

The Climate Strike Movement in Switzerland

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Global Research, September 27, 2020

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Environment](#)

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In the early hours of Monday 21 September, a large number of young people from the Swiss Climate Strike movement occupied the Federal Square in Bern, opposite the Federal Palace – hence its name – seat of the Swiss Government and Parliament. The young activists set up various tents and structures where meetings and small events could be held. This occupation was extremely well organized and respectful of the current conditions in which we find ourselves – practically ALL young people and those involved in the occupation wore masks due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The main objective of this action was to draw attention to the urgency of the climate crisis and to demand concrete measures against global warming from the Swiss government. As written in the document presenting the movement's demands:

“For years, (hundreds of) thousands have been mobilising against the threat of the climate catastrophe. However, the calls for effective climate and environmental protection fall on deaf ears among professional politicians. We realize that we, who are concerned about a future worth living for all, are being let down. The urgency of the problem is by no means reflected in the political processes of parliament and government. Areas such as the agricultural and financial sectors are completely ignored in Swiss climate policy, even though they are largely responsible for environmental degradation and climate crisis. At the same time, those in power in the economy still cling to the fairy tale of eternal growth. They are not interested in our future and only want to increase their wealth and influence.

The existing political and economic system has far failed to provide an answer to the climate crisis. We must free ourselves from social, economic and political systems that exploit people and nature for the sole purpose of enriching a few. It is time to redesign our society so that an ecological and social future is possible.”

This short text raises the problem with the necessary clarity. In relation to Switzerland, a single sentence in this document, in the chapter on ‘Climate Justice’, places the central demand with the same precision:

“Switzerland shall acknowledge its historical and global responsibility for the climate crisis and act accordingly.”

Nothing fairer. As expected, the action of the young climate activists in front of the Swiss government headquarters attracted the attention of the press, politicians and society in general. Several TVs in Switzerland, in the main languages of the country – German, French and Italian – sent teams to the site.

In the camp there was an atmosphere of joy and peace, colourful clothes, flags and posters everywhere. At no time did the occupation put any obstacles in the way of the Swiss government, there was no blockade at the entrance to the Federal Palace. Nor was there any violent activity or even noise that could hinder the functioning of the parliament that was – and still is – in session.

However, an old law of the City of Bern prohibits demonstrations on the Federal Square when the Parliament is in session. Another law also prohibits camping in the square.

The political parties of the Right and many Swiss citizens, bothered by the demonstrations of the young activists, started to exercise an aggressiveness that was comparable to what we see with Bolsonarism in Brazil (not in numbers because Brazil has a bigger population). Most of the press was hostile to the movement – as in Brazil to the Workers Party (PT in Portuguese) – and several parliamentarians, under the pretext of the laws I mentioned above, demanded that the administration of the City of Bern, responsible for the security of the Federal Palace and the Parliament, immediately expel the demonstrators. The city government first sought a dialogue with the activists, proposing that they withdraw. But the activists announced their intention to maintain the occupation until next Friday, with the aim of reminding the parliament in session of the need to confront the reality of climate change.

In the early hours of this Wednesday the police force invaded the camp and expelled the demonstrators who resisted only with non-violence, remaining seated, singing, until they were removed.

The question of the illegality of the occupation was the main theme in the public discussions, not the climate change! Some brave Swiss parliamentarians, in defence of the activists, pointed to this contradiction, such as the Social Democrat Party MP Jacqueline Badran from Zurich, who gave a live testimony on Swiss TV about the real issue, in the face of journalists who insisted on asking about the question of the legality of the occupation, deliberately ignoring the main reason for the movement.

It has to be said that there are many things that are absolutely legal but unethical. The bottling of water sources by the Swiss company Nestlé all over the world, producing a huge amount of plastic waste for which the company has no responsibility, is absolutely legal but unethical. The production and sale of poisons by Syngenta – which contaminates soils and water in several countries, causing poisoning and the death of countless farmers and peasants – is absolutely legal. And in the case of Syngenta it is even legal for the company to continue producing and exporting to southern countries types of pesticides declared illegal by Switzerland and the European Union!

The confrontation in Bern between activists and the law was a conflict between ethics and legality. There is certainly an ethic above and beyond the law, and the rights of nature and the survival of the planet must take precedence over any other issue, even legal ones.

For the time being, in this battle in the capital of Switzerland, smallness and mediocrity have overcome hope, joy and rationality. There would be no problem in letting the demonstrators remain peacefully in the Federal Square and use the demonstration as an opportunity – as several Swiss parliamentarians have proposed – for a broader dialogue with youth and on the urgency of the problem of climate change. It would be a demonstration of responsibility, of real concern for the fate of the planet and care for future generations.

But the capitalist hysteria fuelled by the press and by the Swiss Right-wing, voicing in all media and demanding respect for the LAW and ORDER was stronger. Many of the Swiss parliamentarians who defended the youth movement suffered unbelievable criticism and aggression in the social media, just as the most exalted Bolsonaroists behave in Brazil. For at the basis of Bolsonaroism there is the same capitalist hysteria present in all extreme right-wing movements in the world, panic and indignation at any questioning about the priority of capital, uncontrollable and visceral anger at anyone who dares to defend other priorities – be it the environment, the dignity of work, human rights or the planet itself. For capital wants and must be above all, even above life itself. It is up to nature to submit to the dictates of capital, and together with most human beings to bow to capitalist exploitation and profit above all else. The young people in Bern defended other priorities and with their joy, intelligence and determination pointed to other paths, that's why they had to be expelled. But this was only a battle, the struggle continues. One way or another a breach has opened up in Swiss society too, the debate will continue.

And from Brazil came a message of unexpected and fundamental solidarity for the Swiss movement: a letter of support addressed to the Swiss government itself, sent to the Swiss Ambassador in Brazil, signed by leaders of some of Brazil's main social movements such as the Landless Movement (MST) and 54 Brazilian parliamentarians. This letter is already in the hands of the activists and many Swiss parliamentarians and personalities. (For the letter [see article](#))

And in this way, we have united in the fight against Bolsonaroism, against the hysterical and deranged capitalism, both in Brazil and in Switzerland. For the future of the planet, with generosity, tenderness, courage and determination.

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