

# **Women's/Feminist Strike in Switzerland: A Step Forward on the Road of the Internationalization of Feminist Struggles**

Wednesday 27 November 2019, by [PREZIOSO Stéfanie](#) (Date first published: 13 August 2019).

**“But what do they want?” was the question since the first Feminist Conference in June 2018 held in Lausanne and its call for a Women\*s / Feminist strike to be held a year later. On the 14<sup>th</sup> of June 2019, exactly 28 years after the first-ever women\*s strike in Switzerland, more than half a million women\* and supportive men took part in mobilizations all over the country. Thousands more, from midnight on, occupied public spaces, and several workplaces or simply showed their solidarity with the strike by wearing purple clothing or the strike’s ad hoc badge.**

It is hard to analyze the success of such a mass movement, necessarily heterogeneous in its social composition and the political, cultural, national, religious, or generational origins of its participants. It is all the more arduous to understand, as from the start, by its decision to mobilize on the 14<sup>th</sup> of June, as opposed to the 8<sup>th</sup> of March as in the rest of the world, this movement appeared to stand apart from the transnational mobilizations of the three preceding years. These mobilizations have given rise to a new feminist wave, upheld by millions of women who have come together, demonstrated and/or have gone on strike to oppose socially regressive policies that disproportionately affect women\*, worsening the various forms of patriarchal oppression that dominate our societies.

However, the scale of the movement and its unmistakable success in Switzerland are in my view a product of the combination between the offensive nature of this new international feminist movement and the reactivation of the crucial experience that was the 1991 June 14<sup>th</sup> women’s strike within a deeply conservative and patriarchal country, ranked 20<sup>th</sup> by the World Economic Forum as to gender equality. This date symbolizes a key moment for the renewal of feminism in Switzerland.

The transmission of the experiences and knowledge of those who took part in the 1991 strike was all the easier because each generation present in this mobilization (including the one formed in 1968 years) understood its invaluable importance. Taking possession of one’s past to surpass it while updating it to counter neoliberal amnesia was a compelling necessity, all the more so because the history of feminist struggles is systematically forgotten, when it is not deliberately deleted. The stakes were high. On June 14, 1991, half a million women\* had mobilized throughout the country to ensure that gender equality (*de jure* and *de facto*), written ten years earlier in the Swiss Federal Constitution, was finally implemented. The movement had then grown all the more surely because it reflected a widely held feeling that enough was enough, in one of the last countries of Western Europe to have granted the right to vote to women, well after the United Kingdom, Ireland, Germany, Spain, France, and Italy.

The Swiss feminist movement had been fighting for political rights for women for decades. In 1971, male voters finally accepted these rights in a popular vote at the federal level by a 65.7% majority.

As the proposal was rejected by eight cantons, these rights were not fully implemented in all Swiss cantons until April 28, 1991, just weeks before the first women's strike. At that time, no significant and concrete progress had occurred as to equality in the workplace, in the family, etc. It was not until the second half of the 1980s that the new matrimonial law stripped the male "head of the family" of his extensive prerogatives. As for the right to abortion or maternity leave, they still appeared, on the eve of this first major feminist mobilization, as out of reach goals. Suggested as a joke by female watchmakers in the Vallée de Joux (at the heart of the watchmaking industry, devastated at the time by massive dismissals), the strike as a means of action was finally adopted not without provoking strong resistances, including among those who supported the need for mobilization.

In Switzerland, the so-called "social peace," based on a 1937 agreement between the metalworkers' union and the employers' organization called "peace at work" (*Paix du travail, Arbeitsfrieden*), was widely adopted in all sectors and ended being perceived as a supposed element of "collective identity." On an imaginary plane, cleverly cultivated by bosses and trade union leaders, in a country marked by a surprising continuity of elites, this "peace at work" was and is still presented as flowing from a trait of national character that explains the exceptional economic growth of the postwar decades. One should remember that since just after the Second World War, the Swiss dominant elites based their political action on an uncompromising economic liberalism, reflecting an economic system spared by the war, strongly marked by the power of the banking sector and devoid of any heavy industry requiring state intervention.

On June 14, 1991, a purple wave (the color of the strike) swept the country, from the windows of dwellings to public spaces, to workplaces, revealing the discriminations prevailing in all productive and reproductive sectors. During the following decade, no doubt thanks to the impressive mobilization of 1991, the revision of the law on equality, prohibiting any form of discrimination "direct or indirect in all work relationships," the right to abortion and maternity leave were obtained. From the beginning of the 2000s, feminist mobilizations underwent important developments, as also gender studies, opening up new perspectives for concrete thinking, in relation to the affirmation of new subjectivities and new subjects. This revival was felt on the social front (in defense of public services and benefits) and in defense of migrant and undocumented women, but also revived international action and awareness, especially through the World March of Women.

