

The general strike of 1918 and its aftermath

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The end of the First World War brought social unrest to Switzerland. Inflation, food shortages, the influenza pandemic and the hardships of the soldiers on border duty had strained the working population. In November 1918, the Olten Action Committee, the leadership of the labour movement, called a nationwide general strike, demanding proportional representation, women's suffrage, the forty-eight-hour week, an old-age pension and other reforms. Once the Federal Council had deployed the army, the strike was called off after three days.¹ In Basel, where the strike was widely followed, clashes occurred between strikers and troops.

Although the strike failed, several of its demands were fulfilled in the following years. Proportional representation in elections to the National Council was introduced in 1919, the same year in which the forty-eight-hour week was adopted. The old-age and survivors' insurance was finally introduced in 1948. Women's suffrage had to wait until 1971 at federal level. Having marked the political awakening of the Swiss working class, the general strike left a memory that shaped the relationship between capital and labour in Switzerland for decades.

The Peace Agreement of 1937 in the metal and watch industries, by which employers and unions agreed to settle disputes through negotiation and arbitration and to renounce strikes and lockouts, inaugurated the Swiss tradition of social partnership.² The chemical industry of Basel developed its own collective agreements with the unions. Over time, labour peace became one of the conditions of the stability that made Switzerland attractive to investors. For the financial centre, the social peace of the twentieth century was as important as political neutrality: both reduced the risks that investors faced in Switzerland.

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1 Notes

1. On the Swiss national general strike of 12–14 November 1918 (Landesstreik) and the demands of the Olten Action Committee, see HLS, article "Landesstreik". To be verified. ↩
2. On the Peace Agreement (Friedensabkommen) of 19 July 1937 in the Swiss machine and metal industry and its significance for Swiss social partnership, see HLS, article "Friedensabkommen". To be verified. ↩

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