

Interview with a Swiss socialist

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INTERVIEW WITH A SWISS SOCIALIST

In the following few issues we shall be reporting on various interviews and experiences made during a recent trip to Switzerland. In the present one, we report on a conversation with the "political director" of the Swiss left-wing organ "*La Voix Ouvrière*", Mr. Armand Magnin, and try to elicit from him the aims of his movement in the prosperous and content Switzerland of today.

La Voix Ouvrière is a rather skimpy paper. The summer edition has no more than six pages. In winter, when news becomes more abundant, the paper adds extra pages. Neither does it appear to have much success with the high street public and the two unattended boxes from which the paper can be bought near to Geneva's Cornavin station are invariably filled with untouched piles of *Voix Ouvrières*.

Mr. Armand Magnin, a stocky and genial ex-workman from Fribourg, explained to me that the bulk of sales came from subscriptions. The daily circulation of *La Voix Ouvrière* ran at about 12,000 copies a day. The same organisation was printing a German equivalent called *Vorwaerts* appearing weekly and circulating at about 6,000 copies. There was also a similar publication in Italian with a circulation of 2,500.



Mr. Magnin in his office
at "*La Voix Ouvrière*"

La Voix Ouvrière was founded by the Geneva Communist Léon Nicole in the 1930's. It was edited for many years by Henri Trub, who died last year. Mr. Armand Magnin, present secretary of the Geneva section of the Swiss Labour Party and formerly Geneva secretary of the Union of Metal Workers, Switzerland's most important

trade union, took his succession on a part-time basis. The paper was fortunate in being the owner of its printing works, originally founded with labour money. These presses were only partially used with turning out *La Voix Ouvrière* and three-quarters of their operations consisted of normal commercial work. The special rates offered by its own printing works, the 250,000 francs of yearly advertising income plus a 40,000 franc subscription by the Labour Party and a steady subscription income allowed the paper to survive in relatively difficult times for the Swiss Socialist movement.

Mr. Magnin further told me that *La Voix Ouvrière* had four full-time editors. The paper enjoyed the free contribution from people committed to the party's cause. In particular, a certain chemical engineer signing as *Calvet* was writing a series of scathing articles on the inside aspects of the Swiss chemical industry.

It is in Geneva that the Swiss Labour Party has the most secure position. It ranks as one of the six parties of the town, separated in the "bourgeois parties" (Radicals, Liberals and Independents) and "social parties" (Socialists, the Christian Socialists and the Labour Party). With the Socialists (of which they are the left-wing image) they constitute a major political force in the town and have consistently held their own in the Great Council. They hold two voices out of five in the Executive Council and pioneered with women delegates. They have beaten the local Radical Party during the May municipal elections and have enjoyed a gain of a thousand votes.

Mr. Magnin explains this as the towns people's appreciation for what the Labour Party stands for and for what it had already achieved in the way of social justice. The situation was nowhere as rosy in other parts of the country. The Labour Party was evicted from the Great Council of Zurich and Basle in recent elections and nowhere is its strength comparable to what it now is in Geneva. This is reflected in the representation at Parliament. There are only five members of the Labour Party in the National Council (two from Vaud, two from Geneva and one from Neuchâtel) and none in the Council of States.

Mr. Magnin deplures the bad organisation of the Party in western Switzerland and explains its present disarray as a consequence of the rift in a deviationist and in a far-left wing of what used to be the Swiss Communist Party, but which was banned dur-

ing the war. These two tendencies are still present and the Swiss "Labourites", inheritors of the former Communist Party, have not built up a sound common front. Dissensions in the Party in German-speaking Switzerland have undermined its strength.

I was interested to hear from Mr. Magnin how he envisaged the future role of his party in a country which people in every continent envied for its prosperity and harmony. Mr. Magnin and his comrades want a *Socialist State*. There is no doubt about this in their minds. The means of production must be handed over to the State and be owned by every citizen. Mr. Magnin claims that Switzerland is in a worse situation than France, which is said to be ruled and owned by "40 families".

But his desire for social and material equality leaves out any change of the political structure of the country. He is a traditionalist and stands by on neutrality, federalism, direct democracy and militia training. His only political improvement would be to ban the Council of States, a reactionary body which contains only two Socialists out of 44 members. The Swiss Labour Party also dissociates itself from the fringe Maoist Parties that have sprouted up in the large towns. He disapproves of Trotskyites and Radicals because of their absence of realism. Mr. Magnin is far from backing outright revolution.

Despite the virulence of his leaders in *La Voix Ouvrière* and his attacks against the complacency of the Swiss establishment, he wants to see things moving slowly but surely and is opposed to destroying the positive aspects of the Swiss set-up. One thing against which he has a most guarded attitude, however, is Switzerland's thirty-year-old "Peace of Labour" agreement, which he believes leaves a raw deal to the working classes. He finds that it is only a palliative to an unjust social situation which must be remedied as the whole of the production system falls into the hands of the Socialist State for which his movement is militating. The Swiss Labour Party is furthermore opposed to the recent initiative in favour of employee participation in management.

