

# STRIKE WAVE IN WESTERN SWITZERLAND: «*Smood: Exploiter! Migros: Accomplice!*»

## OBSERVATIONS FROM A GERMAN-SPEAKING WORKER

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### WHAT'S GOING ON?

- Over 100 delivery workers have been striking in 11 different cities in French-speaking Switzerland for exactly a month now. They are demanding fixed work hours, a minimum wage, pay for overtime and weekends, amongst other things.
- As workers we are all exploited, because the wage we get is worth far less than what we produce for the bosses and owners. This surplus value is robbed of us by them – this is how they make their profit.
- This strike is an important and great precedent that will have a great impact on the Swiss labor movement, no matter how it ends. It shows the perspective of a labor movement that is not passive, but combative, that cares not for «labor peace» but for the interests of the working class.

### 1. WORKERS ON THE STREET

The 2<sup>nd</sup> of November 2021, at 18:00 exactly. It is a cold winter evening. The slogan «*Smood you are screwed, the workers are on the street!*» echoes on the Bel-Air square in Yverdon-les-Bains. Yverdon, as it is commonly just referred as, is a small city in the canton of Vaud, in the West of Switzerland. But what this slogan signifies is nothing small at all. It is the start of an ongoing strike in French-speaking Switzerland, organizing a previously unorganized part of the working class. A strike movement that has been largely kept quiet in the German-language news. A strike wave which may soon spread across all of Switzerland, that all workers need to support, no matter where we live and no matter what language we speak.

The «*workers on the street*» refers to delivery drivers, more specifically those employed at Smood. Smood is one of the biggest delivery services in Switzerland (active in more than 24 cities in Italian-, German- and French-speaking Switzerland) – alongside giants like Uber Eats and Just Eat – and their working conditions are naturally just as terrible. What sets Smood apart from its competitors, is that it doesn't just deliver food from restaurants, but also groceries from over 80 different Migros stores across the country. This is due to the fact that Migros is its largest shareholder (35% of Smood belongs to them) – They even have two representatives on the board of directors! Because of that, the slogan «*Smood: exploiter! Migros: accomplice!*» has become a staple at picket lines<sup>1</sup> and manifestations by and in support of the striking workers.

Ever since the first lockdown was announced in the Spring of 2020, business has been booming for the bosses and owners of food delivery services. This is of course nothing new to any of us. In fact, most of us have (of course only in tiny amounts) contributed to this boom. With social contact cut down to a minimum, while work stays the same or even gets more intense – coming home and cooking can just be too exhausting, even if we know that we can't really afford to order food. Naturally, Smood is not an exception to this boom, and the capitalists who own Smood, as well as Migros, are making a pretty penny. In fact, with the explosion of orders ever since the beginning of 2020, Smood managed to increase their profits by 80% last year alone, making a total of 70,000,000 (!!!) CHF. But all that profit is not «trickling down» to Smood's delivery workers at all, in fact the opposite is the case. Because the lie that we are so often told by the capitalists and their bootlickers, that a booming, strong economy means better conditions and pay for workers is just exactly that: a lie. And even though a lot of workers have contributed to this boom through ordering food, we are in no way to blame for the horrible working conditions – just as us buying food at a grocery store does not make us to blame for the exploitation of apprentices working there. The problem is not delivering or ordering food, but that the bosses and owners exploit the worker heavily, to make greater profit.



*A picket line of Smood workers, where the connection between Smood and Migros is highlighted.*

The workers at Smood have been striking ever since that evening on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of November. The strike had humble beginnings, with only six workers initiating the strike, but since then, it has spread and multiplied like a wild fire. Not just in Yverdon, but in all of the Romandie. The strike, which only weeks ago was made up of actions by a few workers in one city, has been transformed into a strong strike movement of more than 100 delivery workers in 11 small, medium and big cities in all of French-speaking Switzerland.

And the sparks of this wild fire may soon also reach German-speaking Switzerland, according to a report from the newspaper *work* (the organ of the UNIA, the union directing the strike). They report that meetings of Smood workers are starting to be convened in different German-speaking cities, which opens up the perspective of widening the scope of the strike massively.

## **2. FOOD DELIVERY DRIVERS WHO CAN BARELY AFFORD FOOD**

Working conditions at Smood are terrible. The work shifts are distributed by manner of app, something (unfortunately) relatively normal in that industry.

