

**Zeitschrift:** The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK  
**Herausgeber:** Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom  
**Band:** - (1965)  
**Heft:** 1470  
  
**Artikel:** The problem of labour in Switzerland  
**Autor:** [s.n.]  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-686387>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 16.02.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# The Swiss Observer

FOUNDED IN 1919 BY PAUL F. BOEHRINGER.

## The Official Organ of the Swiss Colony in Great Britain

Advisory Council: R. J. KELLER (Chairman), GOTTFRIED KELLER (Vice-Chairman), DR. E. M. BIRCHER, O. F. BOEHRINGER, J. EUSEBIO, A. KUNZ, A. STAUFFER, G. E. SUTER.

EDITED BY MRS. MARIANN MEIER WITH THE CO-OPERATION OF MEMBERS OF THE SWISS COLONY IN GREAT BRITAIN

Telephone: CLERKENWELL 2321/2.

Published Twice Monthly at 23, LEONARD STREET, E.C.2.

Telegrams: FREPRINCO, LONDON.

Vol. 51 No. 1470.

FRIDAY, 22nd JANUARY 1965

## THE PROBLEM OF LABOUR IN SWITZERLAND

In 1961, a commission was appointed to study the problem of foreign labour in Switzerland. A 220-page report on the findings was published in the middle of October. Shortly afterwards, the results of the census of foreign workers made in August by the BIGA (Federal Office for Industry, Trade and Labour) were revealed. A new record was reached with 720,901 foreign workers with temporary working permit.

Over the last few years, the increase has been as follows: In August 1960 there were 435,476, a year later 548,312, a step-up of 25.9%. In August 1962 there were 644,706 foreign workers (17.6% more than twelve months earlier). In 1963, the number had risen to 690,013 (7% more), and by August last year, the total of 720,901 was reached, a further increase of 4.5%.

Added to these must be the 185,000 foreign workers who are no longer subject to a limited working permit, but have already acquired their residential permit, and about 125,000 non-employed relatives and children, students and retired foreigners. This gives the staggering total of over one million foreign nationals in a country of five and a quarter million inhabitants.

It is interesting to note that in 1910, of the 552,000 foreigners in Switzerland 35.1% had been born in Switzerland and lived there uninterruptedly. Of the foreigners born abroad, 18.4% had been living in Switzerland for ten years and more. In other words well over half the foreign nationals could be counted as well integrated in Swiss national life. Today, barely a quarter of the aliens have been in Switzerland more than ten years, and the large majority have lived there less than five years.

The "Aargauer Tagblatt" in a review of the situation early in 1963, said that "Switzerland with its dynamic economy has the largest number of foreign workers in the world". The federal factory statistics for 1963 showed that in the 14,354 factories in Switzerland 763,296 workers were employed. Out of these 487,545 were Swiss and 275,751 foreigners. The latter were made up of 254,166 with limited working permit and "Grenzgänger" (entering Switzerland on daily permits from neighbouring foreign parts) and only 21,585 with residential permits.

Over a quarter of the foreign workers are in the building trade (186,300), followed by 138,000 in various branches of the metal industries and trade. 76,000 are in the hotel and catering trade and over 42,000 in commercial and technical employment. About 25,000 are in each of the following groups, wood industry, food production and distribution and domestic service. Some 18,000 are in agriculture and horticulture and 103,000 in other employment.

Over 65% of foreign workers on a limited working permit are Italians, well over 10% Germans, 9% Spaniards,

4% Austrians, 3% Frenchmen, over 1% Greeks and a small number of Turks, as well as other nationals.

Of the 720,901 foreign workers in the last census nearly 20% are employed in the Canton of Zurich, 10% in Berne, 8% in Geneva, followed closely by Ticino, Vaud and Aargau. St. Gall's share is over 5%, Baselstadt's, Baselland's and the Grisons' proportion over 4% each. Then come the Valais, Thurgau, Solothurn, Lucerne and Neuchâtel. The smallest numbers are in Appenzell-Innerrhoden (947 men and women), Obwalden (1,543) and Uri (2,051).

In the last issue of the "Tages Anzeiger" (Zurich) in December 1964, the figure of foreign workers placed in Swiss agriculture during last year was given as 5,600. Of these 3,800 were Spaniards, 1,500 Yugoslavs, 100 Portuguese and 200 Tunisian student trainees.

