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Switzerland

# **“In Switzerland, being a union member is almost like having the plague”**

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Elif \* (not her real name) is a 37-year-old worker of Belgian-Turkish origin who has held down several jobs in Switzerland for the past two and a half years to support herself. Elif actively participated in the strike against Smood from its inception in November, in the first town to go on strike – Yverdon.

**Elif, you have been in Switzerland for almost three years, can you tell us how you arrived at Smood as a delivery woman?**

I came through a French company that engaged in catering for Switzerland, and then life led me to work in other restaurants where I was dismissed with not much justification and that forced me to look for work and that's how I found Smood. In Belgium I graduated in Human Resources Management and am a specialized educator. I also have flight attendant training. I have several cards in my pocket. But in Switzerland, in order to use these diplomas, the procedure is very long and expensive and I do not have the time or the resources. So, I find myself doing jobs that are not, basically, in my line. I stumbled upon Smood because I can't use my qualifications here, I was forced to accept it.

**In Belgium you were unionized. What are your experiences of struggles at work there? What is the difference with Swiss trade unionism?**

The first big difference is that the union in Belgium is almost compulsory. The unemployment fund is linked to the union, is created by the union so suddenly, necessarily, when you enter the labour market, you join a union. It's innate, it's done automatically, we don't ask ourselves the question, everyone is unionized. There's no stress in saying it because that's the way it is, and the bosses know about it. Here in Switzerland, I realized that being a union member is almost like having the plague, that's really it. They look at you askance when it is a legitimate right. And I think the bosses should get used to it more.

Regarding the struggle, personally I have not had one in Belgium. I didn't have any problems or worries with a boss, even if I had 2-3 conflicts it was quickly settled between us... The bosses do not like to go too far in Belgium because they know that the union is behind and that they will not necessarily win their case. On the other hand, where I have seen struggles in Belgium, it is via Carrefour Belgium, my mother has worked at Carrefour for 37 years. Carrefour therefore the department stores and large group that closed the stores while they were making a profit. There was a strike for a long time, so I experienced the strike in Belgium through my mother. My mother had no fear because she was unionized and because she was employed under the old contracts that they could not change. On the other hand, all the young people who had just started, and who had new contracts, were wrongfully dismissed.

**Were your mother and her strike experience a resource for you during the Smood strike?**

Of course, my mother was interested as she also experienced it, she knows what a strike is and that it is hard, that we must not let go and that we must have morale. And finally in their strike at Carrefour, they won their case. The group has changed its restructuring plan, but it's national! These are really national procedures, and it is all the unions that are doing it, the reds, the greens and the neutrals. So, they got together against Carrefour.

**On this subject, here you experienced the Unia-Syndicom union conflict at the beginning of the Smood strike. What do you think of this?**

I find it sad. Because for me a union, whether green, red or blue, it is there for the well-being of workers and to protect them from employer injustice. So, I would have preferred Syndicom, Unia and the others to get together,

facing Smood. United we stand, divided we fall.

**What does the Smood movement, in which you actively participated with other comrades, mean to you, in terms of collective dynamics and the creation of a collective of struggle?**

It creates links, necessarily, it creates a team. As you say, before it was each individual for themselves, whereas there we created a group that fought. If it were up to me, we would have continued the struggle to the end. In my opinion, the only way to make a boss give way is to strike. So, it was good but it's a shame that in the end, we ran out of steam from the moment we realized that the legal system was not necessarily fair. I think that was the trigger for some who went back to work. At that very moment, we lost hope of having something correct. It's clear that we will eventually get something, but when? How? The fact that the legal system takes time like this, it suggests that in the end it is a waste of time.

**At the beginning of the strike, how did you experience its gradual expansion from one town to another?**

It gave me hope because it was reminiscent of the strikes I experienced in Belgium with my mother. It started with one town and then it took on a national dimension. I really believed that we were moving towards a national project. So, it was sad not to be able to do that and honestly, I told you from the beginning, or even when we discussed our actions to redo, I was for going on strike again, maybe in other circumstances and otherwise, but going on strike again. Don't work. For me it is the only tool that allows workers to put pressure on the company.

