

Zeitschrift: Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand
Herausgeber: Swiss Society of New Zealand
Band: 78 (2012)
Heft: [2]

Artikel: Minimum wage comes under the spotlight
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-944012>

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Minimum wage comes under the spotlight

Over three-quarters of European Union member states have a minimum wage; the issue is in the Swiss spotlight after local votes in cantons Neuchâtel and Geneva. In January 2011 the Trade Union Federation launched a people's initiative calling for a minimum salary of SFr22 per hour at 2011 rates, or around SFr4,000 per month - triple the European average. This would apply to everyone except apprentices, trainees, family businesses and voluntary workers. The signatures are expected to be handed in early in 2012 to force a nationwide vote in 2012.

In November 2011, 54 per cent of Neuchâtel voters agreed to the principle of a minimum wage being written into the cantonal constitution. Meanwhile, the same percentage threw out the idea in Geneva. Switzerland's largest trade union, Unia, welcomed the Neuchâtel decision, which it said was a sign of growing awareness among the population about wage dumping. Canton Jura is the only other region which has a similar principle in its constitution, but has yet to adopt a law for its implementation.

Unions have quite a bit of weight in canton Neuchâtel, which has industrial sectors like the watch-making industry, and which would benefit considerably from the creation of a minimum wage.

According to the Federal Statistics Office, the gross median wage in Switzerland over all sectors was SFr5,979 a month last year.

Firms, however, generally argue that minimum wages are damaging for employment. Business groups like the Swiss Building Association say countries with minimum wages have not managed to drive down unemployment rates, and in recessions a minimum wage would cause firms to move abroad and obstruct the creation of new jobs.

The Trade Unions believe the impact of a minimum wage on an economy depends on its level and on the economy's competitiveness. In Switzerland six per cent of the population - or 250,000 people - are working poor, employed full time, but earning salaries that prevent them from having a decent life. At the moment certain branches of industry have general labour agreements, covering 50 per cent of the working population. Only half of all workers covered by a collective agreement are guaranteed a minimum income, well below levels in other European countries.

In December 2011 the Swiss union Unia denounced a case of wage dumping in canton Jura: six foreign construction workers employed by a Polish firm were paid €10 an hour instead of €24 per hour agreed upon under a collective bargaining agreement.

Unia is calling for stricter checks on construction sites, tighter sanctions against wage dumping as well as the introduction of a minimum wage.

In May the Swiss Trade Union Federation called on the government to set up a national task force, which would include union representatives, to fight wage dumping. 38 per cent of foreign companies which use foreign labour in Switzerland do not respect collective labour accords.

Monthly minimum wages in Europe

Switzerland: €3,3261 (SFr4,000)*
Luxembourg: €1,570
Ireland: €1,403
France: €1,365
United Kingdom: €1,361
Netherlands: €1,301
Belgium: €1,259
Greece: €680
Spain: €650
Portugal: €470
Slovakia: €217

*Proposed by Swiss Trade Union Federation

Climate change is bad for your health

If climate change and global warming continue unchecked, it's not only glaciers that will be affected - your health and quality of life are also at risk. According to "Climate Change and Switzerland 2050", a report by the Advisory Body on Climate Change (OcCC), Switzerland faces a range of negative health impacts.

The director-general of the World Health Organization Margaret Chan estimated that 60,000 people die every year because of climate-related natural disasters.

According to the OcCC, the main direct threat to Switzerland is an increase in heatwaves, such as the one in 2003, which resulted in more than 44,000 additional deaths across Europe - including almost 1,000 in Switzerland. By 2050 such heatwaves will occur every few years.

Potentially even more serious consequences may arise indirectly. Warmer temperatures and a more variable climate can have an effect on agricultural production and food availability, the availability of clean water and sanitation, and the transmission of vector- and water-borne diseases.

Parasites have a very complex transmission pattern frequently related to vectors (organisms which carry pathogens), and the climate significantly influences the activity of those vectors. A slight increase of parasitic diseases that previously were encountered more in warmer areas such as the Mediterranean basin has already been observed. Part of this is due to increased travel activity, but part is because it is warmer and those infectious organisms were able to establish themselves in Switzerland.

However, every cloud of greenhouse gas has a silver lining. For example, milder winters would reduce the seasonal winter time peak in deaths that occurs in temperate countries.

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