swiss schools through the coming winter.”

One of the signatories is Bern epidemiologist Christian Althaus, who left his position as a government adviser in January 2021 in protest. The National Council (lower chamber of the federal parliament) Economic Commission tried strenuously to muzzle the members of the federal government’s scientific task force and ban them from speaking out.

At the time, the task force had called for “nationwide strong measures analogous to the March [2020] lockdown.” However, while coronavirus deniers and QAnon types receive the most media attention, warning voices from scientists are being systematically sidelined.

Meanwhile, outbreaks at schools have been erupting for weeks, and hospitalizations and admissions to intensive care units are steadily increasing. Employees at old age and nursing homes are also increasingly reaching their limits, and resentment is rising.

This was also clearly demonstrated on Sunday in a second vote on emergency care. The popular initiative “For strong care” also received more than 60 percent approval. It is explicitly directed against a half-hearted counter-proposal by the government and parliament.

Significantly, the care initiative goes back to a petition that took place long before the coronavirus pandemic. As early as November 2017, the Swiss Professional Association of Nurses (SBK) had submitted more than 120,000 signatures for its initiative against the nursing crisis. Amid the pandemic, it has now been approved by a large majority.

The pandemic has exacerbated all the smoldering social conflicts and taken them to the extreme. However, the vote has by no means resolved the conflicts. They are deeply intertwined with the class interests of big business and the banks, as is evident from the fact that the controversial COVID-19 law simultaneously authorizes the government to hand out large sums of money to businesses as “Coronavirus aid.”

A truly science-based coronavirus policy that puts

lives before profits will only be possible when the working class takes the struggle into its own hands. To achieve this, it is necessary to build the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) in Switzerland as well and to publicize its initiative, the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).



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