Swiss Labor Activists' "Think Network" Proposes Alternatives on Public Policy

written by Dan La Botz | May 27, 2011

Swiss German labor activists on the left have over the last few years undertaken a project which might be of interest to those of us in North America. Denknetz or Think Network is a leftwing think tank created in 2004 by a group of labor union activists, staff members, and others to address policy issues. The fundamental principles of the group are the promotion of freedom, justice and solidarity and the view that those three things must be fundamentally linked to each other.

"We think that a collective like Denknetz can make a real contribution," says Beat Ringger, staff member of the Swiss Public Employees Union and the Director of the project. "We recognize that some people work through building leftist political organizations and parties, and we think that's fine—some of us are members of such groups. But we think this sort of project, that is, organizing political discussion and carrying out serious analyses, and developing alternative proposals an make a unique contribution. Since the 1990s, the Swiss German-speaking left has been fragmented, and we believe that this sort of project can help re-establish a common language, methods and ideas. We develop analyses and alternatives and off them to the left."

The group now has 750 members, most of the German-speaking Swiss but also some French-speaking Swiss and others from Germany and other places. The group publishes articles and books and organizes about 5 to 10 forums a year on social issues of importance to the Swiss labor and social movements and to the Swiss people in general.

Since its founding Denknetz has created working groups on various issues which have published articles, position papers and books. The working groups tackle issues such as a guaranteed national income (called a "conditional income" in Europe), taxation policy, education issues, social security, informal and precarious work, the status of women and the "care economy"—child care, elder care and other issues.The organization has published a variety of position papers, six yearbooks, a book dealing with social insurances and a book on taxation to appear this summer.

"For twenty years we have had attacks on our social security system," says Ringger. "We have a big problem with the general direction our society is heading. We argue that we have to take back money from the financial institutions and redistribute it to the society as a whole. Our first two books take up these issues." *The Great Reform: A General Earnings Insurance* (*Die grosse Reform: Die Allgemeine Erwertsversicherung*) analyzes the current, complex Swiss workers' insurance system and argues that it be streamlined and simplified by creating one insurance for unemployment, on-the-job injuries and health issues. A second book which is in the works *The Right Course—The Right Taxes* (*Richtig Steuern*) argues that the the Swiss people should take back five percent more of the annual GDP of the wealth of the rich to pay for social and ecological programs.

The Denknetz group also published proposals for the reorganization of the financial markets. "We believe that regulation is not enough," says Ringger. "We think that basic banking functions such as savings and checking accounts should be in the hands of publicly owned financial institutions," meaning something like our American credit unions.

"We need a new direction in our society," says Ringger. "We believe that this project will help

to begin to set us on a better course.”