



# Not until you drop

Is late-night shopping at a Coop Megastore in our future?

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**Many an expat has arrived in Switzerland to find, to their astonishment, the shops close their doors at 16:00 on Saturdays, and as for Sundays – well, forget it. Supporters of longer trading hours face stiff opposition, but in a stagnating economy is business winning the argument?**

By Lynne Constable | The vote by citizens of Canton Fribourg last September not to extend Saturday shop opening hours by an hour to 17:00 has highlighted once more the strong feelings aroused by this long-standing battle – and the difference of opinion has made unlikely bedfellows of those who would like to see the status quo maintained.

The labour unions have long resisted any relaxation of the rules and indeed Unia, the largest trade union in Switzerland and responsible for the service sector, believes that opening times are already too liberal. In that, it is in agreement with most conservative and religious groups, which argue that traditional family life is already under threat by evening and weekend working.

On the other side of the fence, a combination of retailers, politicians and tourist organisations says liberalising the law will boost business – and therefore the economy.

### Following the herd

It might appear the general European trend towards longer opening hours, seen over the past 10 years, is inevitable in Switzerland too. Certainly, one of the arguments is that in a recessionary climate, anything promoting trade can be only beneficial.

“In economically difficult times it is important to improve the basic conditions of trade and enterprise, rather than put

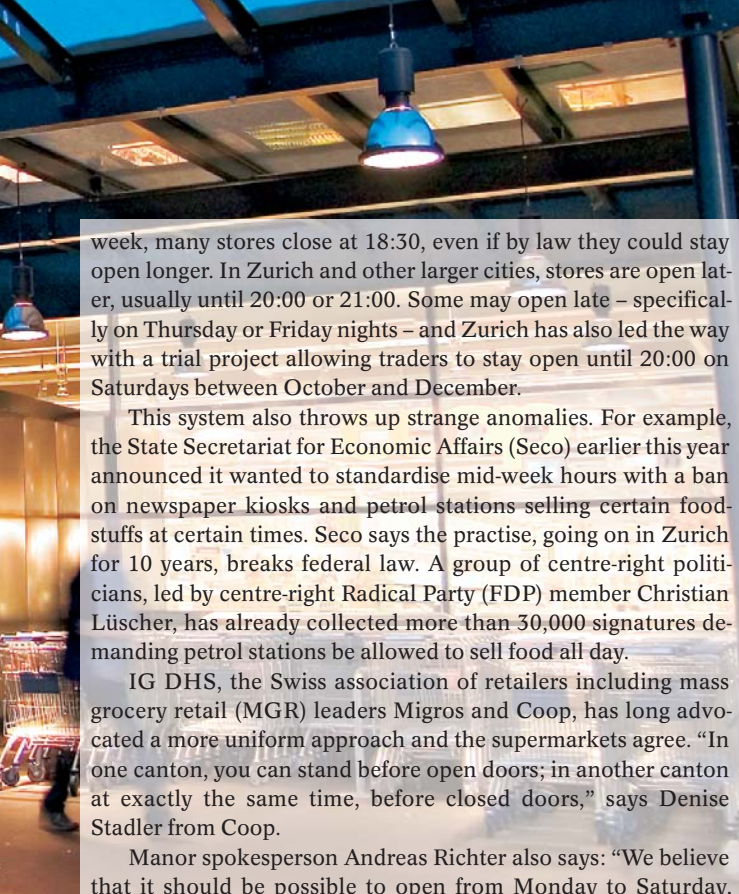
obstacles in the way,” says IG Freiheit, a non-political organisation founded in 2006 that campaigns for less state regulation in everyday life.

The Swiss tourism industry also thinks the economy, and in particular city tourism, would be boosted by liberalising shop opening times and has long campaigned for an extension of trading hours in cities, train stations and airports. However, Unia spokesperson Mattia Mandaglio disagrees: “Longer trading hours have no benefits for the Swiss economy. The economic revenues, both for the shops as well as for the economy, are marginal.”

The federal law governs workers’ rights and hours of work, and generally prohibits the employment of staff on Sundays, with the exceptions of small family businesses, shops in certain tourist areas, major train stations and airports. This provision was adopted in a 2005 popular referendum – and was opposed by trade unions and conservative Christian groups. Cantons may also allow shops to open up to four Sundays a year, but it is discretionary and shops must prove there’s a pressing need.

