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“We can finally voice our concerns”

They are not entitled to vote. Nonetheless, Swiss school pupils will influence the outcome of the parliamentary elections in autumn. They are striking in their thousands for a consistent climate policy and to stir politicians to action. These young people are leading the way. But what makes them tick?



MARC LETTAU, REPORT
THEODORA PETER, PARTY SURVEY

Friday is once more upon us; a school day. Despite this, large numbers of noisy students are marching through the city centre. Passers-by now know the reason as such demonstrations have been taking place in many cities for months. The student body is striking. They are skipping school and loudly demanding a strong climate policy with immediate effect. The younger ones are barely twelve years old; the majority are teenagers. In the meantime, twenty-somethings from the universities have also joined in. There are increasing numbers of their grandparents' generation, but fewer from their parents' generation. Some 50,000 took part in the nationwide climate strike on 15 March 2019. Two months later, on 24 May, participants numbered in the tens of thousands, despite their university-entrance examinations. The movement cannot be overlooked or ignored.

"Things are not OK"

But what's motivating this movement of young strikers? We put this question to a trio of students from the canton of Bern. First up is Thun pupil Linus Dolder (16). He describes how much the power of images spurs him on. When he is on his winter holiday, 2,000 metres up and only wearing a T-shirt, and he sees brown landscapes sparsely streaked with white artificial snow, he realises, "that things are not OK, even without having lived on this earth for thirty or forty years".

Sophie Feuz (16), a pupil from Bern, is not focused on the "unknown future", but rather the untenable present. "People are already losing their livelihood, animal species are dying out and glaciers are disappearing in the Alps due to the current situation." It's depressing to experience so much decline during one's own short life, "and life is so very short".



Linus Dolder: "All you can do is change something. Become a vegetarian, don't fly any more, ride your bike more often."

Photo: Danielle Liniger

Lastly, Wirada Läderach (15) from Belp gives us three reasons for striking. Firstly, her fear of the "massive chaos" that awaits if those who are in crisis due to climate change come under even more pressure. Second, the frustrating experience, "that all those who hold our future in their hands don't want to act". And thirdly, the strike has given them an opportunity to, "finally voice our concern about something that has been worrying us for a long time".

Everything. Now.

The striking youth all sound rather bolshy but come across as amazingly well-behaved. The police who are escorting the large numbers of marchers are visibly relaxed. The list of de-



Wirada Läderach: "My parents are happy to see me taking part in the climate movement. We talk about it often and at length at the dinner table."

Photo: Danielle Liniger

mands is more cheeky than specific. First, the main concern becomes evident as twelve-year-olds proudly carry a banner before them that hasn't turned out so well, and that bears the inscription: "The climate is even worse than our banner". The main demand is for "a Switzerland with zero net greenhouse gas emissions by 2030". And the first step towards "climate equality" is to recognise the cri-



"We consume a great deal and also very cheaply," says Sophie Feuz. We should all make an effort to consume less and back true-cost pricing.

Photo: Danielle Liniger

sis situation and proclaim a "climate emergency".

This is having an impact on the political establishment. In February, the cantonal parliament of Basel-Stadt approved a climate resolution and actually proclaimed a "climate emergency". It remains unclear as to whether this is a symbolic act to placate the student body or the start of a new political agenda. In the meantime, cities including Olten (SO) and Delémont (JU), as well as the canton of Vaud have declared themselves climate "emergency areas".

The cantonal elections at the beginning of the year delivered signs of change in the political climate. In March, the pointedly climate-political Green Party and the Green Liberal Party increased their share of the vote from a joint 14.8 per cent (2015) to 24.8

per cent. By Swiss standards, this is an enormous shift. It also occurred at the expense of the right-wing SVP as well as the Liberals. The subsequent parliamentary elections in the cantons of Baselland and Lucerne delivered a similar picture. However, the Zurich elections are of particular interest as they have always been a reliable barometer for the national elections later on in the year. The majority of political scientists are therefore speculating that on 20 October the picture of a Green success and conservative right-wing slump could repeat itself.