Up until recently, workers had to wake up at 04:00 in the morning every day in order to secure a shift. This was the time at which Smood graciously and generously announced new shifts. Today, as a consequence of the strike, the announcement time has been shifted to 09:00 in the morning. While this of course already represents one victory for the strikers, the case is and remains: The early bird gets exploited.

If you are even a couple of minutes late, the shifts can already be gone, and with that your chance of properly coordinating your time – especially if you're going to school, university, if you have other jobs on the side, or if you (God forbid!) want to have any semblance of social life to keep you sane.

One chilling example of the way Smood completely invades all aspect of worker's lives is the story of Ramzi, a 22 year old delivery driver for Smood in Vaud. He's been delivering for them for almost two years now, always through a subcontractor firm. He talks about how he has had to completely give up on social life and hobbies like boxing and how his crazy shifts have led to him sometimes not seeing his family for weeks. And here's the catch: he lives with them!

As a delegate of the Nyon strike committee, Ramzi stands on the picket line every evening. Additionally, he meets drivers from other cities every two days to discuss strategy and to keep each other up to date. And while this hard work also has him feeling pretty spent at the end of the day, it is a tiredness far from the exhaustion he otherwise experienced after a shift. *«It's a fatigue that feels good»*, he says. *«Because we are fighting for a just cause.»*

Workers tell stories about how even if they do set their alarm early enough to grab a shift that fits them, these often «disappear» through «glitches» – making them have to pick the ones they woke up early to avoid in the first place, in order to get their necessary hours together.

Through this system, Smood makes coworkers who have never even met each other fight over crumbs, for the least shit of the already shit working hours. *«It is like in the Hunger Games' movies: everyone against everyone»*, Anna says. Anna is from Yverdon, the town where the strike began, and finances her studies through working at Smood. She continues: *«The shift system turns us into ruthless competitors. But we won't go along with that!»*

While Smood, and other delivery companies, always claim that apps like these are to make sure that deliveries arrive, and that workers are «properly compensated», this is nothing but a big, fat, shameless lie. It is ironic for companies like these to take the words «proper compensation» in their mouths, when they do not even properly pay their delivery drivers the tips that they receive. These are kept secret from the workers, and when they are paid to them, they are so low that it is clearly only in part. The real purpose of the app is constant surveillance and intimidation of the workers. Because you should never forget that Smood, and the «orange giant» Migros are always watching.

And the new shift system is not the only part of the working conditions that has worsened in recent times. 52 year old Fabrice, a worker from Geneva, tells *work*:

*«And something else has worsened: We used to be able to log into the system from home. Today, we have to make an extra trip to the city to do so. The reason for this is that many drivers live in France. They sometimes logged in too early and didn't get to the customer in time. But now Smood has introduced a system that is disadvantageous for everyone. No one pays me for gas and the time it takes me to drive downtown to*

*register. Others are worse off. For the past two weeks, a colleague has been sleeping on my sofa because he can't pay for his apartment. By the way, we were already on strike here two years ago. At that time, Uber Eats had just entered Geneva. And they had a lower mileage allowance than we did. Smood reacted and simply lowered our compensation for expenses to the level of the competition. Because of our strike, they reversed that, but unfortunately only temporarily.»*

The next part of your daily routine is the mandatory selfie you have to take, in order to «confirm» your presence (one would think the constant geolocation tracking would already do the job, but alas). And these are not the only photos making up your workday. Smood also forces you to photographically document your every delivery, apparently to make sure that it arrives. But if an asshole customer claims it never did, you're still just as fucked as if you had never taken those pictures, because no proof stops the customer from always being right, and you from being on the bottom. In that case, the delivery, and the time it took, is simply removed from your paycheck. And even though the delivery workers are constantly surveilled through GPS, this is also not in order to make sure they are «properly compensated». Striking workers often tell stories of them having to drive more than 30 minute long delivery jobs, only for the app to display that they have not been on the road for more than five minutes. These are not «glitches», but deliberate actions.



