

Swiss "co-operative" union

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SWISS "CO-OPERATIVE" UNION.

(This article is reprinted from the "Co-operative News," February 28th. It is mainly of local interest but gives an impartial picture of Mr. Duttweiler's personality and politics; he and his new party exercise a rising influence in our economic and political structure in spite of the opposition and critical arraignment of the existing factions in the federal and cantonal governments.)

Details are now becoming available of a remarkable attempt to capture the strongest Swiss co-operative society, the Allgemeiner Consumverein Beider Basel — usually called the A.C.V. — by a strange figure in Swiss economic and political life, Gottfried Duttweiler and his followers.

Duttweiler is the founder and head of Migros, one of the most successful Swiss chain store concerns which on January 1st, 1941, was transformed from a capitalist company into a "co-operative organisation;" he is also the leader of a political party — Landesring der Unabhängigen, the National Union of Independents — which has won some notable successes in national, cantonal, and municipal elections. His policy, though dynamic, does not seem to be based on fundamental principles or ideological conceptions, but is characterised by many changes which make it difficult to determine its general line.

In one of the Swiss daily papers Duttweiler has been described as "the focal point for the attraction of discontent in Switzerland," and it is undoubtedly true that he is using and canalising discontent into a strong current of opposition against the old parties and against whatever obstacles he finds on his way to power. For some time he has pleaded for a "concentration of the co-operative forces, of the social capital in the name of Swiss evolution." His retail chain store enterprise, the Migros A.G., had in 1940, its last business year as a private company, a turnover of 72.5 million francs, which is about 9½ million francs more than the trade of the Basle Society.

It was in June, 1940, that Duttweiler announced his decision to transform his company into a co-operative society, to hand over all the shares to the consumers, a small number being allocated to the employees. On January 1st, 1941, all the shops of the Migros were transferred to the regional Migros co-operative societies founded in the meantime by Duttweiler and his friends. In October, 1941, these societies were federated in the "Migros Co-operative Union," Zurich, whose administration is headed by Duttweiler.

The purpose of this new "co-operative" union is to federate co-operative societies which, "excluding all profit motives, aim at supplying the needs of their members, in accordance with the principles developed by the Migros organisation, and organising the productive and consuming power of the Swiss people in the economic and social sphere." In addition, the new Union sets itself the task of defending the common economic, social, and cultural ideals and interests of the members, especially by the mobilisation of their political rights.

The "Migros Union" has a daily and a weekly paper for its members. Apart from wholesale purchase and production, which will probably lead to the taking

over of the "Migros A.G." factories producing chocolate, confectionery, edible fats, and other foodstuffs, the Union has authority to take over or participate in the capital of existing enterprises of varying kinds. Its shares will be in the hands of affiliated societies, the contribution being 1,000 francs for an annual trade of 60,000 francs and correspondingly more for a higher turnover.

A sharp competitive struggle is taking place between the real co-operative societies and the pseudo co-operative Duttweiler organisation. But in addition to this, Duttweiler is, in the case of the Basle Society, attacking from within by an attempt to conquer the Council of the A.C.V.

The method of election to the Council of the A.C.V. is of giving members the choice of voting for one of a number of lists of candidates, the number of seats being allotted on a strictly proportional basis — the same method as for Parliamentary elections in Switzerland. This system, though it has the effect of making voting very keen, the majority of members voting in the Council elections, has the disadvantage that it favours the formation of groups with conflicting political or economic ideas. As long as the various shades of opinion put allegiance to the common co-operative organisation above their sectional interests, all may go quite satisfactorily; but if that common bond is weakened, a serious crisis may easily develop.

In Basle this danger is clearly discernible since the election on November 21st last, which brought the Duttweiler group a partial success with a total of 6,102 votes and 25 members elected to the Council. The total number of votes recorded was 33,203 (total membership 62,000), and the two main groups, the non-Socialists, comprising practically all parties to the right of the Social-Democrats, and the Social-Democrats obtained, respectively, 13,728 votes and 57 representatives, 9,901 votes and 41 representatives, while the Communists and another smaller group mustered 2,220 votes and eight representatives, and 1,224 votes and four representatives, respectively.

The election campaign was very lively, with stormy meetings and a great deal of publicity; all important Swiss papers devoted long and elaborate leading articles to it. Although the Duttweiler group has not been able to conquer the Co-operative Council, it has broken the long-established majority of the leading group. The result will be either a close collaboration of the two stronger groups which previously very often opposed each other, or Duttweiler will become the ultimate deciding factor.

The A.C.V. tried to counter Duttweiler's attack by tightening its rules concerning eligibility for membership of the Council by the inclusion of a new article to make it impossible for a member of another Consumers' Co-operative Society or the husband or wife of such a member to be elected to the A.C.V. Council.

Basle members of the A.C.V., who are also members of a Migros Society, instituted legal proceedings against this new rule, and obtained a provisional ruling of the Court which suspended its application for the November election, without prejudice to the final decision. But whatever this final decision may be, it seems clear that the provisions of the rules can play at best only a minor part in combating the forces which are now showing themselves at Basle, and which, tomorrow, may make themselves felt at other places.