

Zeitschrift: The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK
Herausgeber: Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom
Band: - (1965)
Heft: 1481

Artikel: Swiss boom and foreign labour
Autor: [s.n.]
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-693418>

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The Swiss Observer

FOUNDED IN 1919 BY PAUL F. BOEHRINGER.

The Official Organ of the Swiss Colony in Great Britain

Advisory Council: R. J. KELLER (Chairman), GOTTFRIED KELLER (Vice-Chairman), DR. E. M. BIRCHER, O. F. BOEHRINGER, J. EUSEBIO, A. KUNZ, A. STAUFFER, G. E. SUTER.

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Telephone: CLERKENWELL 2321/2. Published Twice Monthly at 23, LEONARD STREET, E.C.2. Telegrams: FREPRINCO, LONDON.

Vol. 51 No. 1481

FRIDAY, 9th JULY 1965

SWISS BOOM AND FOREIGN LABOUR

At the beginning of 1964, Switzerland was forced to introduce an economic stabilisation programme. The inflationary impulses of the economic boom had become so strong that the Government took special measures. The three basic sectors were: the money and capital market (blocking foreign money, limiting the growth of credit controlling capital issues); the building sector (limitation of building by the introduction of building licences); and the labour market (stabilisation of the number of foreign workers at a level of about 700,000). The aim — as the “Annual Financial and Commercial Review” put it — Stability.

On 28th February last, the Swiss electorate was asked whether the restrictions imposed by the Government to stop the rising cost of living, inflation and the stabilisation of the labour market, should be continued for another year. An atmosphere of tension and confusion reigned because the experts themselves disagreed publicly on economic issues too complex for the average man to understand. The “sovereign”, i.e. the citizens, supported the Government in this nation-wide Referendum and accepted proposals which, for the purpose of voting, were grouped in two categories. The first, credits, was accepted by 526,616 to 385,750, and the second, restriction on building, by 507,728 to 406,299 voters.

The confusion by no means lessened after polling. The “Neue Zürcher Zeitung” which had been wholeheartedly behind the Government, said that the electorate had stood the test and had given the measures the necessary moral authority. The “Volksrecht” called the result of the plebiscite a victory of reason. The “Ostschweiz” of St. Gall called it a victory of the quiet in the country and praised the confidence shown in the Government, though warning of what might happen if this confidence were disappointed. The “Neue Berner Zeitung” considered the result proof of maturity, but urged further action. The “Basler Nachrichten” called the outcome of the plebiscite a victory of sober considerations and a proof of the readiness to make sacrifices. The “Luzerner Neueste Nachrichten” wrote about confidence in the Federal Council. The “Tages Anzeiger” said that the hammer did not hit the rising cost of living and asked what would have happened if the foreign labour question had not been introduced into the campaign.

The “Tat” called the result a Pyrrhus Victory and was of opinion that the one thing which would *not* be achieved is a successful fight against increased cost of living. The “National Zeitung” of Basle which had opposed the restrictions energetically all along the line, believed that slogans had won and predicted great disappointment once the storm of the artificially curbed price

increase would break loose in the framework of the restricted economy. The “Schaffhauser Nachrichten” had also opposed the Government’s programme. It judged the result as creating a *provisorium* and that the electorate had obviously agreed in the hope that the economic policy of the State would be successful.

The “Gewerkschaftskorrespondenz” believed the Swiss people had expressed their unmistakable will that the fight against the rising cost of living was dearer to them than a visionary ideology of growth. The “Trumpf Buur” (Aktion für freie Meinungsbildung), described the greatness of the Swiss voting democracy that the people themselves have to bear the consequences of their own decisions. Every group sees in the restrictions their own instrument for improvement. But why have such an instrument at all? In all other countries of Europe where such instruments have been used, the cost of living has gone up from between 26% in Germany and 40% in Great Britain, to 60% in Italy, whilst in Switzerland, the increase has “only” been 24% in the same period.

A member of the Swiss committee against the restrictions, Regierungsrat Dr. Albert Scherrer, St. Gall, expressed disappointment but called to mind the saying that one can lose a battle and yet win the war.

In many quarters it was maintained that every Swiss who had taken the liberty of saying “no” was a speculator, a representative of vested interests or — as was stated by a speaker on the radio — “an overeating Swiss who needs a slimming diet”.

