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Switzerland

The feminist strike of 14 June 2019, towards a mass movement in Switzerland

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The feminist women's strike on 14 June in Switzerland was a real success. [\[1\]](#) Here is the story of how and why it was organized from one of the leading activists.

A feminist strike of an unprecedented scale is being prepared in Switzerland. On the eve of the event, it may be useful to retrace some of the contours of this already historic movement. In a country where the reactionary right is the first party and where "labour peace" is sealed by agreements between dominant unions and employers, the feminist movement is strengthening and rehabilitating the strike as a means of struggle.

At the origins of the movement

On 14 June 1991, a first "Women's Strike" took place, bringing together more than 500,000 people across the country. Their demand? That the principle of equality enshrined in the Federal Constitution 10 years ago should finally be implemented. While some social gains such as maternity leave, the legal right to abortion and the revision of the Equality Act prohibiting all forms of gender discrimination in the workplace were won in the decade that followed, substantive and substantive equality still remains to be achieved.

Women's real material and social conditions are not improving. Living in a country where women are sacked overnight because of their pregnancy, where they lose their residence status by divorcing an abusive partner, where some have to work at more than one job because their full time job is underpaid, where they are subject to discrimination and harassment in their training places, where they spend an average of 53 hours a week doing domestic work that is still not recognized and shared... The reality faced by the majority of women in Switzerland is such that it seems legitimate for a large part of the population to gather for a broad political protest since what seemed to have been achieved yesterday is not being achieved today.

The current movement is on an unprecedented scale, as the activists who built and participated in the 1991 strike confirm. It is anchored both in the continuity of this historic event and in an internationalist logic that echoes the multiple feminist strike movements of 8 March. With the support of more than 65% of the population [\[2\]](#), participation in the mobilizations is expected to be massive.

The movement originated with a battle against a parliamentary pension reform project defended by the right, the Swiss Socialist Party and the Swiss Trade Union Confederation (Union Syndicale Suisse), which called for women's retirement age to be raised to 65. The battle was fought and won by a front composed of dissident feminist trade unionists, radical left organizations and various associations. The same coalition has remained active on other fronts, including broad corporate tax reforms. And when it came to discussing equal pay at parliamentary level, we decided to use this opportunity to put an end to institutional discussions without any real concrete measures to combat sexism.

In June 2018, we organized the Assises féministes, a first women-only meeting, without cisgender men, to see if there was also a desire among the population to build a broad feminist movement. To our surprise, the conference brought together nearly 200 women from different regions of Switzerland, all of whom voted to organize a feminist strike on 14 June 2019!

Different ways of challenging the social order

The assemblies that followed made it possible to draft a manifesto and a national call for a strike [3], which anchored the movement in a critique of capitalism and the cisheterosexist system, in the recognition of productive and reproductive work, in the fight against multiple discrimination, for the right to dispose of one's body, and in a critique of the school system reflecting the patriarchal model.

The reasons for striking in 2019 are diverse and multiple because each life course is unique, at the crossroads of different oppression, exploitation and discrimination. Hence the broad and diverse nature of the manifesto's demands, which affect different spheres of life.

It was also important to make visible the fact that the formal rights acquired so far have been recuperated by the existing system, which is capitalist, racist and sexist, and which benefits the 1% of privileged people. Thus, our strike movement, as it is being built, wants to be part of this break with the institutions, by pointing out everything that keeps them going. What our movement is aiming for is a profound social change! This change is achieved by choosing strikes as a central and necessary tool for political action.

Nevertheless, given that this movement was built with the idea that it should be as broad as possible, many forms of action coexist and the demands put forward by the future participants do not all have the same potential to challenge the patriarchal order. It is interesting in this respect to highlight the role played by the media: to a large extent, the legitimacy of the movement has been built by the echo throughout the media, thus contributing to the democratization of this struggle by making it more widely accessible. However, it was the less subversive themes that were given the most coverage, such as equal pay or the representation of women in institutional politics – with the exception of the major controversies surrounding the legality of the political strike or the question of non-mixed representation as a way of organizing collectives.

As anti-capitalist feminist activists, we must challenge liberal feminism, that is useful only to a handful of already privileged people. What is the point of equal pay if wages remain low? What is the point of promoting women to high positions of responsibility, if precarious women are increasingly precarious? As the authors of the *Feminism for the 99% - A Manifesto* remind us: “We have no interest in breaking the glass ceiling while leaving the vast majority of women continue to clean up the shards!” . [4]

We must also refute law and order policies as a means of combating gender-based violence, which disproportionately target non-white and/or poor men and seek to criminalize – under the guise of protection – activities carried out by certain women, such as sex work. We must fight for reproductive, non-essentializing justice that gives everyone the same opportunities, regardless of their legal status, financial means, gender identity and sexual orientation, to have access to a universal health system, to free and unrestricted abortion, to the possibility of having children.

