

The women's strike in Switzerland - a historic day!

Susanne Kühn, New International 239, Berlin, July/August 2019 Mon, 15/07/2019 - 14:49

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On June 14, in Switzerland, around half a million people took part in the women's strike. In all major cities, but also in parts of the country that are not well organised politically or in trades unions, women, especially those who work in the care sector or education, were on strike. In many places, strikes and actions began in the morning and spread throughout the day. According to the Swiss Confederation of Trade Unions, some 100,000 people took part in the strike on the morning of 14 June.

At 3:24 pm, one of the central moments of the action, hundreds of thousands of women throughout the country left their jobs or stopped their "private" care work. There were demonstrations in all the main cities but also many smaller ones. The largest was in Zurich, where more than 160,000 people, most of them women, took to the streets in one of the largest rallies in the city's history! In cities like Basel, 40,000 people, or more than 20 percent of the population, were on the streets.

The women's strike is a historic event, if only because of its size. The Swiss population counts around 8.5 million people, so some 17 percent took part in the action, which would correspond to about 14 million in Germany!

For what and by whom?

The movement in Switzerland consciously identified with the International Women's Strikes, in which millions also participated in 2019. The fact that the Swiss march did not take place on March 8 but on June 14 is explained by the history of the struggle for equality. In 1991, a first women's strike, also of around half a million, took place, organised and led by the Swiss Confederation of Trade Unions to demand the consistent implementation of the Equal Treatment Act that had been adopted in 1981.

Many of the goals set then for equal treatment, equal income, wages and working conditions, against sexist harassment and sexual violence have not yet been met and once again figured in the manifestos, appeals and demands for the Women's Strike, 2019. Particularly affected are migrant women who have been repeatedly oppressed and deprived of their rights and who, like sexually oppressed people, are a preferred target of Swiss right-wing populism from the "Swiss People's Party" (SVP). The day of action was therefore not only marked by solidarity with the new global women's movement, but also with migrant women, whose unlimited right of residence and full legal and social equality were demanded.

The main reason for the historical success of the women's strike is that it was mobilised and organised by working class women. The "women's question" emerged, though not fully consciously, as a class question and as one inseparably linked to the struggle against imperialism and capitalism.

As in 1991, and unlike the last women's strikes in Germany, the unions, especially in the public service and health sectors, played a key role in the mobilisation. Associations represented in the industrial and private

sectors, such as Unia, also actively organised strikes, for example, of cleaners at A&M Duraes Reinigung + Hauswartung GmbH in Lucerne.

Self-organisation

Unlike in 1991, however, the strike was less "top-down". This year, base organisations had been forming for months in numerous companies and offices, and it was these that led and organised the struggle. These were led by women, but also included men or, for example in childcare centres, parents, as supporters.

The important role of company and trade union structures, however, did not mean that the focus was on purely economic issues. The demands for social facilities and financing of care for children and the elderly, for example, which are otherwise passed on to women, gave the movement a wider focus that went beyond purely workplace issues.

A third was the demand for protection from, and a fight against, sexism, violence against women and LGBTIA+ people and for sexual self-determination. Finally, anti-racist and internationalist slogans constituted a fourth main point of the goals of the women's strike. An overview of the movement's demands, manifestos and arguments can be found on the Women's Strike page at:

<https://www.14juni.ch/argumente/> ^[1]

Working women were undoubtedly the main force in the strike, raising anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal and anti-racist slogans on the demonstrations. Like the international mobilisations on March 8 in recent years, the historical women's strike confirms the emergence of a new working class women's movement, even if it is as yet still dominated by petty-bourgeois feminist ideologies, forms of identity politics or the reformist apparatuses of the trade union bureaucracy.

Even before the strike, it was clear to the hundreds of thousands who took part on the day, and even more to the many activists who organised it, that this was not the end but only the first highpoint of the movement. In the coming weeks and months, evaluation forums and meetings are planned to discuss and determine the perspectives, tasks and next steps of the movement.

This can lay the foundation not only for a strong women's movement in Switzerland, but also provide a powerful impulse far beyond the country. Women in other countries can learn a lot from the Swiss activists and comrades, especially with regard to rooting the movement in the workplaces and trade unions.

Connections

In many places the strike was associated with other issues; the fight against racism, right-wing populism, international solidarity as well as the question of the whole system were also raised. This points to the potential not only of the women's strike, but also to the role that a new women's movement can play in the renewal of the workers' movement. Many activists also belong to groups on the radical left or in the left wing of the unions and many are also active in anti-racist struggles or in movements like Fridays for Future.

For them, the question also arises of how and on what programmatic basis a political force, a new revolutionary workers' party, can be built in Switzerland and internationally. The new movement for women's liberation can thus also become a powerful impulse for revolutionising the whole workers' movement, linking the struggle against every form of oppression with that for socialist revolution.

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Links:

[1] <https://www.14juni.ch/argumente/>