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HOME AFFAIRS.

"The Swiss Socialists and Military Expenditure."

by PIERRE BÉGUIN.

We commented, recently, upon the decision taken by the Central Committee of the Swiss Socialist Party not to support an Initiative, which had been launched in the French-speaking part of the country, with the aim of obtaining a permanent reduction in military expenditure.

We remarked, on that occasion, that even if this Central Committee had refused its support to the Popular Initiative, it had not, for all that, decided to oppose it. It had even abstained from recommending to the members of this big Opposition Party that they should refrain from signing the Initiative. Moreover, this decision was taken by a majority of two-thirds, only. Thus everything seemed to point to the fact that it had been preceded by a difficult discussion and that it had not proved easy to come to an understanding. From that moment, we already knew that an opposition of a certain size would have preferred that support be given to the Initiative. In this respect it is also characteristic that the Secretary General of the Socialist Party is — in his private capacity, but quite openly — a member of the Initiative Committee.

The last week-end has cast a new light on the subject of the Socialist attitude. In point of fact, the Socialist Party of the Canton of Vaud, which is the most important one in the French-speaking regions of this country, met last Sunday for its Spring Congress. It decided to give its support to the Initiative, that is to say, not to conform to the decision taken by the Central Committee. Moreover, if one rightly understands certain allusions in a communiqué which is not very clear in certain respects, it would appear as if the Vaudois Socialists are going to appeal against this central decision. They are, indeed, demanding the convocation of a Congress which will define the military policy of the entire Party. This indication would lead one to understand that the Vaudois

Socialists are of the opinion that their militant members, gathered together at a General Congress, would not take the same decision as that of the Central Committee, which only numbers some fifty members and is chiefly composed of members of parliament and of Party Secretaries. In other words, they want to challenge the decision of the leaders, by going to the basic organisations and the militants. It would seem to be a foregone conclusion that this debate can neither be avoided nor even adjourned for any length of time, by those who would have preferred that it should not take place.

We are in no way surprised at this attitude of the French-speaking Swiss Socialists. It should never be forgotten that if the Socialists in the German-speaking parts of the country are chiefly inspired by trade unionism and occupy themselves primarily with social and economic problems, those Socialists who are in the French-speaking regions are more politically-minded. They owe these free-thinking tendencies to distant origins, tendencies which are far less apparent in the rest of the country.

The fact should however be stressed that the support given by the Vaudois Socialists to the Chevallier Initiative, is not unconditional. It is quite clear that what they really want to do is to associate themselves with a manifestation of public opinion and thus exercise pressure on the Authorities, in order that the latter should renounce from certain costly reforms of the military apparatus and cut down a budget which shows symptoms of inflation. In their eyes, the Initiative in question does not constitute an aim, but simply a means to an end. By temporarily giving their support to an extreme measure, they hope to be able, later on, to achieve more successfully a moderate conciliatory solution.

One may very well ask oneself if such tactics are not dangerous and liable to lead their authors further than they wish to go. They are, as a matter of fact, associating themselves with a movement which is purely sentimental and is supported by definitely anti-militarist circles, with the idea that it will be possible, later on, to check this movement, to retrace their steps and to get the Socialist forces to support a solution which not be directed against the efficiency of the Army itself. But, it is this backward movement which will prove to be very difficult.

What is equally dangerous in this attitude is the fact that it consists of conjectures regarding solutions which no one can really know about, for the moment. Our civil and military authorities are now engaged in making careful studies; they are striving to adapt our Army to the general evolution of military technique. Divergent points of view are being compared and debated. A synthesis will be achieved, finally. An indispensable choice will then be made. And, it is only then that it will be possible to ask the Swiss people if they agree with the conclusions arrived at by their Authorities. To ask the people to take a decision already now, and to undertake to carry it through, would be to allow them to settle a question without knowing all about it.

It can only be regretted, very seriously, that people try to complicate the situation and to multiply sentimental reactions in regard to a problem which should be resolved in an atmosphere of calmness.

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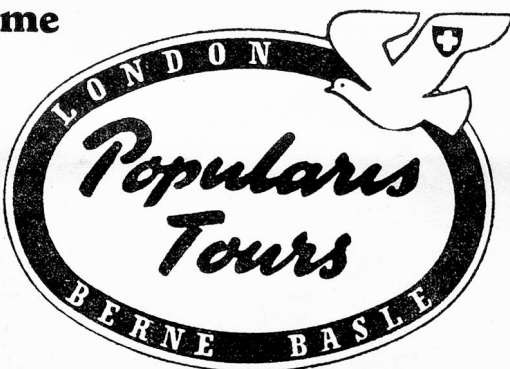
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