What do the strikers think about the autumn elections? Sophie Feuz: “I firmly believe that we will have a significant effect on the elections.” She follows this with an “if”: “If young people don’t lose interest”. Some students of a similar age are satisfied with “just taking to the street once”. “On the other hand, more and more of us are joining in each time.” She would be even more confident in the movement if the voting age at national level was 16. Many are far more interested in political life at the age of 16 than at 20, she says: “School

helps us to mature. Many young people are very switched on.” However, as soon as they are out of school, they lack any “platforms” to develop their own maturity, she says. This quickly causes them to lose any motivation they may have had to participate in political life.

The FDP corrects; the SVP hopes

The two largest conservative parties, the SVP and the FDP, are reacting in very different ways to the climate strike phenomenon and its widespread impact. FDP party president Petra Gössi wants to give the party a splash of green based on a survey of the rank and file of the economic liberal party. Thus, the FDP is now also demanding a CO₂ levy on petrol and diesel. However, Gössi is meeting with some resistance. A member of the

FDP faces green policy change

78 per cent of FDP members want to see more commitment from the party on environmental and climate matters. This was the outcome of an internal survey commissioned by FDP president Petra Gössi. The rank and file are calling for a levy on air tickets, and also want to see Switzerland reduce its CO₂ emissions predominantly within the country. To date, the FDP fraction has blocked both issues in Parliament. The new approach is designed to initially lead to a position paper containing demands related to the areas of housing, transport, work/education and the environment, and serve as a guideline for FDP policy over the next few years. It remains unclear whether the party’s change of approach will lend a green momentum to the national elections.

Political representation: 33 seats in the National Council, 13 seats in the Council of States, 2 seats in the Federal Council.

More on the FDP’s climate policy: ogy.de/fdp-klima

SVP warns against “climate hype”

Climate and environmental policy are not at the top of the SVP’s list of priorities. Instead, the party is positioning itself as an opponent of the “climate hype” that is causing “ban mania” among the left wing. The People’s Party is focusing on freedom and individual responsibility. It opposes any new levies and fees but is supportive of tax incentives in climate and environmental policy, such as for building refurbishments. The SVP is particularly critical of Switzerland’s proposal to go it alone on halving CO₂ emissions by 2030 without internationally binding resolutions from all countries. With regard to the national elections on 20 October, the SVP is banking on non-Green voters, and positioning itself as a lobby for motorists and against restrictions on mobility in the process.

Political representation: 66 seats in the National Council, 5 seats in the Council of States, 2 seats in the Federal Council.

More on the SVP’s climate policy: ogy.de/svp-klima

BDP banks on Glacier Initiative

Like the CVP, the BDP supports a tough CO₂ Act. After the failure of the bill in the National Council, the party originally wanted to launch its own popular initiative with the objective of not allowing any more new cars with combustion engines in Switzerland from 2040. The party later dropped the idea of such a mobility initiative and instead supported the broad-based Glacier Initiative, which aims to incorporate the goals of the Paris Climate Agreement in the constitution. The BDP is consolidating its strengths and presenting itself as a pragmatic and solution-oriented party – true to the election motto of “Boring, but good”. By dispensing with its own initiative, it may not be easy for the BDP to make ground on the climate issue in the autumn elections.

Political representation: 7 seats in the National Council, 1 seat in the Council of States
More on the BDP’s climate policy: ogy.de/bdp-klima

party leadership, Christian Wasserfallen, argued that it is a waste of time for a party to “change its colour”. If you want to vote “green”, it is better to give your vote to “the originals”, that is the Greens.

The SVP’s situation is far more precarious. Nobody would buy a sudden change of colour from them. So, they are initially banking on the principle of hope. They will stick to their course as SVP figures asserted following heavy losses in the cantonal elections that the climate issue may be off the table again by the autumn. However, a section of the traditional rank and file – the farmers challenged by climate change – do not believe that. The SVP leadership have therefore begun to overtly work against the youth and, for the first time, to present the party as the last bastion of motorists’ interests. Since then, party president, Albert Rösti, has diag-

CVP as a majority creator



The CVP was the only centre-right party in the Federal Council to support the far-reaching measures in the CO₂ Act in the National Council last year. The party committed itself to green concerns early on – most recently by supporting the energy transition. After the failure of the bill in the National Council, the party wants to play a key role for a new bill that is capable of gaining majority support. With regard to the autumn elections, the CVP wants to make ground as the “sole conservative party to consistently stand for environmental protection”. By doing so, it will disassociate itself from the SVP and the FDP, who have shown no interest in domestic CO₂ reduction goals to date. The CVP also supports the levy on air tickets as well as financial incentives for home insulation and to replace oil heaters to reach the climate goals.

