

Travel Notes - Impressions of the Left in Switzerland

April 22, 2016



I am in Switzerland to attend the Spring University of Swiss Solidarity, a radical socialist group most active in the French speaking region, for whose newspaper *solidarities* I write regularly. I've been talking to some of the group's activists about the situation here, and they have given me some impressions of the situation of the left here. So these are my impressions, just impressions.

There have been two important movements in Switzerland recently, the first in the Canton (state) of Geneva. Geneva, with a population of about 500,000 in the metropolitan area, is dominated by a conservative party that represents high finance linked to international capital and which is bent on imposing austerity on the country's working people—but it has met resistance.

The public employee unions in Geneva carried out an important 7-day long strike, and a demonstration of more than 10,000 people, just before Christmas last year. The unions struck, under the pressure of the rank-and-file workers, against a new budget being imposed by the canton government.

The Geneva Canton government proposed budget cuts, arguing that if there were not cuts immediately there would soon be a deficit. If the original budget for 2016 had passed, it would over three years have reduced the overall wage (both wages and benefits) by 5 percent while also increasing the workweek from 40 to 42 hours. The proposed budget would also have reduced state funding for the para-state institutions, hospitals, universities, seniors' assisted-living facilities, and cultural institutions museums and theaters. The proposed 2016 budget would also kept workers from receiving the small step increase in wages that are the norm.

In the parliament the majority voted for strong laws against labor, passing a hiring freeze until the Canton of Geneva's debt was under 7 billion francs, which would take about twenty years to achieve. The conservatives argued that the debt had to be reduced immediately, though the current debt of 12 billion francs costs almost nothing because the interest rate is close to zero. The public employees weren't having it.

With the workers up in arms, the Canton of Geneva government said to the unions, that it would try to pass another budget for 2016 trying to soften the 5 percent cut. The Geneva government, however, decided to simply extend the 2015 budget, though it was not adequate either. Then, surprisingly, the Geneva government somehow found almost one billion francs that had not previously been accounted for, leading the moderate Populist Party (some of whose leading members are police officers and public employees) to vote with the Socialists, the Greens, the radical Ensemble a Gauche against the Conservatives' budget. In the end, the union could claim a

small victory in the fight over the 2016 budget. Yesterday, at the initiative of Ensemble à Gauche, the majority of the Geneva Canton parliament voted a non-binding resolution to stop the cuts. Geneva is on the frontline, but the same battle against austerity is going on in every Canton in Switzerland.

The second important development, called Collectif R in Lausanne and called "No Bunkers" in Geneva, is a movement to safeguard asylum rights and for better conditions for asylees in Switzerland. It is called "No Bunkers" because some of those who had received asylum in Switzerland were being housed in bomb shelters and bunkers built during the Cold War out of fear at that time of Soviet aggression. The bunkers are hardly appropriate housing for immigrants who have received asylum. The movement's slogans are "No Bunkers" and "No Borders."

While the movement has been around for years, but now new, young activists recently became involved and set up their headquarters in the Saint Laurent Church in Lausanne that has become the center and symbol of the movement. They have also occupied part of the University of Lausanne and carried their protests right into the Federal parliament.

There are now two important political struggles taking place in the country, one dealing with the social security system and the other with taxation. Switzerland has a retirement system much like our own, with an employer-worker funded public fund and private funds like our 401Ks. The public system is inadequate and the private system is risky, so the Swiss left is pushing to bring the both funds under public regulation.

At the same time, the right is pushing to reduce taxes on Swiss corporations, with the usual argument that reducing taxes will attract investment and make the country more competitive, and naturally the left is fighting against any such conservative change in tax laws.

What constitutes the far left in Switzerland? In French speaking Switzerland *solidarités Suisse* is the most important group, while in Germany the far left has several components. There are three important organized groups: The Young Socialists are affiliated to the German Swiss Socialist Party, but are to the left of it. Another group is Revolutionärer Aufbau (or simply Aufbau), an unlikely combination of Stalinist, Maoist, and autonomist groups, known for its violent tactics. Finally there is the Trotskyist group Movement toward Socialism. In addition to these three there are many small autonomist or anarchist groups.

Well, based on conversations with a few activists, those are my impressions of the left in Switzerland, but they are just impressions.