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Switzerland

A racist vote?

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Since the Swiss referendum on February 9, 2014, narrowly backing a move to restore strict quotas for immigration from European Union countries, many have decried the vote as racist and xenophobic. They have thus drawn the necessary political conclusion, which makes racism the target of a policy, anti-racism the guideline. In my view, nothing would be more erroneous and above all ineffective given the political and social urgencies of the moment, in the country with the lowest rate of unemployment in Europe. Here are some preliminary lines of explanation.

Surrounded by a pseudo discourse which was both social – the generalised undercutting of wages, the rising cost of housing - and ecological - the overloading of trains and road axes - the draft law voted on certainly has its roots in the ideology of the “fight against Ueberfremdung”, the alleged “foreign overpopulation”, inaugurated by the Swiss authorities after the First World War.

This same ideology gave rise to the xenophobic wave of the 1970s, which four times subjected to popular ballot proposals to repatriate foreign workers. The roots of this are moreover not purely ideological, since a quasi direct link can be established between the initiators then and now. There is no doubt about the nationalist and xenophobic nature of the text subjected to the vote.

Its content has found a natural audience in rural Switzerland or, as some analysts have noted, among those located at more than 700 metres altitude, whereas the towns have rejected it. As elsewhere in Europe, it is the regions where foreigners are least present which have most strongly protested against “foreign overpopulation”.

These layers formed the hard core of Sunday’s result as they have in the past 40 years in the areas of immigration and asylum. But they could not alone form a majority, albeit one of only 20,000 votes. To this hard core several other phenomena were added. First, among certain layers of youth there has been an increased prevalence of nationalist discourse, identification with “national” values, with other forms of identification, social or class based for example, already not very present among the youth of this country, being systematically reduced.

This is the result of a long process of the political and structural integration of the workers’ movement, in both its political and trade union aspects, into the state apparatus of the Swiss bourgeoisie and its subordination to the interests of national capitalism symbolised by the practice over eight decades of the policy of “labour peace” (In July 1937, the main trade union federation and the engineering employers’ organization signed the so-called “labour peace” agreement involving the total renunciation of strike action to guarantee the international competitiveness of Swiss export industry. After the Second World War this policy was generalised, accompanied by the minority and constant - except for less than ten years in the 1950s - participation of the Socialist Party in the coalition government, as well as the cantonal governments and local executives, notably in some big towns, where both the Greens and the so called “left of the left” also participate in coalition governments).

Still a relatively minority phenomenon, this revival of nationalism among youth is evident notably in the emergence of young right wing cadre, whether in the youth organisations of the Union of the Democratic Centre – the most employer friendly and anti-worker of the bourgeois parties – or in those of the Radical Liberal party. Present – certainly marginally, but nonetheless present - among school students, these forces take on weight given the shift to the right of the epicentre of political debate. Thus unlike in the 1990s – and also afterwards - in terms of spontaneous demonstrations in the schools against the nationalist backlash, this time there was nothing. This was certainly not the decisive factor in the outcome of the vote, but the disarray created among youth has probably played a role. It is in

any event the absence of public initiative, in contrast to the other vote of the week-end, that on the right to abortion, which has left an empty space.

This disarray was still greater when, apart from some rare experiences of organisation of independent left campaigns against the xenophobic initiative without real visibility, no content has come from the left. And it is precisely at this level that another strata, represented by what was a little too quickly called the “workers’ vote”, was added to the traditional nationalist core. I will return subsequently to the necessary prudence with respect to the “workers’ vote” but it should be recognised that the protectionist discourse has largely penetrated the popular layers.

At the base of this vote, undoubtedly, is the generalisation of policies of wage undercutting practiced by employers who, fortified by an unlimited availability of labour power – the industrial reserve army, to employ a concept which makes sense - and the preventive capitulation of the trade union movement, can do as they like. In Tessin, for example, a peripheral canton suffering from a marked regional under-development, the unlimited exploitation of an immigrant border-crossing work labour force, paid peanuts, exerts a constant pressure on the popular layers. It is in this canton that the figure of the “Polish plumber” of other days takes on the traits of the “electrician from Reggio Emilia”, paid at the rates prevalent in Reggio Emilia.

Faced with this situation the institutional left, both political and trade union, has been totally incapable of contributing even the beginning of a response. It is confined, in the continuity of subordination to the interests of Swiss export industry, to relaying the employers’ discourse explaining to hundreds of thousands of workers worried about their purchasing power and workplace, “the importance of immigration for our wellbeing” and “the necessary opening to Europe, pledge of our prosperity”.

It was indeed this latter aspect that was essential for Swiss capitalism, since the challenging of the agreements with the EU could signify major restrictions for its access to European markets. Faced with this situation, the silence of the parliamentary and institutional left has been more culpable inasmuch as it has at no time been capable of denouncing the fact that it is employers who cut wages, not immigrants, that it is capitalists who lay off workers, not immigrants, that it is landlords who increase rents, not immigrants. But obviously such words would have had as consequence a commitment to class confrontation that this “left” avoids like the plague.

Thus, it is the vacuum left by the so-called “left” which has given room to the reassuring discourse of the UDC, which promises to re-establish “protections” by control over the migratory flows; this is the vacuum which has been filled among the popular layers. It is the legacy of a “left” which, under the pretext of the “progress of civilisation” did not wish to fight in 2005, during the vote on the bilateral agreements with Europe, to impose strict conditions – mandatory extension of employment contracts, minimum wages to be respected, employment of work inspectors – on the alleged “free circulation”. And whereas it adheres to these “values of opening” without giving them social content, a part of the layers most exposed to the effects of commodity globalisation seek a response among the xenophobes.

Unlike what happened in recent months, in the 1970s xenophobic initiatives were countered, in the three regions of the country, by unitary committees of Swiss and immigrant workers, the CUTSIs. They led the campaign from an angle of the community of interests, of class, between workers whatever the colour of their passport. It is moreover in struggle that this community of interest was able to leave traces, notably in the form of integrated structures of Swiss and immigrant employees.

And it was where these experiences of struggle were most advanced, supported by a permanent anti-capitalist propaganda and political agitation, that the xenophobic initiative of February 9 was least successful, the “workers vote” in its favour not having the same weight as where the institutional left had deserted the ground. That’s why it is first through the construction of a social, class conscious, internationalist opposition that we will fight the nationalist and xenophobic discourse. Because the abstract denunciation of “racism” inevitably ends up in the concrete

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stigmatisation of those who, through despair and the lack of an alternative, give credit to the xenophobic discourse. This is a long term task which must imperatively be taken on.