

Federal referendums of December 1, 1996 : a close NO and a clear NO

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Objekttyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad**

Band (Jahr): **23 (1996)**

Heft 6

PDF erstellt am: **21.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907776>

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A close NO and a clear NO

A definite NO to the revised Labour Law (67%), a close NO to the immigration initiative of the SVP (53.6%). These were the results of the federal referendums of December 1, in which 46% of voters took part.

In French-speaking Switzerland, the initiative against illegal immigration was rejected decisively. However, in a number of Swiss People's Party (SVP) strongholds (such as Aargau and Thurgau), in central Switzerland and in two

Iliara Bignasci

frontier cantons (Schaffhausen and Ticino), it was accepted. The SVP takes the view that those parties which combated the initiative should "now provide evidence that the situation really is under control".

Commentary

Confronted with the constraints and unfathomables of economic deregulation, Swiss voters have decided in favour of solidarity. Without any ifs and buts. The redundancies and restructuring which belong to Switzerland's everyday corporate life provided fruitful earth for

Federal referendums

- March 2, 1997**
 - No referendums
- June 8, 1997**
 - Subjects not yet decided
- September 28, 1997**
 - Subjects not yet decided
- November 23, 1997**
 - Subjects not yet decided

The rejection of the SVP initiative was generally welcomed. The Liberal Democratic Party suggested that all existing problems should be solved by means of a revision of the Asylum Law. Federal Councillor Arnold Koller declared himself convinced that "in spite of a worryingly high proportion of yes votes" the referendum result would have a favourable effect on cooperation with other European states in the field of immigration and asylum policy. But he also stressed the necessity of reducing the growth of the number of foreign residents in our country.

Massive rejection

Very few people expected such a massive rejection of the new Labour Law passed by parliament. President of the Confederation and Economics Minister Jean-Pascal Delamuraz named as a reason for the definite NO to the bill lack of a will towards consensus and particularly the way in which the par-

liamentary majority had pushed it through. "The balance of interests contained in the executive's draft revision was cut out in the bill which finally went through parliament" he said. "The referendum result represents a rejection of unilateral politics. We must take up once again and intensify that domestic dialogue which makes up the strength of Switzerland."

Immediately after the referendum the Christian Democratic Party (CVP) announced a parliamentary initiative which would lead to a law instituting overtime wage rates for night work within the shortest possible time. The Federal Council also wants to start again from scratch; Federal President



The fates of refugees are often reflected in foreign faces. A majority of Swiss voters wish to continue granting illegal immigrants an orderly asylum procedure. (Photo: Keystone)

Delamuraz immediately announced his intention of sitting down as soon as possible with employers' organisations and the trades unions. "We have already lost too much time," he said, "which means that there cannot be a total revision of the Labour Law. But parliament could pass a series of measures to make the job market more flexible by as early as next autumn."

The result of the referendum on the SVP asylum initiative gives no ground for celebration. It must rather be seen as a signal that at present wide sections of the public in Switzerland are suffering from uncertainty and are plagued by anxiety about what the future holds for them. Today the Swiss people see themselves as under threat in precisely those fields which were their strength in the past: full employment, material prosperity, sound government finances and the idyll of the precious stone set in a silver sea.

Whether or not the people of Switzerland will again return to their old belief in their own capabilities depends on the degree of determination with which the political parties, the trades unions and the employers' organisations are prepared to search for ways out of the present recession together – and not in opposition to each other.

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Press review

Press commentary on the December 1 referendums was dominated by relief about the NO to the asylum initiative and demands for a rapid but socially balanced revision of the Labour Law. Here are some extracts.

CORRIERE DEL TICINO

The rebuff to the revised Labour Law is equivalent to halting the adjustment process of Switzerland's framework as a production location. This process is based on the view that foreign competition will become ever harder and more aggressive. So the trades unions have reason to celebrate victory. But it could turn out to be a Pyrrhic victory. For if the Labour Law cannot be adjusted to the changed requirements in a number of ways, Switzerland will continue to be encumbered with shackles and other burdens in international competition.

Tages-Anzeiger

The glaring NO is a clip over the ear for those private sector representatives who made the law unnecessarily harsh in parliament. In spite of this there should not now be a situation in which employers retreat into an offended sulk and say: In that case we can do perfectly well without a new law. For at the end of the day they really did want liberalisation. The trades unions will also have to do their bit in finding a new solution.

The Labour Law, as it was originally put forward by the Federal Council, was not as bad as all that. The NO by voters represents an opportunity for a social partnership which really deserves the name: a relationship in which both partners are prepared to compromise.

JOURNAL DE GENEVE et Gazette de Lausanne

The question posed was: Do you approve the modification of the Federal Law on Labour in Industry, Crafts and Trade? When the time came to cast their votes, thousands of Swiss transformed the issue into a referendum on the economic and social situation. The large majority of Swiss voters were not so much opposed to the hoped-for relaxation in the organisation of working time and the revitalisation package as showing dismay about the miserable climate resulting from loss of jobs and

Referendum result

Popular initiative "Against illegal immigration"
 YES 982,953 (46.4%)
 Cantons: AG, AI, GL, LU, NW, SG, SH, SO, SZ, TG, TI, UR
 NO 1,138,073 (53.6%)
 Cantons: AR, BE, BL, BS, FR, GE, GR, JU, NE, OW, VD, VS, ZG, ZH

Modification of the Federal law on Labour
 YES 697,951 (33%)
 NO 1,418,888 (67%)

Voter participation: 46%

pressure on wages. With their resounding NO, they were showing their disgust and fear about the future.

Neue Zürcher Zeitung

After the rejection of an updated regulation of night and Sunday work, the politicians and the private sector will together have to work out quickly a version of the Labour Law capable of attracting a majority. After not supporting parliament, Economics Minister Delamuraz is now faced with a special task, and the trades unions, rather than celebrating this victory after several defeats which were just as marked, would be well advised not to ride on a high horse.

LE NOUVEAU QUOTIDIEN

French and German speakers from the towns no longer have any reason to let themselves be intimidated: those in favour of isolation are not unbeatable. They are a bore. The next battles (on another restriction on the foreign population and on the anti-European initiative of the Lega) will make it possible to marginalise this political current which has already forced Switzerland into so many disastrous results.

Der Bund

The main thing is that it is not statistics and long-term trends which influence popular opinion on policies concerning foreigners, but negative everyday experience and vague anxieties. In spite of such relief about the referendum result, if the damaged image of Switzerland is to avoid further harm in the future these factors must certainly not be ignored.