*A delivery driver speaking truth: Smood stands for 1. underpaid employees, 2. liars, 3. opportunists, 4. oppressors, 5. despots.*

And this doesn't even begin to scratch the surface of the wage dumping at Smood. Smood is breaking labor laws at every twist and turn, at every possibility provided to them. In the cantons where there is a legal minimum wage, they pay well below that. On paper, the wage the delivery workers get is 19 CHF. If they deliver by car, they receive 2 CHF an hour extra, in order to pay for fuel and maintenance, and if they ride a bicycle, they receive an additional 32 Rp. (coincidentally, there are quite a few cases of Smood registering car drivers as bike riders to pay them less). But the corresponding labor laws stipulate that the car delivery workers should in fact be getting 70 Rp. per kilometer driven, which if factoring in the average distance driven per hour, equals not 2 but 5.60 CHF, according to the UNIA, who are organizing the strike and picket actions. That alone puts the real wage down to 15,60 CHF tops. But this is already a very, very high estimate, and one that often is too good to be true for «smoodeurs» (as the delivery drivers have been dubbed). Farès Doudouhi, the only Smood worker who has been taken exact notes on all expenses since his first work day, tells an even bleaker story at a protest meeting in front of Smood's Geneva headquarters. *work reports:*

*«He is the only delivery man who has kept meticulous records since his first day on the job. The 22-year-old has calculated all the hours he has worked, the kilometers he has driven and the expenses he has incurred for gasoline, his vehicle and his cell phone. The result: his effective hourly wage after all deductions is 5 to 7 francs. So Doudouhi grabs the microphone and blares: <Where are our wages? Where are our tips? Yes, aren't we human?!> And then: <I can assure you: We're going all the way, we're*

really going to keep going until we win, until we have humane conditions!› *Thunderous applause in the audience. Cheers from the strikers. And at the crossroads, a small concert of car horns.»*

And «temporary workers» who are sourced from the company Simple Pay (started by the co-founder of Smood) do not even have a contract with Smood themselves at all, but an altogether different (and even worse) one. Hell, even the shift distribution system is straight up illegal – workers by law should get their shift communicated two weeks in advance.

[https://twitter.com/workzeitung/status/1463221990588882946?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw](https://twitter.com/workzeitung/status/1463221990588882946?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw)

*Delivery drivers from all over the Romandie shouting the slogan «Smood you are screwed, the workers are on the street!»*

### **3. HOW THE HELL IS SMOOD GETTING AWAY WITH THIS?**

When I write that Smood is breaking labor laws at every possibility provided to them, this is not just a turn of phrase. Smood is not getting away with all of this because they've been cleverly tricking the State. The State has known all along that these laws are being broken, and if that wasn't enough, this is not the first time Smood workers have protested their working conditions. The reason that capitalists and their large corporations can break the law and get away with it, while we get police-controlled just for hanging out in our neighborhoods at night is simple. The Swiss State is not a State of the people, or a democracy, but a State of the bourgeoisie (the capitalists), of the bosses and owners. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (the founders of communism and life-long fighters for the working class) already made it clear in 1848<sup>ii</sup>, that the modern State is nothing but an instrument that manages the affairs of the bourgeoisie, and is made up of capitalists and people who are in their pockets. The State is an instrument of class rule of the owners and bosses over us, in order to preserve their interests over ours. And when the interests of the capitalists and their capital (that is to say, land and companies, and so on) is threatened, they send in the police or the army. But what Smood is doing does not threaten the current state of things. To the contrary, it leads to an increase in profit for Smood (and more tax revenue for the State), and that's why they are not acting against it. As Karl Marx quoted in his book «Capital» (1867):

*«With adequate profit, capital is very bold. A certain 10% will ensure its employment anywhere; 20% certain will produce eagerness; 50% positive audacity; 100% will make it ready to trample on all human laws; 300%, and there is not a crime at which it will scruple, nor a risk it will not run, even to the chance of its owner being hanged. If turbulence and strife will bring a profit, it will freely encourage both. Smuggling and the slave-trade have amply proved all that is here stated.»*

 *Some of the Smood workers are masking up out of fear for repression.*

## 4. WE ARE ALL EXPLOITED

While the exploitation of delivery drivers is crystal clear, it is not just them being exploited on a day to day basis – it is the entire working class. Let me explain:

As workers, we don't own anything – we don't own any «means of production», that is to say things that are necessary to make products or offer services (this ranges from entire factories where hundreds work to the mops that cleaning workers use to clean the piss off public toilet floors.) We also don't have any capital, like our exploiters. The only thing we do have is our labor power, our ability to work. And in the society we live in, in capitalism, this labor power becomes a commodity like any other, a commodity that is sold and bought on the market. And naturally, the price the capitalists need to pay for labor power is only the necessary amount to keep workers on average alive and working. They try to give as little as is absolutely possible, to squeeze as much out of the workers for the lowest possible price. So while wages in Switzerland may seem high, the capitalists in matter of fact use a thousand and one methods to press our real wages down (real wages being not the amount of money you receive, but what you can actually buy with that money). And that is not just done through lowering our nominal pay at the end of the month, but through rent increases, high commodity prices, price hikes for electricity and data plans, having to pay private insurance, inflation, debt, and so on. In the end, the poorest workers have to choose between paying rent and going to the doctor and have to end their month by skipping meals, while the (slightly) better off workers are kept passive with the limited satisfaction of a Netflix or Spotify subscription, a weekend visit to the club or a yearly discount holiday to the beach (to call this a «bribe» is to go too far, because in the end, this money also ends back up in the capitalists' pockets).

But to get back to the wage system: when we get a job, all we are really doing is selling our labor power to a capitalist. And there can be no talk here of a fair deal between equal parties. The capitalist class has political power and owns the means of productions, while we do not. And we are constantly threatened by unemployment, replacement and poverty, while they are not. Furthermore, it is not an equal exchange as they claim. They claim that we are merely exchanging work for wages, but in reality, we are exchanging our ability to work, our labor power for a wage. And this important distinction is the key to understand how they exploit us. If they simply paid for our work, then it would be a fair transaction, because we would be compensated for the exact amount of hours we worked. But that is not the case. By paying us for our ability to work for a day, they are able to cheat us; most of the time we are only being paid the value of half a day, or a quarter of a days work for an entire days work.

Let's say your hourly wage is 20 CHF (and most of us certainly don't make that). 20 CHF times eight hours is 160 CHF a day. Let's say you're flipping burgers. In eight hours you might use 200 CHF worth of bread, meat and salads, and so on, but all of those burgers you made put together sell for 800 CHF. It's simple math: you putting those burgers together and selling them added 600 CHF of value. But of those 600 CHF, you are only paid 160, while your boss gets to pocket 440 CHF.

In this example, these 440 CHF is what is called «surplus value». If this sounds to you like being robbed at gunpoint, or rather robbed by means of hunger, unemployment and poverty, you would be correct. This surplus value is pocketed by the company you work for and distributed among the capitalist employed there, that is, the investors, owners, managers and so on. They then take that surplus value, which has now become capital, and reinvest it in more raw material, more workers, expanded production and service facilities and the hiring of technicians, foreman as bureaucrats, as well as lobbyists and politicians. In this way, capital is, like Marx said, dead labor (that is labor taken from the ones who performed it), that like a vampire continues to exist only to exist as long as it continues to suck the blood of more living labor.

So when capitalists say they became rich through hard work, they are only telling half the truth. They did become rich through hard work, but not their own. Or does anyone honestly want to convince me that Marc Aeschlimann – the CEO of Smood – is worth 200,000,000 CHF because of his own hard work, and not that of his workers?



*WANTED: A notorious thief has been stealing delivery workers' surplus value. Witnesses say he introduced himself as «Aeschlimann» and describe him as having «a punchable face», and «wearing a blue shirt». He was last seen posing in a company car he would never voluntarily drive in.*

## 5. POLITICAL DEMANDS AND ECONOMIC STRUGGLE

But what is it that the workers at Smood are fighting for anyway? They are demanding:

- A 25 CHF minimum wage for all Smood delivery workers.
- An end to abusive fines.
- Proper (that is to say legal) planning of their work day.
- Proper (that is to say legal) compensation for the use of their private vehicles.
- Proper (that is to say legal) bonuses for work on holidays and Sundays.
- Quick and transparent payment of overtime.
- And finally, fair and transparent distribution of tips.

These demands are very justified, but they have some fatal flaws, that could threaten real, lasting change in the conditions of the striking delivery drivers. So what are the problems, and how could they be improved?

