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The wage packets of low earners under scrutiny

The unions are calling for everyone to receive a wage that is high enough to live off. The employers' associations argue that this is impossible because it would cost the economy billions. The Swiss people will now decide.

By Marc Lettau

The call for everyone to benefit from material prosperity to a "fair" degree is regularly made in Switzerland. The issue of whether a state-controlled distribution of wealth is not per se an expression of a lack of freedom is then disputed just as often. The last time this took place was in the debate over the 1:12 initiative, which sought to restrict management salaries. And now Switzerland is debating the question of whether "decent" minimum wages at least should be set in light of exorbitant top salaries.

The "For the protection of fair wages" initiative (minimum wage initiative) launched by the Swiss Federation of Trade Unions (SGB) and supported by the Social Democratic Party (SP) and the Greens is calling for a statutory minimum wage of 22 francs an hour, which equates to around 4,000 Swiss francs a month in full-time employment.

The Federal Council, Parliament, the conservative parties and the business federations are opposing the popular initiative, which will be put to the vote on 18 May. The lines of argument are familiar. Those behind the initiative claim that wages below 4,000 Swiss francs a month are too little to live off in view of the cost of living in Switzerland. Almost one in ten nevertheless

earns below 4,000 Swiss francs today. According to Daniel Lampart, the chief economist at the Swiss Federation of Trade Unions, mandatory minimum wages would be "a blessing for those concerned" and not really a problem for the economy as a whole. This is vehemently rejected by the opposition. Roland Müller, Director of the Swiss Employers' Association, believes solutions that apply nationwide to all sectors are an anathema. They would result in jobs having to be cut. The business federations are warning that fixed minimum wages would reduce Switzerland's competitiveness. The trade unions retort that higher minimum wages would stimulate the economy and unburden the state because fewer social benefits would have to be paid to the working poor.

The dispute has to be put into perspective because minimum wages already apply in many sectors in Switzerland under collective bargaining agreements. However, the growing gap between the lowest and the highest wages is inflaming the row, especially since the measures against abusively low wages are proving ineffective. While federal government's Tripartite Commission can define reference wages, it cannot enforce them. The Zurich-based business

journalist Andreas Valda recently described the abuse in federalism: the canton of Zurich turns a blind eye to salaries of 3,200 Swiss francs a month despite the Tripartite Commission setting a threshold of 3,450 Swiss francs for Zurich. The canton of Basel Stadt deems salaries of 3,000 francs to be the local market rate despite the threshold standing at 3,290 francs, he said.

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WORKING POOR

When is a family considered to be poor in Switzerland? If a couple with two children have less than 4,000 Swiss francs a month at their disposal after the deduction of taxes and social insurance contributions, the family cannot lead a "socially integrated life", according to the Swiss Conference for Social Welfare. That family then lives below the "breadline" due to "income poverty". In Switzerland 600,000 people are affected by income poverty, or over 7% of the resident population.

No place for paedophiles in the classroom

Children must be protected from sexual assault. Paedophiles should not therefore be permitted to work with children. This is a commonly held view in Switzerland. Opinions are nevertheless divided over the popular initiative "Paedophiles should no longer be permitted to work with children". The initiative launched by Marche Blanche, an organisation from French-speaking Switzerland, which will be put to the vote on 18 May 2014, calls for an automatic and

absolute career ban to be enshrined in the federal constitution: anyone convicted of paedophilia should be prohibited from working with children for life. Experts in criminal law are not opposing the actual cause but rather the radical solution proposed. They argue that the imposition of a lifelong penalty presupposes a serious offence. This however does not apply in all cases. A sexual relationship between a 19-year-old boy and his 15-year-old girlfriend is hardly a serious criminal offence, they say. Because the automatic penalty, irrespective of the severity of the offence, being called for by the initiative infringes

upon the principle of proportionality and conflicts with the constitution and international law, Parliament decided in 2013 that sex offenders would be dealt with more severely in future irrespective of the outcome of the referendum. The sentences for paedophile offenders are being increased. In addition to exclusion and no-contact orders, employment bans may also be imposed in the case of serious offences but with greater leeway for the courts. Whether the electorate will accept these tougher measures as an indirect counter-proposal to the initiative remains to be seen.

(MUL)