Responsible voices go on criticising the restrictions. Amongst them are several professors of economics, Prof. Kueng (Berne), Prof. Salin (Basle) and Prof. Kneschaurek (St. Gall). The credit measures, they maintain, will harm the reputation of the country as an international centre of finance and will have serious repercussions on commerce and trade. At the meeting of the Swiss insurance companies, the Chairman of the General Management of the Swiss Credit Bank, Dr. E. Reinhardt, referred to the barrier of growing discrimination Swiss industry has to fight on important foreign markets. He considered that “Boom political instruments” are unnecessary and should only be used in times of real vital danger.

Economy is an organism which carries its own regulating powers. Many opponents refer to experiences all over the world which speak in favour of a liberalised economy and the limiting of state intervention for national emergencies. They also point out that the Federal Council, as late as 1962 (Federal Councillor Schaffner at the opening of the MUBA) was opposed to State measures of the very kind which have now been taken.

Since the plebiscite four months have passed, and what are the changes — if any? The follow-on programme of the Federal Council has still not been published (on going to press at the end of June), and a certain uneasiness exists. The Federal Councillor asked for patience through Federal Councillor Schaffner at a meeting of the Geneva Chamber of Commerce. It is speculated that the programme will be used as a gentle retrenchment in the measures taken, in other words to camouflage retreat. A sign that the Federal Council is aware of the difficult situation is that two federal loans which should have been converted by the end of June will be converted gradually in order to spare the tightened capital market.

As regards the building restrictions, it must be said that they are decisively dependent on the credit measures. Thus what building has been stopped is mainly due to lack of capital, and this will result in all the greater building activities the moment the restrictions are lifted. Shortly after they came into being, measures had to be taken already by the federal authorities to artificially stimulate housing construction.

On 28th April, a conference took place in Berne at which the Federal Council discussed the boom problems with the cantonal Governments. Federal Councillor Schaffner talked on the economic situation with special reference to the plebiscite, and Federal Councillor Bonvin dealt with finance and present and future obligations by the Confederation. A smaller conference is to study the question of forming a special commission of cantonal representatives to deal with boom policy questions. Federal Councillor von Moos talked about land speculation and Federal Councillor Wahlen opened the discussion on the relation between foreign diplomatic mission and the cantonal Governments.

The terms of reference of the "Commission for Boom Observation" have been extended, and some more scientists have been included. The name has been altered to "Commission for Boom Questions".

This commission reported on 10th June that the rise in the economic boom had definitely been slowed down. Building projects had been cut and import values had been reduced more than export values. The consumer price index has fallen from 3 to 2.2%. The growth of credit has been arrested. On the other hand, the Bank Council of the Swiss National Bank stated that the Swiss boom, generally speaking was still on the same high level, and that export, production and consumption had further increased.

The Federation of the Swiss Import Trade questioned 165 selected firms whether the restrictions had affected them. 31% said yes, 64% answered no, and 5% abstained. Smaller turnovers are reported from the office furniture and machine trade, from steel and iron, machinery and tool trades as well as building materials. Personnel restrictions caused more difficulties.

The two restrictions regarding building and credits concern constitutional law and had to be submitted to the electorate. Incidentally, amongst others, the Basle Chamber of Commerce warned of the danger of having them permanently anchored in Federal Law or even the Constitution. The third measure concerning foreign labour falls under the sole competence of the Federal Council. These regulations came into force on 1st March. According to them, undertakings employing fewer than eleven foreigners had to reduce their foreign contingent by 5% by the end of June. A further reduction of 5% will be made in 1966, which, however, will be more elastic and include com-

muting workers from near the Swiss border, seasonal workers and workers on alpine building sites. Cantonal and local authorities and private firms have complained, and at the Trade Union Congress in May it was pointed out that considerable hardship had been caused in many firms. In the long run the restrictions would lead to complete paralysis in the labour market.

The first and immediate result of the restrictions on foreign labour was "chaos at Chiasso" on the first day. At Brigue, Domodossola, Geneva, Buchs — everywhere the same story: foreigners were turned back. According to some reports, as many as 4,500 Italians alone were sent back during the first few weeks. Other nationals included twenty Turks and a score of Iranians. More foreign workers already in Switzerland have asked for visas to countries like Canada. In a few weeks the number was 700 as against 2-300 at the most during previous months.