The employment of this large army of foreigners has caused many difficulties. Political, social, cultural and religious conditions are strange to any alien in any country. The farther afield his homeland, the worse it is for him to get acclimatised in Switzerland. The problems resulting from employing foreigners from other than neighbouring countries have caused even more headaches to the Swiss authorities, as well as increased expense because of the difficulty of repatriation in case of sickness, unsuitability or delinquency.

One of the worst problems is that of housing, and in many instances, insufficient and poor accommodation have caused discontent and friction. Hospitals, schools and welfare services have difficulties. In the "Schweiz. Kaufmännisches Zentralblatt" we read of a letter by the "Zürcher Frauenzentrale" to Parliament, stating that up to 75% of the children in the over-full day nurseries in Switzerland are from foreign workers' families. The number of foreign school children is rapidly going up — over 90,000 under 15 years of age. Hospital beds are taken up increasingly by foreigners — about one-fifth of all the births are by foreign mothers. There is a medical check, but often prospective workers enter Switzerland as tourists, and any sickness may only be discovered later. In 1962, of the 350,000 persons examined, 1,800 had to be sent back because of tuberculosis and 250 on account of syphilis. Only a small number are actually sick on entering Switzerland, but many fall ill as a result of insufficient acclimatisation, strange environment and food. A group of Yugoslav workers employed in agriculture in the Emmental left Switzerland because working hours were too long for them and the food did not agree with them — as Mohammedans they ate no pork which is regular food in a farmhouse.

A few other examples to show the problem: In 1963, foreign workers transferred approximately 1.5 milliards of

Swiss francs by way of earnings to their relatives abroad. There is the increase of land purchase by foreigners. In March 1963, many millions of working hours were lost to Swiss economy by immense numbers of Italians going home for the elections in Italy. Transport problems for the railways resulted. These are acute each year at Christmas time; last Christmas 148 special trains were run by the SBB to Italy, and 153 to Spain, as well as 46 transit trains to convey Italian workers from Germany back to their country.

Much has been done to relieve troubles. Social measures (insurance, etc.) have been taken, recreation centres for foreign workers have been opened. Potted dictionaries in Italian, Spanish and Greek, special leaflets for doctors, housewives, etc., have been published, and announcements and signs are put up in various languages. There are classes and courses in German and French for foreigners. In September, a Swiss film "Siamo Italiani" had its *première*, a fair and human story from real life, which helps towards understanding.

When foreign workers first came into Switzerland in such large numbers, the term "Fremdarbeiter" was changed into "Gastarbeiter" as it were from "foreign worker" to "working visitor". Lately not much has been heard of the "Gastarbeiter". In fact, the above-mentioned commission never once used the term in the 217 pages of its report! A new word has been coined, "Ueberfremdung", and for the want of a better version we shall use its literal translation "overforeignisation". This state occupies not only the authorities, but also every right-thinking citizen who is concerned with the future of his country. The stricter measures to reduce the number of foreign immigrants which the Federal Council introduced in spring 1963 had hardly any effect, and the danger of not only economic, but also social and spiritual "overforeignisation" began to sink into the minds of the people. There is now a "Swiss Popular Movement against Overforeignisation", and its members have expressed disappointment that despite the federal decision of February 1964 to reduce the number of foreign workers, the appropriate cantonal authorities had failed in their efforts. They appeal to the Federal Council to take energetic action. They also demand that the use of "flick knives" should be prohibited in view of several incidents in which foreign workers had made use of them, and that foreign intervention should not be tolerated.

The latter referred to protests by Italian trade unions and other organisations in Italy with regard to the new immigration agreement between Italy and Switzerland. One-third of all Italian workers employed North of the Alps are in Switzerland. Most other countries have official recruiting commissions who do their work in Italy, and the Italian worker entering Germany arrives with an agreement in his pocket. In Switzerland it is the business of the employers and their federations. It is cheaper for them to pick and choose from the large numbers who arrive in Switzerland, men and women attracted by the liberal immigration regulations. The "no contract state" is attractive to the Italian who, by nature, dislikes to be tied down by red tape. He feels freer to go and try his luck, and the employer is not tied by any contract if he finds him unsuited for the job or unsatisfactory in his duties. But this liberal immigration system means that the worker in so many cases has to improvise all along the line, and, like the guest who arrives at an over-booked hotel, finds himself relegated to the cellar or the attic. The "Zürcher Woche", in October, had a report on this, called "Tsching in Seldwyla".