Political representation: 41 seats in the National Council, 13 seats in the Council of States, 1 seat in the Federal Council.

More on the CVP's climate policy: ogy.de/cvp-klima

nosed “pseudoreligious dimensions” among the young climate protesters. And the Zurich national councillor Roger Köppel expressed his compassion for the young people in an interview, saying they are being used by “left-wing climate ideologues” and are serving a “red-green environmental dictatorship” which threatens social freedoms. According to Köppel: “It’s a scandal that our teachers are dragging their students to these politically controlled climate demonstrations”.

Is Wirada Läderach being controlled by others and pseudoreligiously blind? She says that such attacks leave her speechless: “We definitely need to act now; otherwise we run the risk of something truly terrible happening.” From her perspective, the accusations are rather suspect.

First, they accuse the youth of today of not being interested in politics and being rather apathetic about it. “And now, when the youth have found a topic that means a lot to them, they are accused of being controlled by others.” Perhaps the movement is deemed so provocative “because it is thinking for itself”, she says.

“More than just a family hobby”

There is also another side to the picture: striking teenagers with a climate-unfriendly beef-burger in one hand and Coca-Cola in a throwaway can in another. Where is the consistency here? He is well aware of such objections, says Linus Dolder. However: “You shouldn’t have to be perfect to have a voice.” Anyone who stands up



The SP supports ecological restructuring

The SP wants to speed up the energy transition so that Switzerland is climate-neutral by 2045. Therefore, it is calling for a fast and socially responsible shift away from fossil energies. The financial centre should also become climate-friendly. “No more investments in oil and gas should be approved.” The demand for renewable energies should enable the ecological restructuring to create around 40,000 new jobs. The party wants to achieve these goals in Parliament through numerous initiatives. The SP also supports the Glacier Initiative, which aims to incorporate climate protection in the constitution and demands the implementation of the objectives of the Paris Climate Agreement. With regard to the national elections, it will be difficult for the SP to make ground on the climate issue as the Greens are flying high.

Political representation: 43 seats in the National Council, 12 seats in the Council of States, 2 seats in the Federal Council

More on the SP's climate policy: ogy.de/sp-klima

for the climate movement is doing something: “That is what is important.” But ultimately, one’s own authenticity is what matters: “I cannot take part in the climate strike on Friday and then fly off on holiday on Saturday”.

His approach: demand change and make changes himself. He has become a vegetarian for ecological reasons, says Dolder: “Now, my mother only cooks vegetarian food.” Läderach also



GLP banks on cleantech

As a traditional environmental party, members of the green-liberal GLP also see themselves on the rise. The party wants to make Switzerland a pioneer through innovation and competition in the area of climate protection. Swiss industry should bank on cleantech. This could generate a “massive export branch” as the Paris Climate Agreement also needs to be implemented in other countries. With regard to the CO₂ Act, the party is campaigning for a large percentage of the emissions to be offset in Switzerland. The GLP argues that measures are not just needed for building refurbishments but also for road and aviation traffic, which have not been touched to date. Like the Greens, the Green Liberals view the autumn national elections as key – under the campaign motto: “It is time”.

Political representation: 7 seats in the National Council.

More on the GLP's climate policy: ogy.de/glp-klima



Greens have a Greta tailwind

Environmental and climate protection are traditionally at the heart of Green policy. The Greens continue to prioritise a tough CO₂ Act. They are demanding more building refurbishments and an increase in the CO₂ levy. The agricultural and financial sector should also contribute to climate protection. Moreover, the Greens want to see worldwide climate equality. Switzerland should ensure that climate change-induced damage is financed according to a causation principle. During previous cantonal elections, the Greens have benefited the most from the ‘Greta Thunberg effect’. Whether they do well at a national level in the autumn depends to some extent on the climate issue remaining high on the political agenda. The Greens have pinned their colours to the climate mast by declaring the 2019 elections the “Climate Elections”.

