

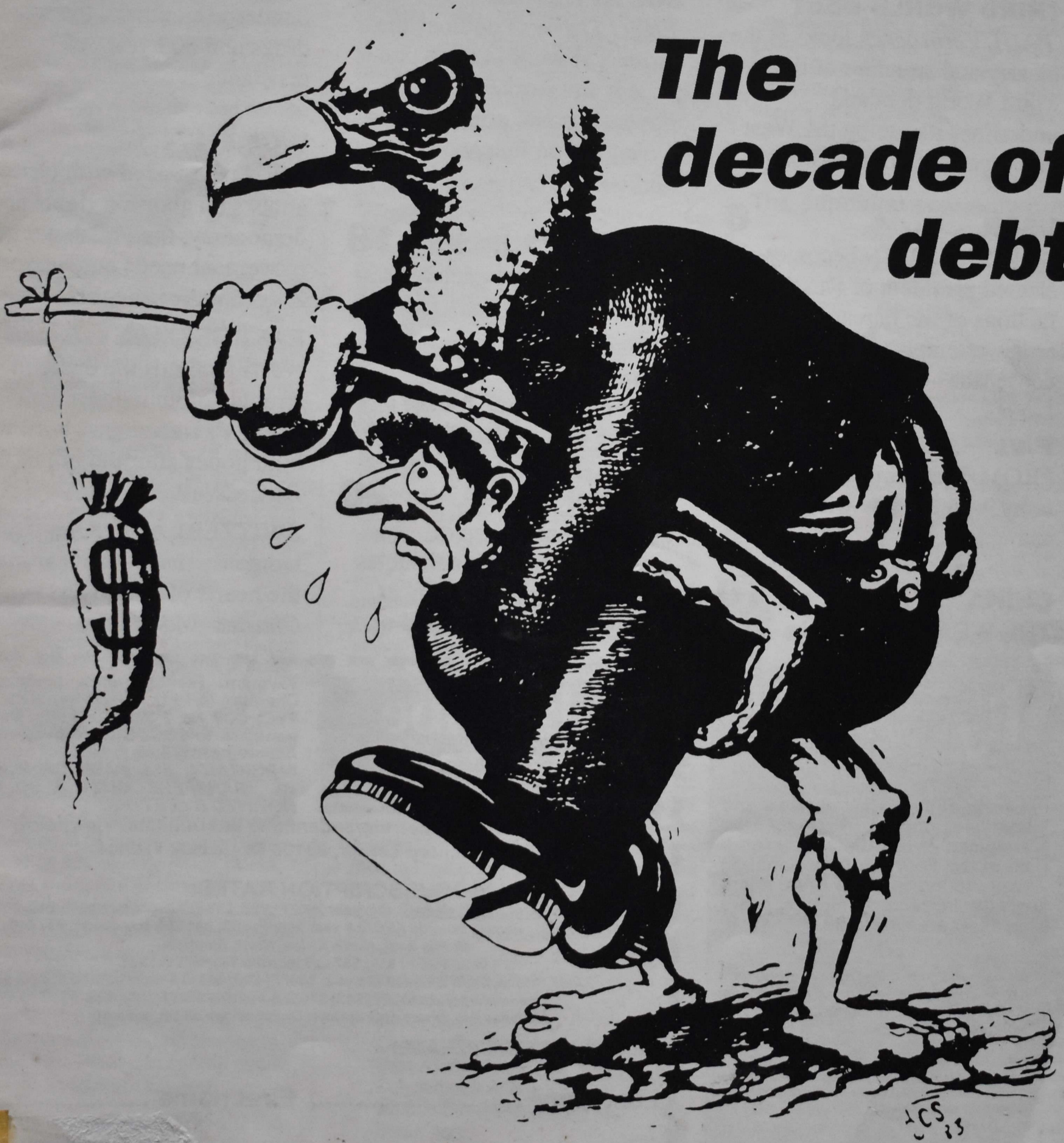
# International VIEWPOINT

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## *The decade of debt*



**The new clothes of Boris Yeltsin \* United Yemen: a marriage of  
ice \* The Seoul spring \* The fate of the East German women's  
movement  
AND MUCH MORE**