We must fight for anti-racist feminism, at a time when Islamophobia is intensifying every day, when the Roma population that is often forced to beg in order to survive is criminalized, when non-white women are invisible in the media, political and feminist spaces (including ours), and who continue to be discriminated against in hiring and over-exploited when they find a job.

Thus, the slogan “If you recognize yourself in one chapter of the manifesto, then be with us on June 14” is not a strategy that we must be satisfied with as anti-capitalist feminist activists. While it has indeed brought together a large number of women in Switzerland, we must be critical of its political significance. Our role is to fight for a feminism of

the totality and a feminism that fights against all other oppressions.

It is in this sense that the activists of the strike movement, if they really advocate a change in society, must seize all the demands, without hierarchy, under penalty of preventing a real awareness of the systemic and intertwined nature of oppression, but also of the solidarity and struggles that we must build.

As expressed in our national call for a strike, substantive equality cannot be achieved in a world where only the profits and interests of a privileged minority truly matter. It is because we challenge the system as a whole that we must make broad and inclusive, anti-racist and anti-capitalist demands. These demands must go against a conservative feminism that supports society as it is because it defends the interests of a handful of women, if we want this feminist strike to initiate a real emancipation movement for all.

Local collectives for internationalist feminism

To create a broad movement, what was decisive was the desire to be based on a great number of small, local collectives. These have been built by region or neighbourhood, by workplace and educational establishment, or around certain political themes such as culture, migration, motherhood, old age, wearing a headscarf, etc.

This method has made it possible to build a feminist practice that is close to people, who collectively think about the issues that concern them and together develop demands and the ways to make them visible. While the number of participants who will strike in the true sense of the word will probably not be as massive, the demands expressed will be truly entrenched and supported by the participants.

Beyond the fact that our demands come from the grassroots, our movement is by definition part of the continuity of feminist movements such as we have seen in Poland, the Spanish State, Argentina, Italy, India, Chile, the United States, etc. All over the world, women are at the forefront of the struggle for a better world.

It is also the role of anti-capitalist, feminist, anti-racist and ecosocialist activists to bring these struggles to life and politicize them. Our solidarity must be part of a global rejection of the system that today is degrading human life and the planet, in a context of rising reactionary ideas, wars and dispossessions, the spread of racism and state violence. It is only in the process of building mass movements, from below and from an internationalist perspective, that the beginning of real change is possible.

The year-long process of building the strike in Switzerland was not easy, but it nevertheless tried to show that a different society is imaginable and possible. This strike seeks to include both politicised women and those who have become politicised within the movement. The latter has also brought together different social categories, generations, or even various political, trade union and associative parties. However, the movement still struggles to ensure that the “margin is at the centre” [\[5\]](#), a condition for a truly revolutionary feminism.

However, what we are living and building in Switzerland is historic and opens the way for a renewal of feminism. This strike is more a process than a symbolic day and we know very well that this date is not an end in itself but the first step towards building a mass feminist movement. The 14 June 2019 will show us what we are capable of when we join forces, but it will be up to us, anti-capitalist feminists, to take on board the criticisms to continue working towards a sustainable, inclusive and total movement because everything remains to be done!

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Translated from [Contretemps](#).

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[1] See *The Guardian* 14 June 2019 "[Swiss women strike to demand equal pay](#)", *New York Times* 14 June 2019 "[Swiss Women Strike Nationwide to Protest Inequalities](#)", *swissinfo.ch* 14 June 2019 "[Huge turnout for women's strike in Switzerland](#)".

[2] "Women's strike: almost two thirds of the Swiss are in favour", [Tribune de Genève](#) (in French), 4 June 2019.

[3] Manifesto of the feminist strike women's strike "[Manifeste de la Grève féministe/ grève des femmes* et l'Appel national pour le 14 juin](#)".

[4] Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya, Nancy Fraser *Feminism for the 99% - A Manifesto*, London: Verso 2019. The idea that it was important for the movement to integrate right-wing women as best it could because sexism is a problem that affects all women equally exists within different groups. It must be said that the feminism defended in the movement left little room for liberal feminism. Right-wing women have thus communicated that they will not take part in the June 14 mobilizations. (Women on the right will not strike", 24 hours, 9 June 2019, [Les femmes de droite ne feront pas grève](#)).

[5] See bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, Boston: South End Press, 1984.