### Creating consumer confusion

This highlights the contradictions of the law: the Swiss system of direct democracy means each canton has its own regulations. As a result, there is a variation in shop trading hours: during the



week, many stores close at 18:30, even if by law they could stay open longer. In Zurich and other larger cities, stores are open later, usually until 20:00 or 21:00. Some may open late – specifically on Thursday or Friday nights – and Zurich has also led the way with a trial project allowing traders to stay open until 20:00 on Saturdays between October and December.

This system also throws up strange anomalies. For example, the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (Seco) earlier this year announced it wanted to standardise mid-week hours with a ban on newspaper kiosks and petrol stations selling certain foodstuffs at certain times. Seco says the practise, going on in Zurich for 10 years, breaks federal law. A group of centre-right politicians, led by centre-right Radical Party (FDP) member Christian Lüscher, has already collected more than 30,000 signatures demanding petrol stations be allowed to sell food all day.

IG DHS, the Swiss association of retailers including mass grocery retail (MGR) leaders Migros and Coop, has long advocated a more uniform approach and the supermarkets agree. “In one canton, you can stand before open doors; in another canton at exactly the same time, before closed doors,” says Denise Stadler from Coop.

Manor spokesperson Andreas Richter also says: “We believe that it should be possible to open from Monday to Saturday, from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. – everywhere. In those cantons with more restrictive opening hours, a liberalisation would have positive effects on the local economy.”

In addition, Coop’s Stadler claims the regional variations cause it unnecessary expense. “This variety in cantonal and municipal regulations causes us high expenditure and unnecessary logistical costs.”

### Strange bedfellows

However, what some call an unholy alliance of vested interests combine, as in Fribourg, to thwart progress. “Unfortunately, it appears that such bills in cantons with a conservative population or relatively strong trade union come up against such opposition. Even with the necessary number of signatures for a referendum, it is difficult to overcome it,” says Coop’s Stadler.

The view from major retailers is simple: the changing needs of consumers are paramount – and they want longer opening hours. “Longer opening times correspond to a customer need, which we want to satisfy,” says Migros spokesperson Martina Bosshard.

This is especially true of expat consumers, who must wonder at the variety of opening times across the country, especially when they first arrive. “I couldn’t believe that I had to get my shopping done by 4 p.m. on a Saturday – and I still can’t,” says a Lucerne resident.

Most larger business say they would find it worthwhile to stay open longer, even with the extra labour costs. Big supermarkets have a large pool of staff, economies of scale and quick stock turnover, and they say it makes sense to keep the machine running. Says Coop’s Stadler: “Longer store opening times in the evening and on Saturdays correspond to a customer need and increase turnover. That will have a positive effect on economic growth.”

Of course, smaller shops in more rural areas don’t always have the same priorities, and nor do trade unions. “Family life and social life in general suffer from longer trading hours,” says Unia’s Mandaglio. “Most important are the negative effects of a further extension of trading hours on the health of workers. In

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particular, stress-related diseases are closely associated with longer opening times.”

However, work hours are strictly regulated by federal law and employment contracts, and cannot be raised arbitrarily. The majority of shops in railway stations and airports have a volunteer system in place and non-traditional working hours also fit better with some lifestyles, as a weekend worker at Coop in Lucerne’s train station says: “I am a student and being able to work at the weekend gives me the opportunity to earn some extra money.”

But, as the unions point out, a further relaxation of opening hours would lead to the employment of more non-unionised temporary staff. These part-timers do not benefit from collective work agreements and are more likely to be paid less than full-time workers.

### Looking ahead

In any event, it seems unlikely regular Sunday opening will ever be on the agenda. Even though there are many exceptions for small businesses, the major retailers acknowledge a combination of cultural, religious and union opposition will make it impossible to trade on a 24-hour basis. Nor is it necessarily the goal. “The extension of trading hours around the clock does not interest us,” says Manor’s Richter.

A seven-day work week would mean the end of voluntary weekend working, and staff would be subject to a rota system – something conservative groups and labour unions would never accept.

Migros’ Bosshard also agrees. “Sunday sales correspond to a customer need just in the Christmas period. A general liberalisation of the Sunday sales makes little sense and is politically not enforceable.”

Whether retail business can influence the opposition in the long term is debateable. Migros believes it will prevail eventually, but Coop’s Stadler is uncertain. “The retail trade has a limited influence on a relaxation of the regulations.”

So, it looks like 16:00 Saturday closing – for those who don’t live in a big city – will be with us for a while yet.

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