At the end of 1964, 793,351 foreign workers had had permits to stay or to reside. This was an increase of 60% since 1960. In addition, their families and 15,000 members of international organisations and administrations and their families have to be counted, bringing the total to a million. The foreign population makes up 14% as against 9½% in 1960. In Geneva it is 30% including international personnel, in the Ticino 22%, Vaud 18%, Zurich 16%. The lowest figures are for Uri with 4% and Obwalden 5%. In 1964, 36,745 entry permits were issued (1963: 242,166) and 2,591 (1,225) refused. 63,399 (42,162) permissions for limited stays were given, 2,268 (1,985) foreigners were turned away at the frontiers and 4,776 (4,074) were prohibited entry for good. The total for new permits issued in 1964 numbered 455,405, 10,354 more than in 1963. Italians are still at the top of the list — this also applies to the whole of Europe according to UNO — 1.5 millions. Luxembourg has 50% foreigners, France 11% and Germany 5%, a grand total of four millions.

According to the last figures available (September 1964), Swiss workers in factories numbered 62.1% and foreigners 37.9%.

Other figures published were those of the transfer of money which amounted to 481.3 million francs to Italy, 89.4 to Spain and 5.9 million francs to Greece.

A circular was sent to cantonal authorities and labour offices by BIGA (Federal Office for Industry, Trade and Labour) giving detailed instruction and asking that registers be established of all firms employing foreigners.

The writer of a leader in "The Times" on 6th April "Keep Switzerland Swiss" said that Switzerland had been so traditionally regarded as the home of international organisations that it came as something of a shock to realise that the Swiss were becoming increasingly concerned about being swamped by the foreigner. As was reported in a previous issue, there is alarm about "over-foreignisation". There is a Swiss popular movement against it. The members advocate a much more drastic reduction. The present 5% is deemed fictitious as under the new agreement with Italy (accepted by 117:26 votes in Parliament in March and which came into force on 22nd April), the Italian workers are allowed to have their families with them after eighteen months. Thus, whilst the number of workers would be smaller, their families would reduce the actual saving in foreign manpower. Assimilation and integration are not altogether desirable as long as the standard of education and culture is lower than generally accepted. There have been feelings of antagonism and resentment. The Churches and other organisations have warned against hatred and discrimination — after all the

Swiss themselves wanted the foreign labourer to do the manual work which they were no longer willing to do.

The restrictions on foreign labour have been received with concern and scepticism in many quarters. It is feared that production will be reduced for the time being as rationalising firms and increasing productivity cannot be effected from one day to the next. There is certainly room for improvement. Whole branches of industry with outdated structure have been able to survive thanks to foreign workers, instead of being forced out of business or at least made to rationalise. Unprofitable production could be stopped. The constant changing of jobs especially amongst the younger employees has an adverse effect on productivity and quality of work. A reduction in the change of jobs from the present 30% of the employees to 10% would enable a saving of up to 100,000 workers.

It is natural that the suggestion to work longer hours has been met with disapproval. The "Trumpf Buur" suggests that with two hours a week more work, another 100,000 foreign workers could be dispensed with. Such proposals are unpopular. The trade union federation rejected them as unacceptable demands. Yet, working more does not only mean being at work for longer hours, but to do better work in an improved "working climate" and a more sensible attitude to the "dirty jobs". The Zurich Chamber of Commerce considers restrictive measures as of problematic value as long as the Swiss people are not ready to take up the less interesting jobs.

The Swiss Bank personnel federation (140,000 members), decided to make a first contribution towards curbing the excessive boom by renouncing any reduction in working hours. When the firm of Rieter in Winterthur asked their staff whether they were willing to work longer hours, 83% were willing to do so. But the trade unions protested violently. They will have to be reasonable.

The whole problem is a complex one. As Dr. ing. Arnold Roth (Aarau) said in an article in the "Neue Zürcher Zeitung" on 11th March, if a ceiling of the total number of workers were to be adhered to for any length of time, the effect on the individual firm would be deathly. It would be the best way to destroy the dynamic character of the proud Swiss industry and to turn it into a museum. He is by no means alone in challenging his compatriots to courageous action. It is essential that the development of the economy will be led back to initiative and freedom of action for the large and small undertaker as well as for the artisan. The very essence of economy is change, expansion and contraction, and these cannot be prevented by force for any length of time.

(News contained in this article apart from sources already mentioned, was received by courtesy of Agence Télégraphique Suisse.)

UEBERFREMDUNG

(wie Elsa von Grindelstein vom "Nebelspalter" sie sieht)

Klage: Man trifft in letzter Zeit bereits
Nur selten Schweizer in der Schweiz,
Fast jeder ist ein Fremder,
Die Heuer und die Emdler,
Die Kellner und Chauffeure,
Und auch die Coiffeure,
Die Maurer undsoweiter
Und alle Hilfsarbeiter.

Trost: Das Schweizer Militär jedoch
Besteht aus lauter Schweizern, noch.

*("Echo" Zeitschrift der
Schweizer im Ausland.)*

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