

## 12.1 The 1964 revision of the Italo-Swiss bilateral labour accord

*Bilateral labour accords usually reflect the subordination and domination respectively of the two “partner” states, with the labour- supplying state usually having less influence over outcomes. The case examined here however resulted in significant gains for Italian migrant workers and their families, but forever changed Swiss politics and society. It transformed Switzerland into a land of immigration, an outcome totally unforeseen at the inception of the recruitment of Italian workers after World War II.*

After World War II, Switzerland resumed large-scale recruitment of seasonal foreign workers, most of whom were Italian citizens. Seasonal foreign workers were obligated to return home every year, but the renewal of seasonal permits was a possibility, and many returned year after year. By the early 1960s, religious organizations, trade unions, and Italian organizations in Switzerland linked to the Communist Party of Italy (PCI) and to the Roman Catholic Church as well as the Italian government began to criticize the status afforded seasonal workers. A major concern arose from the protracted separation of the seasonal foreign workers from their families. Family members did have visitation rights and many overstayed illegally. Schooling of children of Italian seasonal workers became particularly problematic. This led to calls for reform of Switzerland’s seasonal foreign worker policy.

The Italian government began to press for renegotiation of the 1948 bilateral agreement that regulated employment of Italians in Switzerland. The Italian fraternal organizations in Switzerland with ties to the PCI and its trade union affiliates and the Catholic Church played significant roles in this outcome. The Italian government eventually institutionalized emigrant participation and representation in the governance of Italy, a feature of governance in many migrant homelands around the world.

Unlike the disadvantaged position of so many homeland governments, the government of Italy had leverage, especially due to its membership in the then EC. The Swiss relationship with the EC, of which Italy was a founding member, translated

into bargaining power that led to secret renegotiation of the 1948 Italo-Swiss labour recruitment agreement. When the terms of the new agreement were announced in 1964, Italian seasonal workers who completed five consecutive seasons of employment in Switzerland became eligible for year-round employment permits with the right to be joined by immediate family members. Announcement of the reform shocked Swiss conservatives who complained that Switzerland would become a land of immigration, which it did. This led to a series of highly-publicized referenda in the 1970s calling for capping and reduction of legal migration to Switzerland. These referenda were unsuccessful, but prompted the Swiss government to curtail recruitment of foreign workers. The politics surrounding the referenda presaged the growth of anti-immigrant politics in other European contexts in the 1980s and became a central feature of Swiss politics with significant implications for Switzerland's image around the world.