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Autor(en): [s.n.]

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK**

Band (Jahr): - (1984)

Heft 1811

PDF erstellt am: **26.09.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-687115>

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Socialists vote to keep Swiss 'magic'

AFTER a heated 10-hour marathon debate, an extraordinary congress of Switzerland's Social Democratic Party has voted to continue the 24 year old government coalition with the centre-right parties, often cited as a prime factor in the near proverbial Swiss political stability.

The vote, 773 to 511, rejected a party executive proposal to end the alliance temporarily and go into opposition. But speakers of both the party's left and right wings agreed that the Social Democrats should in future be less compromising and must increase political pressure at all levels.

"The party will never be the same", declared party president Helmut Hubacher, who had initiated the pull-out proposal.

However the outcome, widely predicted in unofficial pre-congress polls, was feared by some to lead to a possible breakaway, specifically by younger members.

The issue had dominated political discussions in the country to an unparalleled extent since the centre-right majority in parliament last December rejected the Social Democrats' official candidate for the Federal Cabinet, Lilian Uchtenhagen.

The party had proposed that Mrs Uchtenhagen, an economist and the first Swiss woman ever to bid for a berth in the executive, fill the post vacated by the death last October of Finance Minister Willy Ritschard.

Instead, the legislators elected another Social Democratic outsider Otto Stich. He accepted the post although his party president had indicated before the vote that he was unacceptable to the party.

When the party staged its extraordinary congress in Berne, tempers ran high among the mainly middle aged 1,350 delegates as advocates and opponents of a pullout alter-

nated at the rostrum before the vote.

"We need fresh air, otherwise we will suffocate", declared Toya Maissen, a woman member of the party executive and a sharp critic of the Swiss rule by consensus.

Referring to mounting voters' absenteeism, she said that the system had led to "an ever increasing popular contempt for official politics".

Arthur Schmid, a former party president, countered that a "voluntary retreat would not mean renewal of the party but will cause grave damage", because it would strip the party of its most influential position.

"Participation in government and opposition do not exclude each other in the Swiss system of direct democracy", he said.

A Geneva delegate, Christian Grobet, won applause from the left-wing when he said "we no longer want to be the hostages of the bourgeois parties".

But Pierre Aubert, who as Foreign Minister holds the second Social Democrat berth in the cabinet under the coalition agreement (popularly known as the "magic formula"), appeared to echo the views of many rank and file members when he cautioned that "slamming the door will cost a high price".

Otto Stich, the man who now heads the finance ministry instead of Mrs Uchtenhagen, accepted a cactus plant from women delegates - and then listened seemingly impassively to personal attacks at the congress.

Several speakers called on him to resign. One woman called him an "Ersatz-Frau" (a substitute woman) while another quoted from a satirical weekly that had dubbed him an "obscure socialist of reassuring mediocrity".

In a brief speech greeted by a mixture of applause and jeering whistles, he defended his support for the alliance, saying this was based on a mandate from the voters. "We cannot solve the many problems facing Switzerland by pulling out of the government", he said.

Addressing the plenum immediately after him, a young delegate said that a withdrawal would be a signal of hope in a society heading for (environmental) disaster.

And a 67 year old speaker agreed that only an opposition rule could inspire the youth which he said was largely in a "no future" mood.

Party president Hubacher was accused by some Right wing delegates of having used counterproductive tactics in pushing Mrs Uchtenhagen's candidature too strongly. But there were no calls for his resignation.

It was a grave setback for the leadership, however, coming on the heels of the humiliation in parliament and the Social Democrat's poor showing in last October's general elections.

For the first time in more than half a century, they have now been outstripped by the right-of-centre Radical Democrats as the leading vote getters.

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