In the short-term, Mr. Magnin wants to see a number of social adjustments carried out. "The worker earning a mean 1,600 francs a month has a difficult life. His comfort depends on his wife working, a possibility which hinges on the present high in the economy and which is artificial. The present system victimises the lonely and unmarried woman. Thousands of them working in the retail trade earn less than 900 francs a month. The treatment of seasonal workers is appalling. We have always fought for more justice and understanding towards them and have fought bitterly against the Schwarzenbach Initiative. The housing situation, relying on purely

capitalist concepts, is getting on to be dramatic. We launched the first of a series of initiatives to improve old age pension benefits."

These and others are the immediate aims of the Swiss Labour Party. No more than practical socialism in fact—the ideology being left in the background. The Labour Party approved of the Russian invasion of Hungary in 1956 but disapproved of their policy towards Czechoslovakia in 1968. Nevertheless, their affiliation with the high instances of the World Communist Movement are rather weak and the Swiss Labour Party has a strong conscience of national belonging.

It is strongly in favour of increased

public aid to developing countries, more protection of the environment and equal pay for men and women. But these are bandwaggon upon which every other movement has been riding and not the original mark of the Swiss Labour Party. It is fair to say, however, that they were among the first to bring these problems out in the open. The Party may be losing its acumen and appear too compromising for the new militants. Mr. Magnin calls it "*le rassemblement des forces progressistes*", which sounds quite inoffensive. The contents of *La Voix Ouvrière* do however remain quite uncompromising, as it is difficult to read such searing criticism of Swiss things elsewhere.

NATIONAL DAY REFLECTIONS

Our Ambassador speaks at the Wimbledon Town Hall

My dear compatriots,

You will not be surprised if one of my dominant feelings today is certain embarrassment. Once more a new Swiss ambassador is addressing you! Over the last roughly 10 years you have seen in my position a succession of faces, one after the other, and hardly had you become familiar with one head of mission than another arrived. It may be small consolation to you that these were the ways of destiny and that these rather frequent changes simply could not be helped. However that may be, I for one sincerely hope that it will be my privilege to stay with you for a number of years to come, in this country which I greatly admire and in this my beloved city of London.

Before I ask your permission to tell you a little more about the ideas that occur to me in connection with our national holiday, I should like to thank most warmly the organisers of today's function and among them, in particular, Mr. Berti. He has once more shown his usual efficiency and circumspection in arranging all the manifold details that have to be attended to on such an occasion. I should also like to extend my thanks to the "Musikgesellschaft Diepoldsau", which not only embellishes our celebration and will delight our youngsters when we get to the dancing, but also conveys to us some of the atmosphere of the old country to which we all remain so deeply attached.

While we are celebrating our national holiday today, lots of things are happening in the world at large. The "winds of change" are blowing again with increased vigour. And since we are living in just *one* world, in one way or another world events are affecting us too, and the fact that we

are Swiss does not provide us with any escape from them.

When Federal Councillor Max Petitpierre became our Foreign Minister in the mid-forties, he coined a new slogan for our foreign policy, and this was "Neutrality and Solidarity". In this way he wanted to bring out the feeling that so very obviously dominated us—as far as the older generation was concerned—during the years of the last war. We had sympathised very profoundly with the immense sufferings that the peoples of the world had to endure in that fateful period, and we had tried, within the limited means at our disposal, to help to alleviate them as much as possible. We also felt that, apart from our duties in this most immediate task of healing the wounds of the war, we had to share in the efforts to build up a new and better world. This conviction led to Swiss membership of dozens of international organisations, humanitarian, scientific, technical and others, where we could make our voices heard and where, at the same time, new avenues of thought were opening up before us.

I think a new stage has now been reached for Swiss participation in world affairs. I said a minute ago that we cannot avoid being involved in them anyway. If any proof of this simple truth were needed, it was supplied—in a most striking fashion—by the hijacking of a Swiss aeroplane by Palestinian guerrillas in September of last year. Much to our surprise we found ourselves a victim and—in our efforts to get out of a most unpleasant situation—an actor on the world stage. This incident inflicted a kind of shock upon our entire population and made us aware that there are no passive bystanders left in the world, which has become a very small place indeed.

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What I have just said should not, however, be interpreted as meaning that we have to throw away all that Switzerland has stood for in the past and start again from scratch. The set of values which we have lived by during the last decades and the centuries-long evolution which has made them what they are will certainly remain of utmost importance to us. It would be a sad day indeed when the Swiss came to the conclusion that the qualities by which they are known throughout the world are just so much nonsense and to be discarded without further ado. My most striking experience since I arrived in this country is the enormous sympathy that I find for Switzerland and the Swiss people wherever I go. Obviously, the remarks I hear about our being such a clean, orderly, well-groomed country are, although very flattering, still somewhat exaggerated. Switzerland is no longer all that clean and orderly.

But from my contacts with the young Swiss in particular I gather that their fundamental character has remained the same. They are visibly and understandably shaken by the richness and complexity of impressions with which they are deluged by modern civilisation and which are difficult to digest and sort out. But I see no inclination on the part of the Swiss population to stop being Swiss and just become diluted in a larger whole.