### **From One Strike to the Next**

It is interesting to note that while in 1991 the use of the word "strike" was considered problematic, last year the debate focused rather on the term "feminist," an adjective viewed by some as too "radical" or too "excluding" or, on the contrary, too "dated" or mainstream for others. In particular, young women of immigrant origin, very present in the movement from the start, were the most cautious, even if they were not fundamentally hostile to the use of the term. They feared that the restricted and disembodied meaning assigned to it by neoliberal capitalism in the previous decades might repel their generation. This had proven to be true when, in 2015, the Federal Commission for Women's Issues launched a project calling for a "woman's vote," seeking thereby to erase in the name of the "universal feminine," various forms of oppression suffered by the vast majority of women in Switzerland.

Did not feminism very often serve to legitimize political scenarios that promote neither social justice nor "gender justice"? Added to this was the fact that it had been unable or simply refused to grasp the relationship between sexism and racism, promoting in the name of "the emancipation of women," a battle against other women, especially veiled Muslim women, scapegoats of the nationalist or liberal right or even of sectors of the so-called "secular left." Thus, figures such as Martine Chaponnière, an early Swiss Women's Liberation activist, [defended a ban on the veil at](#)

[school in March 2016.](#)

This feminism had also helped to exclude “invisibilized” or precarious social layers from its militant agenda. The most revealing case is of course that of undocumented migrants, who, according to available estimates, are in their majority women employed in the domestic economy. Migrants without legal status, in precarious positions, working for a meager salary and without social insurance, they take on part of the housework and care, allowing women of the middle and upper classes to escape to a certain extent, the overwork due to the growing privatization of domestic chores and their unequal division between women and men. As Nancy Fraser has written:

- Mainstream feminism has adopted a thin, market-centered view of equality, which dovetails neatly with the prevailing neoliberal corporate view. So it tends to fall into line with an especially predatory, winner-take-all form of capitalism that is fattening investors by cannibalizing the living standards of everyone else. Worse still, this feminism is supplying an alibi for these predations. Increasingly, it is liberal feminist thinking that supplies the charisma, the aura of emancipation, on which neoliberalism draws to legitimate its vast upward redistribution of wealth.

The 200 or so women\* gathered on a hot day in June 2018 in an overcrowded hall in Lausanne intended precisely to put these issues on the agenda of the mobilizations planned for 2019. Seeking to reclaim a fighting feminism and invoking strike actions as a means of struggle, in a country where political strikes are illegal, was therefore an important step. They could also claim a first and, as its initiators admitted, unexpected success. Originating as an idea put forward at the 13<sup>th</sup> Women’s Congress of the Swiss trade-union umbrella organization Union syndicale suisse, whose basic line has long been that of collaboration with employers’ organizations, the idea of a Women\*/s/Feminist strike immediately took hold and grew.

In fact, the convening of the Feminist Conference in Lausanne took place in a particular context. At the national level, only a few months earlier, radical left-wing political forces, mainly *solidaritéS*, minority union sectors, feminist activists and pensioners’ associations, had won a major victory against a government project adopted by the Parliament, with the support of the Social-Democratic Party, aiming to raise the retirement age of women from 64 to 65 years (after two successive rises, led by the social-democrat minister Ruth Dreyfuss, from 62 to 63 in 2001 and from 63 to 64 years in 2005). For months, since April 2017, these activists had taken to the streets to gather the 70,000 citizen’s signatures necessary for this new law to be put to a popular referendum, thus weaving links between them, reinforced by a spectacular victory in the ballot boxes, in September 2017. Together, they had succeeded in imposing their action in numerous places, carrying a social demand for real (and not only formal) equality between women and men. Faced with a unanimous bourgeois bloc, supported by the Social-Democratic Party, this victory at the polls revealed an important mobilization potential against the policies of social regression (offensives against wages, social insurance, public services, and benefits) affecting the entire country.

