

Global Issues

A Right-Wing Workers' Movement? Impressions from Germany

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In the German federal elections of September 2017, a far-right populist party, the Alternative for Germany (AfD), entered Parliament for the first time, becoming the largest opposition grouping. Although the populist right is now finding support in all sections of the population, its resonance among workers, the unemployed and trade union members is above average. The AfD's 12.6 per cent share of the vote included 19 per cent of workers and 15 per cent of trade union members (14 per cent West Germany, 22 per cent East Germany).¹ In terms of qualifications, most AfD voters have intermediate or lower-secondary school-leaving certificates; only 7 per cent of academics vote for the AfD. Women are clearly under-represented in the party's electorate, but the proportions are particularly high in rural and structurally weak regions. If one looks at data on party preferences instead of election behaviour, which may be influenced by tactical calculations, a similar picture emerges. Compared to all other parties, AfD supporters have the largest income spread, but also the highest proportion of workers and employees who are in simple jobs. The Pegida movement is a similar right-wing populist formation. It protests against immigration and the alleged "Islamisation" of Germany, has brought tens of thousands onto the streets in the city of Dresden in Saxony, and has branches throughout the entire country. Notably, Pegida's social profile is also shaped by workers and employees with low to middle incomes. Correspondingly, the movement presents itself in its own statements as an alliance of the middle class and the working class. The AfD acts in a similar way when it addresses the "little people" (*kleine Leute*) as important target groups of its election campaigns.

Currently, the populist right is going one step further. In the past, it gained positions in company works council elections – partly by means of opposition lists, partly by infiltrating trade union lists.² Now, right-wing opposition groups such as the *Zentrum Automobil* (Centre for the Automotive Industry) are becoming combative and vocal critics of globalisation while avoiding racist tones. There can be no doubt that leading figures at the *Zentrum Automobil* are deeply rooted in the militant right. However, the influence of right-wing works councillors is as yet limited to a few factories, mostly in the automotive industry (e.g. Daimler Untertürkheim, Daimler Sindelfingen, Daimler Rastatt, BMW Leipzig, Porsche Leipzig). There is a related development

¹ The over-representation of workers in trade unions results in an above-average sympathy among trade union members for the extreme right.

² In the German system of labour relations, there are two tiers of worker representation. Unions are responsible for collective bargaining with employers and employers' associations over wages and working conditions, but there is an additional body that has no formal role in collective bargaining or industrial action – the works council. Employees are entitled to elect a works council in any firm with at least five permanent positions. The council represents their interests at the company level, including those of workers who are not union members. The works council has information, consultation and co-determination rights. For example, it can voice objections if there are plans to make people redundant. Works council elections take place every four years; the last round took place between March and May 2018.

that is more dangerous for the German trade unions. There are works councillors who show exemplary commitment to their workforces while at the same time sympathising with Pegida and AfD on political issues. They keep a low profile during the working day, which makes it difficult to confront them. Where there are individual elections to posts and trade union representatives are absent, works councillors with a right-wing populist attitude attract no attention.

It has long been known that there is potential for right-wing populism among workers and trade unionists. In the existing research, however, it has so far been taken for granted that radical right-wing positions among active trade unionists are met with a firm hand and can be effectively combated through democratic participation. However, according to the disturbing findings of a study that we conducted in 2017 in a region in Saxony, among other places, this certainty no longer fully holds (Dörre, Bose, Lütten and Köster, 2018). Active trade unionists, who work to increase union density in their companies, are in some cases prepared to procure buses to travel to Pegida demonstrations. In their self-perception, these are complementary acts of democratic rebellion: in the workplace they take the side of the union; in society they take the side of Pegida and the AfD. When asked whether Pegida is a democratic movement, a works councillor sympathetic to its aims replied: “I think so”. He added that, in theory, it would be possible for the movement to “address everyone” – although “a Nazi shadow” hovers over it, it is discussing what actually concerns “every normal person who earns their wage and their bread” (Works councillor, metal and electrical industry).³

Right-wing Populist Orientations among Wage-earners

Why does right-wing social populism meet with sympathy among workers and employees, including union members and activists? My attempt to answer this is based on an investigation we carried out in the East and the West, but with a focus on an Eastern German region (Dörre et al., 2018). The results can be summarised as follows: There is a widespread perception that society is marked by dichotomy, but the respondents felt that they were not quite at the “bottom” but rather somewhere in the “middle” of society. In the self-perception of respondents, being a worker, especially a simple production worker, means being stranded in a prosperous society. People experience the fall in unemployment in recent years in Germany but still do not believe that their own lives are fundamentally improving. Instead, younger workers in particular still have an image of society that makes a strict distinction between the top and the bottom. In an interview, a young worker who is unionised and self-described as left-wing depicts her situation with the following words:

Both of my parents are workers.... I didn't graduate with an Abitur [German school-leaving qualification for university entrance], didn't go to university, but instead just finished regular secondary school, did an apprenticeship, and now I work. And I am relatively sure that ... it will stay like this.... I would consider myself in the middle range of the middle class, but that's all it's ever going to be. And ... this gap between the middle class ... and the upper class is just gigantic. I will definitely never manage to jump across that gap, not in my lifetime, no matter what I do. And that's the way it is for lots and lots of people! (Worker, union member, 19 years old).

