

Was it a victory?

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WAS IT A VICTORY?

STUDENTS' REFERENDUM

In October of last year, the Swiss Parliament passed a law, the "E.P.F. law", giving a new statute to the Polytechnic of Lausanne. This institute of technology had hitherto been part of Lausanne's university, and had depended for its livelihood on the Canton de Vaud. It was now to be taken in charge by the Confederation, and enjoy the same legal status and advantages as the Zurich Federal Polytechnic. Switzerland was then to have two major institutes of technology, one in Zurich and one in Lausanne. The E.P.U.L., or "Ecole Polytechnique de l'Université de Lausanne" was to become the "E.P.F.L.", or "Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne".

This re-organisation of Swiss scientific education was long overdue, because German-speaking Switzerland had benefited by the country's only school of engineering being in Zurich. The establishment of a similar school in Western Switzerland was to encourage its developing industries, in the same way as the proximity of the "Poly" had been of great use to the industries of Zurich.

Although no one complained when the law was being debated and passed, once it had been voted, the students found in it cause for discontent.

The new law replaced the one which had governed the organisation of the "Poly" since 1854. It brought hardly any change, however, save for a clause giving recognised student bodies the right to be consulted in academic and administrative decisions.

This was clearly not enough for the "Poly" students, who decided to block this new law by launching a Referendum. The union of Swiss students held a conference in Fribourg and supported their Zurich comrades. Their main grievance with the new law was that it hardly changed anything with respect to the previous one: it provided for nothing concerning study fees, student assistance, university autonomy and student responsibility. Moreover, it had overlooked both a motion introduced by Mr. Eisenring, a National Councillor from Zurich, who had insisted on increased student participation in the running of their universities, and the student themselves, who had not been consulted as they had been on previous occasions.

The students had nothing against the E.P.U.L. becoming the "E.P.F.L.", they were complaining at what the new law left out. They felt that a chance of overhauling the whole Swiss higher education system had been missed.

The Referendum was decided, although it was not backed by every student association. There was a month to collect the 50,000 necessary signatures, and the students just made it in time.

These signatures having been handed in by 8th January, and the Referendum taking place on 1st June, there were five months for the students to decide what kind of law they actually wanted and to get the Swiss to back it, or at least, back them.

Their campaign got a fair amount of publicity in the press, but rather less on radio and television, which of course diminished the students' impact on the Swiss people, who were in the main not particularly fond of students, especially since the hot events of 1968 and the street fighting that had taken place in Zurich. However, students organised a number of processions, teach-ins and seminars with their professors. In Basle, they even had their own propaganda vehicle, and searched for converts in the streets. This whole unprecedented action was to try to get the Swiss to be more aware of their students and understand them better.

Naturally, the more engaged students took the opportunity to express their philosophical motivations, somewhat similar to those of L.S.E. militants, who have been claiming that the university should no longer be "sold" to capitalistic interests trying to feed students on the stuff which would allow their own self-centred capitalistic universe to survive. They therefore wanted the freedom of deciding for themselves what they were to learn, and refused to be imposed upon by forces they eventually wanted to destroy. For a hot minority of students, the reform of the Swiss university was therefore no less than a first step towards a complete overhaul of Swiss society. Fortunately for the students, this was not brought home to the majority of the Swiss population!

In answering them, their professors stressed their belief in change, but not in a mad rush. They believed in empiricism, and not in investing green students with responsibilities which they were not able to assume. The drafters of the E.P.F. law reminded its opponents that it left ample scope for improvements and further developments, and that it had never been intended to be more than mere rules guiding the life of Switzerland's two institutes of technology.

The debate was by no means over by 1st June, and seemed hardly to have

stirred popular indifference to the matter, judging by the 30.6% of the voting population which took the trouble to go to the polls. No political Party took any firm position in this issue, and the students were left almost alone to face the country. They managed to carry the day, but with a very small majority.

They had scored a victory, but had little cause for rejoicing, because the Referendum had in no way proved that the population had either supported or understood them. In fact, some people, complaining at the expenses the creation of the "E.P.F.L." would have entailed, voted against the E.P.F. law. That is, they voted for the students with the intention of letting them down! This of course showed that the students' information campaign had not been successful everywhere. It also means that if a day comes when student wishes are submitted to the people in a Referendum, the students will by no means be able to count on all those voters who supported their Referendum on 1st June. They still have to define these wishes: they have turned down a law, it now remains for them to find a better one in its place. To this end, they are getting organised in various committees and establishing political contacts. If they pursue this initial victory wisely, they might well be recognised as a serious force by the Swiss people in the end.

In the meanwhile, the E.P.U.L. is left without any clear statute. This is no tragedy, since Federal Councillor Tschudi, who is in charge of education, has immediately reassured the Lausanne that the outcome of the Referendum had in no way impaired federal help to the new E.P.U.L. buildings now being erected at Dorigny. This, after all, is the most important thing, since the principle benefit the E.P.U.L. would have derived from the rejected law was increased financial help from the Confederation. This help is fortunately going to be continued.

P.M.B.

PLANETARIUM TO BE INAUGURATED

On 1st July, Switzerland's first planetarium will be inaugurated at the Swiss Transport Museum. Thus Switzerland will receive an excellent educational aid, of particular importance at this time when man is about to penetrate space and accomplish history's greatest technical achievement by landing on the moon. This planetarium is more suitable than anything else to arouse and deepen the interests of the public, especially of young people, in the events on the firmament.

(S.N.T.O.)