In the Cantons and Communes, budget cuts with a direct impact on women - because they are at the forefront of care and education, but also because they make up the majority of people in the country below the poverty line - had affected education (with an overall funding reduction of 1 billion francs in 2017), health, asylum and development aid. According to the Federal Statistical Office, the pay gap between women and men is now 19.6%. Women are overrepresented in low-wage jobs (2/3 of employees earning less than 4000 francs), 60% of them hold part-time jobs (forced by their employers or by the unequal distribution of household chores). Only 10% of women with a child under four work full-time, and the proportion of young mothers who have to give up work tends to increase because of the shortage and high costs of childcare facilities. [1] Today we speak of the “mother’s ceiling” to account for this reality. In 2014, 20.2% of mothers with children under 25

years of age were unemployed, compared to 4.4% of fathers in the same situation; 82.5% of women with a child under 15 worked part-time, compared with 13.3% of fathers.

These inequalities in wages and career paths have a major negative impact on the level of pensions. Overall, women only receive little more than half of the sum of the pensions earned by men, because women have lower wages, because they work in less paid sectors and part-time jobs, and/or have had to give up work to care for children. As a consequence of these massive economic discrimination, the extreme limitation of maternity leave (conquered in 2005 at the federal level, it covers the loss of earnings after childbirth for 14 weeks only) and the absence of paternity leave (1 day in most sectors) or parental leave, most domestic work is still women's work in Switzerland today. And as if all this were not enough, the hard right tried, thankfully without success, to abolish the reimbursement of abortion costs (proposal voted on the 9<sup>th</sup> of February 2014).

With the campaign against raising women's retirement age and the battle against the massive decline in taxation of large companies, won in 2017, political organizations of the combative left, as well as militant sectors of the trade unions and the associative world forged important links on which the mobilization of June 2019 could count.

At the international level, since 2017, faced with the victory of Donald Trump in the United States and the coming to power of conservative and fundamentalist forces around the world and their declared war against women\*, the poorest, the precarious, the migrants, the March 8 mobilizations have grown in Switzerland too. Young women, often very young, have outflanked and overflowed more traditional feminist gatherings, with a significant participation (mixed or not) of "autonomous" sectors, marching against violence of all kinds against women, reinforcing and/or diversifying the 8 March committees somewhat sleepy until then. They were a thousand in the streets of Geneva in March 2017 and more than twice as many in March 2019, as the strike was in preparation.

### **Feminism, Class Movement, and Internationalism**

After the Conference in June 2018, local collectives were created all over the country, patiently building the mobilization from one canton to the next: first in French-speaking Switzerland, where a coördination was put in place and collectives created in each region (Vaud, Geneva, Neuchâtel, Fribourg, Valais) then in Italian speaking Switzerland and finally in German-speaking Switzerland. These collectives were the expression of the perceived urgency of addressing and challenging the various forms of domination depending on an individual's place in society. This necessity was all the more imperative, as they held together different generations, including political generations and distinct organizational cultures (where they existed) of associative, political, and trade union activists, with a variety of socio-professional categories and origins. But the aim also was to integrate these varied experiences into the broadest possible movement, reflecting new feminist aspirations.

The strike manifesto, first drafted by a small group of women\* appointed by the general assembly during the second plenary session of the French-speaking coördination in Lausanne in September 2018, and then discussed, amended, corrected and amplified by the local collectives, is undoubtedly one of the most successful results. The discussion of this manifesto aimed to be as horizontal as possible, to bring together all the forces present, those of experienced activists, most often from the radical left, migrants and women's associations, and trade unions (from the private and public sectors), but also those of the youngest activists who wanted to make their voices heard. This method made it possible to determine together the modes of action and the demands of the strike. Amongst which were equal pay, a minimum wage, reduction of working hours; insurance and social benefits; the rights of migrant women at work and in their migratory journey (call for regularization and legislation that protects them); combating discrimination and violence against women\* (a

national plan for preventing and combating gender-based violence and sexual violence, acceptance of the right to asylum for these reasons); freedom to live one's sexual orientation and to choose one's gender identity; presence of women in the public/political space.

The radicalism of this manifesto, which questions the patriarchal and capitalist system, was a decisive conquest. In Bienne, in March 2019, the 500 women\* present adopted a *Call* to strike. It is this *Call*, known as the "[Appel de Bienne](#)," which was to be read on June 14<sup>th</sup> at 11 am in places of work and public spaces of Switzerland:

- We all, women\*, with or without a partner, in community, with or without children, with or without employment, and whatever the nature of that employment, healthy or sick, with or without disability, heterosexual, LGBTIQ, from the youngest to the oldest, born here or elsewhere, with different cultures and origins, we call for a feminist and women\*'s strike on June 14, 2019. We want equality in the facts and we want to decide ourselves about our lives. For this, we will go on strike on June 14, 2019!

