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Covid-19: Swiss government rejects confinement and relies on “individual responsibility”

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With 11,888 positive cases and 193 deaths to date [27 March] for 8 million people, Switzerland is the country with the most Covid-19 cases per capita in the world. 13.74 cases per 10,000 inhabitants on average in the country as a whole, 39.65 in Ticino, 35.19 in Geneva and 29.49 in the canton of Vaud.

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Since 16 March Switzerland has declared an emergency situation, granting full powers to the Federal Council, which now governs by ordinance. If the measures are historic - the army has not been deployed like this since 1939 - they remain rather restrained. We refuse to speak of confinement, the watchword being “individual responsibility”.

There is even a relaxation in some cantons because federal laws now take precedence over cantonal practices. This is the case in Ticino and Geneva, for example, where the canton had demanded the closure of all worksites. Federal Council ordinances authorize the continuation of activities if safety instructions are observed. Systematic screening for the virus is not on the agenda due to pressure from private health insurance companies and the lack of technical means to carry them out.

Despite calls from medical and trade union circles for stronger measures, the Federal Council places priority on preserving production and declares it will “do everything to maintain as much as possible a sufficient level of activity”. However, controls are lacking on the application of preventive measures in companies and a large part of the population continues to be exposed to the virus to pursue activities which are non-essential. A population which, forced to work, cannot take care of its children. While requests to reduce working hours are possible in order to take care of a child under 12, employees are under pressure.

The most precarious forgotten

The strongest measures are therefore to help the economy. The Federal Council is injecting 42 billion Swiss francs, the equivalent of 39 billion euros, as well as credits for companies with interest-free loans of up to 500,000 francs guaranteed by the Confederation. While these measures also cover the self-employed, the most precarious, the homeless and the undocumented are ignored by the authorities.

Registered sex workers are self-employed, but the vast majority are foreign workers with 90-day permits. Without accommodation, they lived in salons, but they are now closed. These women find themselves without income or social assistance, and homeless, without even the possibility of returning home because the borders are closed.

Refugees are also endangered. Health regulations in reception centres are impossible to comply with. Currently, about ten asylum seekers have tested positive for Covid-19. While the administration is idling, an exception is made for the asylum field. The hearings have been suspended for a week but are likely to resume soon. In addition, the procedures continue and therefore also the negative decisions. The applicants then have very short time limits for appeal and in the light of the current context, the effective right to a remedy is no longer guaranteed. Deadlines have been frozen by the Federal Council in civil and administrative matters with the exception of the right of asylum.

The authorities are also not up to par on the medical front. A report by the EPFZ reveals the state of saturation of hospitals. The country would need 1,000 additional resuscitation beds. Rather than investing, the Federal Council decreed the suspension of hospital work laws, thereby removing working time limits when weeks of 60 hours were already possible. The Swiss Union of Public Services has launched a petition to counter this measure.

Three thousand soldiers are currently deployed across the country and that number is increasing every day. Switzerland has a militia army of "civilians in uniform" supported by professional soldiers. Trained in half a day, not systematically tested and poorly protected, soldiers are exposed to the virus due to their poor conditions of accommodation and actions. As a result, there are now 100 soldiers who are positive for COVID-19.

Neoliberal policies for the destruction of health services

The Röstigraben (literally, the rösti ditch, a fantasized cultural border between the German language and Romance language regions) once again tests Swiss federalism. While the majority of the population in German-speaking Switzerland is satisfied with the measures taken by the Federal Council, in French-speaking and Italian-speaking Switzerland, the majority of those surveyed consider that the measures are insufficient and too late. These two regions are the most advanced in the spread of the epidemic with a week's notice.

As elsewhere in Europe, Switzerland suffers austerity attacks against the hospital and health service. Despite an exceptional wealth drawn from an internationalized imperialist economy, Switzerland will be hit hard by the epidemic despite a feeling of security and superiority which usually prevails. The pharmaceutical and healthcare technology industries will not be a game-changer; without critical care beds, the most vulnerable will die in the thousands. The systemic deficit in employment inspection, the absence of a real public health policy and national health coordination will be felt even more heavily in the coming weeks.

Despite more than 1000 new cases every day for a week and hospitals on the brink of saturation, the Swiss authorities continue to defer to the individual responsibility of the citizens by sending them letters of thanks for their individual efforts while asking them to go to work.

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P.S.

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