

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 46 (2019)
Heft: 3

Artikel: A new women's strike for greater equality
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907163>

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A new women's strike for greater equality

Almost 30 years since the first major women's strike in Switzerland, women will be voting with their feet again on 14 June. Some of their demands have not changed.

SUSANNE WENGER

Let us start by looking back, because doing so helps us to better understand the present. Something unusual happened in Switzerland on 14 June 1991. Half a million women answered the call of female trade unionists and women's organisations by striking for gender equality. "Wenn Frau will, dann steht alles still" ("If it's a woman's will, everything will stand still") was Lucerne musician Vera Kaa's throaty refrain in the 1991 campaign song. The strike had a broad message, focusing not only on paid work but on cooking, cleaning and caring as well – the unpaid work that normally falls on the shoulders of women.

That Friday in early summer saw a range of different actions across the country – from isolated mini-walkouts and numerous "symbolic" strikes, to demonstrations and more creative forms of protest. Elfie Schöpf, the journalist who coordinated the women's strike, summarised the day in her book "Frauenstreik: Ein Anfang" ("The first women's strike"), which Zytglogge, the Berne-based publishing company, printed one year later: "For the first time in Swiss history, hundreds of thousands of women came together to remind the country of the indispensable role that they play in society."

Pans in the window

Armed with whistles and violet balloons, the demonstrators illegally occupied the square in front of parliament, Berne's Bundesplatz, while men ironed shirts around the corner in solidarity. Housewives hung pans in their kitchen windows. Nurses pinned the



Women on strike, Bahnhofstrasse, Zurich (1991)

Photo: Keystone

strike badge on their uniforms. Female watch workers called for higher wages. Women magistrates stayed at home. The Swiss Association of Agricultural Women highlighted the discrimination suffered by female farmers. One particular sex worker closed her brothel for the day. Even the Swiss Catholic Women's League showed their support. It was the biggest protest in Switzerland since the 1918 general strike.

Women were protesting about the slow implementation of the article on equality enshrined in the Federal Constitution exactly ten years before. Wage equality was a key issue. At the beginning of the 1990s, women in Switzerland earned on average a third less than men. Other strike demands included closing gaps in social security, creating more nursery places, sharing the burden of housework be-

tween men and women, and stopping violence against women.

Women's strike added impetus

Attitudes to gender equality have been slow to evolve in Switzerland. Swiss women had to wait until 1971 to vote – decades after women in other European countries. The final male bastion only fell a few months before the 1991 strike, when Appenzell Innerrhoden became the last Swiss canton to grant women the right to vote. Each step was hard-earned. The women's strike also helped to move things forward – even though parliament later blocked Genevan social democrat and mastermind of the women's strike, Christiane Brunner, from being appointed to the Federal Council.

One year after the women's strike, marital rape became a crime in Swit-

zerland. Five years after the strike, parliament approved the Gender Equality Act. Reforms to the compulsory Old-Age and Survivors Insurance scheme had a positive impact on women's pension situation. Switzerland also introduced a maternity insurance in 2005. Following the 2015 elections, women accounted for more than 30 per cent of parliamentary seats for the first time. This figure was 14 per cent back in 1991. Some progress has indeed been made, but not nearly enough, according to the organisers of the second women's strike scheduled for 14 June this year.

Regional committees

It will be a nationwide strike again, but with a local touch. Regional strike committees have formed around the country. In Berne, for example, Samira Schmid and at least a hundred other women are preparing for the big day. "This strike is overdue," says the 30-year-old. When Switzerland's women downed their tools in 1991, Schmid was still a small child living with her expatriate parents in Spain. She returned to Switzerland later, studied social work and became a mother of two children. "I only know about the first women's strike from other people's accounts, which I listen to with great interest."

Schmid was born at the end of the 1980s. For a long time, feminism never really crossed her mind. She says she had all the opportunities she could have wanted. "I never thought I had fewer chances than men." However, as a working mother she noticed how hard it still is to combine family and career. "Becoming a mother was a big turning point in my life." In addition, Schmid realised how little her experience of housework and bringing up children counted for in the world of work. "The caring side of things

doesn't count for anything." As a social worker who also looks after women living in precarious situations, she sees the "impact of austerity policies" at first hand.

Continued gender pay gap

The new women's strike in Switzerland is just the latest in a series of female protests seen elsewhere of late – from the Women's March in the USA and in a number of European countries following the election of President Trump, to the Spanish women's strike in March 2018 and the global #MeToo movement against sexual harassment, discrimination and violence against women. The Swiss strike manifesto also makes reference to protecting female migrants and the rights of the LGBT community. A lot has changed in the last 30 years. However, the strike's other demands are remarkably similar to those of 1991. They include wage equality, putting a stop to low pay in female-dominated professions, and a national strategy on combating violence against women.

Almost 30 years since the first women's strike, official statistics provide a sober appraisal of how progress

towards gender equality has stalled in Switzerland. The gap between men's and women's pay may have become smaller, but it remains 20 per cent in the private sector. Women do almost two thirds of all full-time jobs that pay gross monthly wages below 4,000 Swiss francs. Female executives are a rarity at Swiss companies. Women still provide most unpaid care – this is indispensable in itself, but continues to be of little remunerative value. And crime statistics show that there are 50 cases of domestic violence in Switzerland every day, with one fatality every two weeks..

Ideological support

Alliance F, a major cross-party alliance of Swiss women's organisations, has given the strike its "ideological support". Some female politicians from the parties on the centre-right are keeping their distance. Doris Fiala, FDP National Councillor for the canton of Zurich, told the "Tages-Anzeiger" newspaper that she promotes women's rights all year round and that a strike seems "outdated" to her in this day and age. However, Berne strike organiser Samira Schmid feels it is vital that women stick together: "Whatever our differences, some issues affect all of us."

We will soon see whether the strike is as popular as it was in 1991. In an interesting article for the magazine "NZZ Geschichte", Swiss historian Brigitte Studer made the point that 1991 harked back to pre-trade-union days and had a festive, communal dimension. "When societal factors are responsible for the gender gap, women will only be heard if they act in political unison." For Studer, the first women's strike was an emphatic case in point.

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Colourful protests in Zurich (1991) – violet inspiration for this year's women's strike Photo: Keystone