If during the months of preparation, the collectives grew for the concrete preparation of the strike (setting up websites, writing brochures, organizing choirs, initiating actions of all kinds, flash mobs, etc.), other mobilizations helped fuel the strike's demands. The September 2018 mobilization in Berne, for equal pay, brought together more than 20,000 people, and its leaflet was translated into eleven languages (in Switzerland, immigrants without political rights make up more than a quarter of the population). In Geneva, a strike by the cleaners of a private bank who held pickets for days in the cold of winter, as well as the fight against an islamophobic law prohibiting the wearing of the veil in the cantonal and municipal parliaments and for the workers in all state or public service entities, made it possible to widen these struggles and make them more concrete. Two weeks before the strike, "[Purple Scarves](#)," gathering Muslim women wearing headscarves or not, called for the strike.

Lists of demands by professional sectors were also produced and filed in different workplaces. They are today a major challenge for the continuation of the huge mobilization of 14 June. Many initiatives came from below, especially in the public sector (daycares, schools, universities, hospitals, public administrations...) It is undoubtedly there (but we do not have all the figures yet), that the mobilization was the strongest and that the strike was the most followed. In the private sector, it was particularly difficult. In fact, in watchmaking and metallurgy, the trade union centers did not support the call to strike, with the collective labor agreements containing clauses proscribing any work stoppage. Yet, in some cases, bonds of solidarity between women workers in the public and private sectors were manifested through specific lists of demands. Thus, that of employees, students, PhD students of the University of Lausanne, included demands for women workers in the cafeterias and cleaning companies (quite all immigrants) hired by private companies on campus.

The popularity of the movement amongst the population, as evidenced by an opinion poll released by the press, as well as its scale, triggered a sort of strikewashing: some companies allowed extended breaks or released women at 3:24 pm, a symbolic hour of the day which marks the beginning of women's unpaid working hours in Switzerland (since they are not paid as much as men). The mobilizations also sought to make the invisible visible by promoting demonstrations in front of workplaces where women are massively employed (department stores, hotels...) to show solidarity with those who could not join the movement. The invisibles were also present at the final end-of-day demonstrations, represented by silhouettes or placards worn by other women in solidarity.

After the mobilization on June 14, one could read that the call to strike, criticized by much of the press for its left-wing and anti-patriarchal radicalism, far from constituting an obstacle to mobilization had been "*the expression of a true feminist, anti-racist, anti-sexist, and anti-capitalist*

*tide.*" An encouraging analysis of the movement, but probably somewhat too optimistic. It is true, that despite the pressures and attacks on an illegal strike, "confiscated by the left," "excluding men," etc., made by broad sectors of the right and the employers, relayed by some of the media, the mobilization was of unequalled magnitude. The links it created in living places and workplaces, the new solidarities that emerged and the themes that were put forward and constantly repeated since the call to the strike was launched in March were without doubt key conditions for a new awareness of the relations of domination and exploitation that are established in a capitalist society like Switzerland.

However, it must be noted, as [our comrades in Poland](#) also observed, that for the moment "Women do understand themselves as 'the oppressed,' but class analysis is present only in small parts of the feminist movement, mainly associated with academia, radical grassroots groups and, to a much lesser degree, in the unions." But there is hope. The movement was patiently constructed from below, in a capillary fashion, in connection with social movements and militant and trade union organizations, without renouncing the radical elements of its program. This is undoubtedly one of the keys to its success, manifest on the evening of the 14<sup>th</sup> of June. An unprecedented, broad and national movement, in a conservative and patriarchal country that has made its well-proven federalism one of the elements of its political continuity, undoubtedly opens a field for political and social protest throughout the country, effectively imposing a renewal and/or strengthening of its modes of action.

The next step will undoubtedly see this impressive movement, whose first concern - no doubt justified - was to signal its continuity with the June 14, 1991 strike, to connect with the international movement of March 8. This orientation will be debated after the summer break and probably adopted by the various groups. At the internationalist feminist meetings organized last April, in Geneva, by solidaritéS, to which Sara Farris and Tithi Bhattacharya notably contributed, the [call to create a feminist international](#) was well received. In the coming months, the campaign for the election to the Swiss federal parliament will put back on the table the demands of the Manifesto, which will be submitted to all the parties presenting candidates. The future of this new feminist movement, at the forefront of the fight against the hardening of capitalist exploitation, but also against its consequences in the reproductive sphere and against the rise of a nakedly racist patriarchy, has enormous potentialities. Its conscious international articulation today depends very much on its most radical wing. Our responsibilities are therefore considerable.

*This article is part of a dossier entitled "New Dispatches from the Feminist International."*

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## **Footnotes**

[1] See article in *Les Échos*, April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2018.