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series after June 1991; adequate old age pensions;

- An end to the subsidy of marriage and a recognition of alternative ways of life;
- Unrestricted rights to abortion; no

time limit; no law 218;

- Payment for abortions by the social security;
- Out-patient abortions;
- Free provision of contraceptive means. ★

## Swiss women hold one day strike

**IT TOOK** until June 14, 1971, for Switzerland to grant the right to vote to women. Ten years later, article 4 of the constitution was changed to read: "men and women have equal rights. The law provides for equality, in particular in the sphere of the family, education and work. Men and women have the right to equal pay for work of equal value."

**CHARLES-ANDRE UDRY**

**A** FURTHER DECADE later, the difference in wages for identical or comparable jobs remains at an average of 30-32%, according to official figures. And, following a Swiss parliamentary tradition, the law on the implementation of the constitutional article remains to be worked out, thus leaving the employers a totally free hand to give different names to the same job, depending on whether it is carried out by a man or a woman. The few women workers who have dared to take their employers to court have to produce concrete evidence of the difference in wages; in Switzerland, however, individual salaries are as enshrouded in secrecy as banking.

Faced with this situation, the idea of a women's strike took shape, first of all in a narrow circle of women watch and clock-makers, but leading finally to the official proposal for a "women's strike for June 14, 1991" at the October 1990 congress of the Swiss Union Confederation, the majority trade union, connected to the social democracy.

Thus June 14, 1991 — under the slogan "when women cross their arms, the country stumbles" — was an unusual day in a country where "labour peace", and social peace are felt to be national symbols. Several hundreds of thousands of women took part in the protest in a variety of forms.

All out strikes were limited in number, although still more than expected in a situation where the union leaderships had been emphasizing other, non-strike, forms of action. Nonetheless, there were very many work stoppages, which gave women in many sectors of the economy, including commerce, industry, offices, hospitals, social services, universities, and the radio, the chance to do such things as occupy an entrance hall or canteen to discuss inequality, draw up lists of demands, distribute badges, tee-shirts, leaflets and so on. The strike had a colour: fuchsia. That day this colour was everywhere in the streets and workplaces.

### Employers denounce strike

The most significant aspect was the great number of spontaneous initiatives by women's groups spurred on by the month long agitation of some 99 women's collectives who toured the country. The employers took this seriously and vigorously denounced the strike. They understood that a demand that enjoys such powerful legitimacy could be the motor force behind struggles of a kind that they, along with many union bureaucrats, like to believe belong to the past.

Big demonstrations took place in all the cities. More than 3,000 women occupied the Federal Square in Bern, where the government and parliament buildings are located, preventing a number of luminaries, among them German foreign minister Dietrich Genscher and UN secretary general Xavier Perez de Cuellar, from going in to attend the international day in celebration of the 700th anniversary of the creation of the Swiss Confederation through the main door.

On the day the main demands which came up revealed the whole range of forms of discrimination against women: unequal pay and concentration in low wage sectors; professional education (almost all women are directed towards eight professions); difficulties in restarting work after a break; discrimination with respect of professional responsibilities; the lack of nurseries; disadvantages over social security; division of house-keeping tasks and so on.

### Official hypocrisy

A poll of both women and men found that 43% considered it justified to use the strike to put an end to the intolerable inequalities faced by women. This is a sign of the support built up for the struggle for equality between women and men and the loss of legitimacy of institutions that write equality into the constitution, but then refuse to implement it.

June 14 was a first round and a success. Declarations from the employers the following day show that they are preparing for round two. They cannot accept a law that reverses the burden of proof in favour of the woman worker embarking on the case, or offers protection against sacking to any woman who brings such a case.

Given the hardening of the employers' positions it is quite possible that a second more massive and more direct mobilization will take form. ★

