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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 Neuchatel) and none in the Council of States. .

Mr. Magnin deplores 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 bandwagons 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.

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