³ All the worker quotations and findings in this article come from an ongoing qualitative survey dealing with right-wing populist orientations among wage earners, works councils and trade unionists (Dörre et al., 2018).

There are two remarkable things about this statement. On the one hand, being a worker means having achieved everything you can achieve, with a steady job and a reasonably good income – nothing more is possible. On the other hand, being a worker is not a status to be proud of. Like other respondents, the young worker belongs to the “middle range of the middle class”. She can say so because she knows that many people are worse off than she is. This fundamental attitude is typical for the workers we surveyed – whether left or right, young or old. However, this world view, which is essentially dichotomous and conveyed in top-down semantics, has a terminology very different from the classical West German worker studies from the old Federal Republic. Being a worker counts socially only because it allows access to the “middle middle class”. “Middle middle” also means that there is little room to climb higher but a fall is always possible. This is because – and this is new – exclusion and precarity lurk in the neighbourhood of working life. As a worker, you may feel devalued, treated unfairly, but you are still not at the bottom; you still have something to lose and you know others who, whether for good reasons or not, are significantly worse off.

This basic awareness, which we encountered in most respondents regardless of their political orientation, is linked to a hidden, sometimes even repressed, class problem. They do not consider themselves to be poor or in precarious situations. Nevertheless, a feeling of permanent discrimination marks their consciousness. Take the example of a working-class family in Eastern Germany. Man and woman each work forty hours a week for gross monthly wages of 1 600 and 1 700 Euros respectively. After deduction of fixed costs, the household with two children is left with 1 000 Euros from which clothing, food and so on have to be paid. Under these conditions, any major or unexpected purchases, such as car repairs, become problematic. Vacations are hardly possible, and money is unlikely to stretch to a weekend visit to a restaurant. In the face of this regime of scarcity, workers feel alienated through no fault of their own. A production worker who was surveyed and had sympathies for the extreme right summed it up as follows:

Every German citizen has an average basic income of about 3 300 Euros, gross earnings. So, I ask myself, what am I then? Am I not a German? Am I anything? I mean, I'm saying I have a gross income of 1 600 Euros, no, 1 700 Euros. What can I do with that? I can't live off that. And then we're back where we started. The Ossi [colloquial term for an East German person] knows how to survive. Someone from the West wouldn't even get out of bed for that kind of money.... Just to be able to go on a night out once in a while, we really need to plan ahead and watch our spending. Vacation. Those are the things where people say that's just the normal things you need every now and then in order to balance your life out. And that's something you can't; it's impossible (Works councillor with sympathies for the far-right).

A semantic shift is also important here. Being German becomes a cipher for being entitled to a “normal” wage. At the same time, however, this entitlement becomes an exclusive one, because it claims normality only for the Germans. Respondents who argue in this way do not necessarily feel left behind. Although they consider themselves to be “normal”, they are dissatisfied. The less hope they have of success in the distributional struggles between top and bottom, the more they tend to interpret this conflict as one between an indigenous (German) person willing to work and an interloper who is unwilling to work and who is not capable of integrating culturally.

It is striking that the commitment of trade unions to greater distributive justice and calls to resist and exclude refugees are not understood as mutually contradictory but as different axes of one and the same distribution conflict (top versus bottom, inside versus outside). Trade union activists and works councillors tend to adopt a radical stance that is surprisingly unequivocal and

strident. For example, a works councillor who had just initiated successful industrial action openly said in an interview:

Refugees should – at least that’s my opinion – they should have to leave. Whoever comes here and works, integrates themselves, fits in, subordinates themselves – fine. I have no problem with that. But those who only come here holding out their hands and behaving badly and thinking they can do anything they like – out! I mean, that may sound stupid or harsh, but for some of us that’s how it is. I wouldn’t have a problem if they re-opened Buchenwald,⁴ put a barbed-wire fence around it, and then it’s them in there and us out here. And no one has to deal with the other one. And leave them in there for as long – I mean, with normal humane treatment and all – but to put it bluntly, until they are deported. So that nothing can happen (Works councillor, trade union activist and spokesman for a company-level campaign demanding the recognition of an existing, branch-level collective bargaining agreement).