Political representation: 11 seats in the National Council, 1 seat in the Council of States.

More on the Greens' climate policy: ogy.de/gps-klima



CO₂ emissions in Switzerland are falling

The analyses presented in April reveal that between 1990 and 2015 the emission of climate-damaging CO₂ decreased by a good 10 per cent despite a simultaneous increase in the population. CO₂ emissions per head are less than half as high as those in the other industrial states. This is the good news. The bad news is that upon closer inspection, Switzerland's ecological footprint is well above the global average. As the Swiss economy imports a lot of CO₂-intensive products from abroad, around 80 per cent of the greenhouse gas emissions caused by Swiss consumers occur outside Switzerland.

The struggle for a full revision of the Swiss CO₂ law is in full swing in Switzerland. This should result in substantial decreases in CO₂ emissions. There are disputes as to how Switzerland will contribute to future CO₂ reductions: mainly abroad or predominantly in Switzerland. While the National Council has avoided setting a domestic goal to date, the Council of States has been able to agree that at least 60 per cent of the reduction should be in Switzerland. At least, that is what the advisory committee suggests.

(MUL)

declares herself a vegetarian. At the same time, Dolder sees the limitations of individual action: "It is not enough for individuals to act alone. Policy definitely needs to play a part." Politicians must lead the way so that pre-defined goals can be achieved together: "We need to ensure that climate protection is afforded far more importance than it is now in order for it to be more than just a family hobby."

Wide debate, new perspective

Some are embracing the climate youth movement, while others are punishing them by setting boundaries. Both reactions originate from the same reference point – the climate issue. This is why the topic is becoming more and more prominent in the political debate, and is increasingly being regarded from new angles. For example, the progressive and business-friendly "Neue Zürcher Zeitung" (NZZ) recently explained on its front page that digitalisation is incorrectly understood as being part of the solution to the climate problem. On the contrary, it is part of the problem. Due to increasing streaming volumes, communication technology is now responsible for 3.7 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions. That is

around twice as much as civil aviation. With a sidelong glance at the youth, the NZZ lectures that: "Streaming is the new flying." Anyone who streams a video multiplies the energy consumption of their smartphone by a factor of 1,500, it says.

"We all consume a huge amount"

Wirada Läderach always has her smartphone with her. Yes, many of today's young people are actually "comfortable, complacent children of a consumer society". However, at the same time, they are a generation which moves around and looks for new insights. For her that means something along the lines of: "Flying is great; however, it is just not an option for the next trip." The terms 'consumer' and 'consumer society' are also part of the repertoire of Sophie Feuz. Her protest banner, which bears the marks of regular use, reads "Revolution instead of consumerism". By that she means that consumption, which is often thoughtless, is an enormous driver of climate change: "We all consume a huge amount and so cheaply." The challenge is therefore to question one's own consumption and to stand for true-cost pricing, i.e. to pay a price that covers the real costs of a particular product.

When it comes to truth isn't it a little too easy just to wag school and sell it as a political act? Sophie Feuz's reply is to the point. It is "rather embarrassing" and "above all incorrect" to spread such a picture. Anyone who wants to strike must submit a proper dispensation application and also receives a lot of additional homework to do. It is really easier not to strike. She had to write a presentation on "anthropogenic climate change" on top of her usual work. That was a challenge as her class teacher is a geologist and an expert on the topic: "There is no way I can just write a load of rubbish."

The following small parties represented in the National Council were not included in the party survey: Swiss Evangelical People's Party, EVP (2 seats), Ticino League (2 seats), Geneva Citizens' Movement, MCG (1 seat), Partei der Arbeit, PdA (1 seat) as well as the Independents (2 seats). (TP)

Out and about with Linus, Sophie and Wirada

Further pictures of the young people portrayed in this edition, Linus Dolder, Sophie Feuz and Wirada Läderach are available online at www.revue.ch. The gallery is supplemented with images of the last Swiss school climate strike.