**Yes, and Smood said that the strike did not affect them financially**

Yes, because it hired a bunch of people instead, when it is not legally entitled to do so. You know it better than me, but I think it's borderline. But I find that here in Switzerland we do not have this philosophy, this way of seeing things. In Switzerland we don't alienate the boss too much in fact. This is different from the Belgian or French mentality which is combative, which goes on strike for a yes or a no.

**What affected you the most in this strike and what will you keep as memories?**

What I want to keep from this story is really the unity we had at the beginning. It's cohesion, the fact of being together, of wanting to change things. I think the most close-knit group was the Yverdon group. It started from Yverdon and in my opinion the group that held firm the most is Yverdon. The sad thing is that we ran out of breath.

**Do you still have a Smood group among colleagues?**

We have a WhatsApp group where we share things. It has resumed its course, today we re-share deliveries then, and no longer the struggle. I don't even look anymore because it disgusts me. It is not the colleagues who disgust me, they have to work, they have to earn a living and that is quite normal. But it disgusts me on the point when we go into action, I think we have to go to the end, I don't know, maybe it's my character.

**In your opinion, has the dismissal of several colleagues changed the dynamics of the group?**

I think it particularly scared others who didn't have the option of losing this job. This held them back in their momentum. I can understand people, as I told you, they do not have the option to lose it, I was already less affected by this strike because I had my other job that I still have. I was doing Smood in addition so for me if it's not that, it's

something else, so I had no fear of losing this job. But those who have only this to live, I can understand that it slows them down, yes. This is what has also played an important role in weakening the dynamics of struggle.

**Smood was an important source of income for many people while in the media the work of platforms is often presented as being composed mainly of students.**

We do not realize but there are plenty for whom Smood is a first source of income. Young students are rare. When you look at the groups we had on strike, it's mostly the people who lived off that. Because students, whether they make Smood or local coffee, it's equal. But those who went on strike were people who lived from Smood, who only had Smood to live on. Finally, it's a job for a bunch of people who had only found this job for the moment and who live off it.

**How do you assess the union's contribution to this struggle?**

I have no criticism of the union, you have led a positive dynamic, especially you, you carried it out well, you tried to do it correctly and made sure to support us. The only thing that saddens me a little is that we are not on strike. Even if it means going on strike in the face of the judgment. It's clear that we can't be above the law, I understand things, but still... If I return to Carrefour Belgium and the workers, the state was initially OK with Carrefour but then seeing that it had taken on a national scale, that all the unions joined the struggle, the state changed its mind. Following the balance of power, the state turned its coat and forced Carrefour to do things differently, whereas initially, it brought money to the state so necessarily they agreed with the Carrefour. The national dynamic turned everything upside down! For Smood, I think it took a bit too long to go a little to all the cantons.

**How do you see the future? The strike may not have been enough to make Smood back down but what prospects do you see in the future on the issue of platforms in Switzerland?**

I think that on the one hand we need to create a platform, for example for restaurants, which helps workers to complain about these kinds of places and to denounce them. I think that Unia, (well, legally speaking I do not know how we can tie this up) but that Unia can put pressure on these kinds of platforms, via this blacklist and denunciations from workers. On the other hand, to have a direct link with the state to transmit the complaints we receive and put pressure, not on an employer but on a joint committee, which generates the obligation for all employers to comply. It could exist and create direct collaboration with the state for this kind of thing. I think there are a lot of people who are desperate and would like to be heard, that's important.

**Today, after months of struggle, you have decided to turn the page on Smood. How has this happened?**

As I told you, I no longer want to pay to work. Anyway, it was an accessory job for me and Smood did not contribute for me, it mostly cost me. The only thing that was positive was that we were supported, financially and morally by Unia. Because this is important and compared to Belgium, the strike fund is better organized here. There it exists but it is so ridiculous while here we were supported correctly, even if it was not equivalent to the wage. You can't spit on what Unia did, I don't think it's right. But now I turn to new horizons, we will see, maybe working for Unia, who knows (laughs)!

*Translated by **International Viewpoint** from [Solidarités](#).*

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