On 10th August last year, a new immigration agreement was signed in Rome by Dr. Max Holzer, Director of the BIGA. This agreement replaces that of 22nd June 1948. It was necessary that improvements in the legal and social standing of the Italian workers in Switzerland were made for humanitarian reasons. Negotiations had started in 1961 at the instigation of the Italian government. Discussions had been very slow, as Italy had made demands which Switzerland could not accept. Parley had also been hampered by the simultaneous negotiations on the social insurance agreement which has since been enforced.

The most important clause of the immigration agreement is no doubt the one relating to the foreign workers' families. Hitherto they had to wait three years before their wives and children could follow them. The new treaty allows for this already after eighteen months, with the proviso that suitable accommodation is available. After an uninterrupted stay of five years in Switzerland, Italian workers will be entitled to have their permits extended until such time they can get the residential permit. They will also receive permission to change jobs in any branch of employment. Seasonal workers will receive annual permits after a period of 45 months' stay within five years in their own work. The agreement also provides for the same working and pay conditions as enjoyed by Swiss workers.

The agreement was discussed far and wide, in cantonal parliaments, unions, political parties, in the press. There was wide agreement that the principle was just. Switzerland could not allow thousands of active Italians in their best years into the country without also accepting their wives and young children. It was unfair to deny workmen who had shown themselves reliable for five years, the right to change their jobs. It was also pointed out that not all workers would take advantage of these rights — it was still a lot cheaper to live in Spoleto than in Berne.

But there was considerable alarm nevertheless — more lack of housing and hospital beds, more deterioration of quality work, schooling and communication problems, more "overforeignisation" all round. Whilst agreeing that the foreign workers could not be blamed for the present state — they had, after all, helped to bring about the affluence and high standard of living — it was realised that a remedy had to be found.

There were meetings and demonstrations. The National UNESCO Commission, the Federation of Swiss Industries (Vorort), the Chamber of Employees, took it up. The subject was on the agenda of a large number of organisations. Many were the suggestions made to solve the problems and to make the "foreigner brake" work: ceiling for wages and prices, stricter immigration laws, lengthening of working hours, revaluing of the Swiss franc and the latest suggestion by the Christian/National trade union is that some of the annual military refresher courses (WK) should be used to do extra work in order to replace foreign labour. The Democratic Party of the Canton of Zurich has announced the launching of a Popular Initiative according to which the number of foreigners may finally not exceed 10% of the population.

The new immigration agreement was to be enforced provisionally on 1st November. But there was such a great deal of opposition, and the Federation of Trade Unions (SGB) and the Socialist Party asked for postponement until Parliament had ratified the agreement. This, in turn caused bad feelings with the Italian government and Italian circles in Switzerland. Dr. Robert Eibel's "Aktion für freie Meinungsbildung" in Basle in one of his "Trumpf



Buur" articles considered the move on behalf of the trade unions as uncalled for and also accused the SGB of treating the Italians as "running board passengers".

Feeling ran high everywhere, and much was said and written. Conferences took place at the highest level, and a delegation of three went to Rome for further discussions. Dr. Holzer himself called the agreement a "lightning conductor" for the "Fremdarbeiter Malaise". He had signed it before the "Mirage Affair" had brought about a change in public attitude. As a consequence of the reaction, Prof. Holzer said, "the Federal Council is willing to pull the brakes so hard that it will grate".

By 30th October, the Federal Council announced that the agreement with Italy would *not* be enforced provisionally, but would be ratified by both Houses in December in order to become valid by 1st January 1965.

The Federal Council's message to Parliament was published on 12th November. The augmented National Council's Commission on Foreign Affairs, however, decided not to have the agreement up for debate in the December session. They would wait for another report by the Federal Council regarding the whole problem of foreign labour and the danger of "overforeignisation". The Council of States debated the treaty vehemently, but finally accepted it by 31: 0 votes.

The parliamentary editor of the "Basler Nachrichten" Arnold Fisch called the fact that one Council finally gave an unconditional approval whilst the other postponed the debate "a positively classical federal compromise".

Federal Councillor Wahlen received the Italian Ambassador in Berne at the latter's request. Monsieur Marchiori expressed the Italian government's protest and regret at the postponement, and Federal Councillor Wahlen had to explain the truly democratic mechanics of Swiss parliamentary procedure.