The first thing that characterizes all of these demands is that they are purely economical in nature. The second problem is who they're being put forward by. Because there is no political demands – like say, livable minimum wage for all workers in this country – and because this is not a strike of an entire branch, but only of one company within it (and more exclusively, of one region where the company is active as of now), the bastards who own Smood will simply try to cut their losses and find their way around this. If Smood is forced into paying a higher minimum wage, they would simply respond through firing workers (this is something that especially threatens the subcontracted Simple Pay workers) or just lowering the minimum wage at a later point again. And this is not some abstract prediction. Because while this strike is

historical both in terms of scope and significance, it is not the first strike at Smood. As I quoted a striking worker earlier, delivery drivers in Geneva already went on strike two years ago, in response to Smood lowering the compensation they received to the level of that of Uber Eats. And while the strike reversed this decision, this was only temporary.

Additionally, some investors may even jump ship to another delivery company, where their profit is not threatened like this, and would simply end up exploiting delivery workers who are going through the same shit as the Smood workers, but are merely being exploited while wearing a different uniform.

If the whole branch was striking though (and not just in the Romandie), there would be no way for the capitalists to get even, and find loop holes like mass lay-offs. Change could be forced through and rights could be conquered, without us workers being the losers at the end of the day (or more specifically at the end of the general employment contract). And if the strike committees raised political demands, like *«make every delivery driver a contract worker!»* or *«livable minimum wage for everyone working in Switzerland!»,* this could push through larger-scale changes.

To clarify my point, I want to look at the demand for a 25 CHF minimum wage more closely. As I already discussed, this could be twisted and turned (more so it will be) at every chance Smood gets. It would end in losses for the workers. But what if the demand instead focused on raising the minimum wage for all workers at the same time? In that case, the situation would be different, and wildly so.

There is a common misconception that we often hear about minimum wage raises. The argument goes, that raising the minimum wage for all workers would simply mean that everything would get more expensive.

This is not true however. When the working class imposes a wage increase on the capitalist class through class struggle, what takes place is a small expropriation of the entire capitalist class at the same time; all of them have to pay more. The only thing that this would result in, is that, for a very short period, necessities, such as food, would rise in price, because there would be higher demand for them, while there at the same time is not more supply yet. This is because workers don't have enough in the first place, so when they get more money, they will naturally spend it on things they have been going without, or buying more, healthier or more environmentally friendly necessities.

The capitalists who don't produce necessities, and instead produce luxuries, would be hit by the loss of having to pay a higher wage, while at the same time not making more profit, because the demand for luxuries would not increase. So to break even, these capitalists not producing necessities would switch over and invest in necessities. With more supply for the increased demand, the prices would equalize again, and do so quickly. It would be a gain for the entire working class and a loss for the entire capitalist class.

While I have raised quite a bit of criticism here, this is not to needlessly nag or to criticize just for the fun of it. This is not meant to be destructive criticism to

defame the strike and the determination of the delivery drivers. In fact, what I want is the opposite. Constructive criticism and self-criticism before, during and after struggles (be they victorious or not) have always been part of the democratic culture of the working class. It strengthens, rather than weakens. And I desperately want not just the morale of the Smoodeurs, but also their strike, to be strengthened. Because the labor struggle being fought in those 11 French-speaking cities is also my struggle. It inspires me and shows me the strength that we have when we unite. And I am certain that I am not the only one who feels this way. Because today, those workers are not just standing on their own picket lines – they are standing on the front lines of the confrontation between the working class and capital. Their strike is revitalizing a labor movement that is today far too weak, a labor movement that we so desperately need in this country.

The strike at Smood is not just extremely justified, no, it also has historical significance. It is the first major strike in a branch that makes up some of the lowest sections of the Swiss working class, and as such is also developing new forms of struggle, like the use of picket lines not just to confront strike breakers, but to unify and connect coworkers who have never even met before. Even if the capitalists do end up screwing the striking colleagues over, they will not be able to erase the precedents and lessons set for the labor movement in the last month. After debate of the mistakes made, the workers movement would come out strengthened even from a defeat like that. The Smood strike marks a turning point, and signals the strong and revitalized combative labor movement to come, that doesn't cower to bosses, «labor peace» and anti-strike laws. Now what has to be done is to hear those signals, those lessons, and to apply them, to put class struggle on the agenda and to make that the unity of the labor movement.

[i](#) For those who don't know, picket lines are posts of striking workers stationed in front of the businesses that are being struck again, to on the one side deter strike-breakers, but also to raise awareness of the ongoing struggle.

[ii](#) More can be read about this in the «Manifesto of the Communist Party» by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (February 1848).