Whatever one's personal attitude towards the "Italian Agreement", it has no doubt brought to the fore the gravity of the whole problem of which the agreement itself is only one aspect. This time, the people have finally woken up. Like the villagers in one of C. F. Ramuz's novels, they are gripped by a sense of unease. It is hoped that they will not rest until decisive action to deal with the unsound conditions resolutely has been taken.

*(Apart from the sources already mentioned, most of this article is based on information and news received by courtesy of the Agence Télégraphique Suisse.)*

### FEDERAL APPOINTMENTS

The Federal Council has appointed Mr. Charles-Albert Wetterwald as new Chief of Protocol of the Federal Political Department.

The Swiss Ambassador in Japan Monsieur Jean de Rham has also been appointed Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to the Republic of South Korea.

Colonel of General Staff H. L. Raeber, has been appointed Military Attaché for the Near and Middle East and Turkey (seat in Teheran).

The Swiss Consulate in Toronto has been raised to that of Consulate-General. The new Consul-General is Monsieur Georges Falquier.

The new Consul-General in Florence will be Monsieur Edmond Deslex, and in Frankfurt Monsieur August Rebsamen.

The new Consul in Cleveland will be Monsieur Alfred Koller, in Nice Monsieur Ernst Gubler, in Hanover Monsieur Walter Dick and in Tangier Monsieur Edwin Steiner. [A.T.S.]

### NEW YEAR'S DAY

The traditional reception of foreign diplomats took place at the "Federal Palace" in Berne on New Year's Day. The new President of the Confederation, Federal Councillor Prof. Dr. H. P. Tschudi, together with the new Chief of Protocol Monsieur Wetterwald, received the accredited diplomats in the late morning of 1st January. There was an abundance of magnificent flowers in red and white, provided by the federal gardeners, and precious carpets covered the floors. The arrivals followed strictly according to tradition: first the cantonal and municipal representatives (who had made the journey in seven open horse-drawn landaus), then the *doyen* of the diplomatic corps Titular Archbishop of Germinia Mgr. Alfredo Pacini (in a purple Roman cloak), followed by forty-nine Ambassadors including two ladies, the Ambassadors of Denmark and Yugoslavia, Prince Heinrich von Liechtenstein, the only permanent *Chargé d'Affaires*, and a dozen diplomats of the same rank in a temporary capacity (also including one woman representing Bolivia) brought up the rear of the distinguished visitors.

In a new year's message the new President addressed the Swiss people over radio and television. He extended special wishes to the Swiss abroad, as well as to the foreign residents in Switzerland. He referred to affluence and material wellbeing as well as to dangers of the economic boom which had not yet been arrested. Amongst achievements of 1964, he recalled the new social benefits of the old age insurance (AHV), invalidity insurance and workmen's compensation act, and he referred to the successful national exhibition, the EXPO.

As regards the new year, the President expressed his hope that every effort would be made to reduce the loss of life on the roads. He then dwelt on the youth of the country and that their wellbeing and training should have priority in the new year. He hoped that peace would reign in 1965 and that really constructive work could be done in Switzerland.

The President of the Swiss Confederation has received many letters and telegrams of congratulations. Among them were about forty from heads of states such as President Johnson, President de Gaulle, Mr. Mikojan, the Pope and the Burgomaster of Berlin. Several Royal messages of greetings also arrived.

The first meeting of the Federal Council in the new year took place on 5th January, with Federal Councillor Tschudi in the chair.

The railways had to cope with an extraordinary number of travellers, some returning from wintersports districts, Italian and other foreign workers returning from abroad, and many special trains bringing holiday visitors into Switzerland. In the first four days of the year, fifty-one supplementary trains left for Paris, Brussels and the Channel coast, eighteen relief trains travelled through Switzerland from Austria to Paris. Inside Switzerland nearly eighty special trains were put on, not counting the many trains dealing with the returning Italians and Spaniards. Between 11th December and 4th January, 872 relief trains were put on by the SBB. [A.T.S.]

### SEVENTY-SEVEN YEARS OF MATRIMONY

The oldest married couple in Switzerland, Monsieur and Madame Charles Burgat-Maccabez, celebrated their 77th wedding anniversary at St. Aubin (Neuchâtel) on 7th January. Both are in their hundredth year. [A.T.S.]