In this worldview, refugees appear to be a security risk. In the everyday consciousness of right-wing workers, the discourse on social security is shifting towards a debate on public and internal security. Refugees are regarded as potential members of new and dangerous groupings, collectively devalued and thus declared a security problem. Pleas for “humane concentration camps” are certainly an extreme exception. But these are not isolated cases. Rather, they are a radicalised expression of a mood widespread among the working class, one that extends deep into the unionised and activist core. It appears that right-wing populist or right-wing extremist orientations have been consolidated among active works councillors, youth workers and trade unionists in a way that must be called, following Bourdieu (1996: 418, translation amended), a “second-degree decision” – people follow a political programme that has already been pre-selected by political decision-makers.

Where they perceive themselves locally as representatives of a silent majority – which is still the exception – right-wing populist works councillors and trade unionists also stand up aggressively for their positions in their companies. There are workforces and works councils in Eastern Germany in which supporters of Pegida and the AfD form the majority. This leads to self-reinforcing interactions between right-wing orientations, workplace experience and the regional environment. Right-wing populist hegemony in the region supports the positions of right-wing lobbyists. In such cases, the proximity to openly Nazi, extreme right-wing and violent positions is apparently no longer taboo for the company-level and trade union worker representatives of the new right and their supporters in the workforce. Typical of right-wing populist philosophies is the offensive appropriation of democracy. All works councillors surveyed who showed an affinity for right-wing populism argued for more direct democracy because they were convinced that it would enable them to assert their positions more effectively.

Repressed Class Experience and Willingness to Use Violence

Let us summarise: Everyday right-wing populist philosophies correspond to experiences of injustice, but they are – at least in the workplace and among the permanently employed – not an expression of impoverishment, ever-increasing precarisation or extreme poverty. Not everything has to get worse in order to create the perception that society is unjust. In many cases, the recent decline in unemployment leads those left behind by what the media portrays as a “wonderland of

⁴ A reference to the Nazi concentration camp of the same name, which existed from 1937 to 1945 and was located near the East German city of Weimar.

jobs” to present their demands for decent work and a good life with more self-confidence, but in some cases also with bitterness. A trade union secretary we interviewed summed up a widespread mood in the workplace with the following words:

It’s not just fear; it’s a blend of many factors that make wage-earners dissatisfied. In the East, most people live in their home towns, not in the cities people move to. You might have a permanent contract and still not earn enough to afford the lifestyle the media portrays as standard. Many feel surrounded by a prosperous society with which they can’t keep up, with which they are losing touch. But there’s no public awareness of these problems. Workers just aren’t visible in public any more. And then the refugees show up and get a degree of attention that you don’t. There’s investment, teachers, staff for language classes, and job training programmes. Many see that as unfair. And that’s why it’s not a contradiction for shop stewards and active trade unionists to actively participate in the labour struggle while attending Pegida marches at the same time (Union secretary, IG Metall).

It is this disconnect from a fictitious social reality that generates frustration and anger, and now also provokes rebellion. What provokes discontent is not only the fear of status loss, but also dissatisfaction with the fact that people cannot achieve a status that they consider fitting and that corresponds to their own achievements. People perceive themselves as abnormal and devalued through no fault of their own, and this is precisely what generates dissatisfaction and anger. Certainly, this observation does not apply across the board, but in the opinion of the experts interviewed, it applies in particular to (male) skilled production workers in industrial companies. It is not so much an experience of precarity but an experience of class which is repressed and processed politically in a problematic way.

Such repression – and this is a particularly disturbing result of our research – apparently generates a willingness to use, or at least a clandestine sympathy for, xenophobic violence. According to radical right-wing workers, countermeasures against immigrants are justified because normal standards of justice have been suspended by the state’s “preference for refugees” and by an immigration policy that amounts to “population replacement”.

It is significant that all respondents who are sympathetic towards Pegida, the AfD or extreme right-wing parties showed an astonishing affinity for violence. None of the right-wing workers distanced themselves clearly and unreservedly from acts of violence against refugees. The standard argument given by the interviewees is that there are also maniacs and violent criminals on the left. Evasive arguments were also popular. For example, in 2015 a speaker at a Pegida rally, Akif Pirinçci, remarked that “the concentration camps are unfortunately out of service right now”. A works councillor commented, “Admittedly, this is a very borderline statement”, but added that when someone who comes from the Muslim culture “talks critically about his own people, he can’t be completely wrong”. The most important pattern of justification, however, is the reference to self-defence, as is apparent in this statement from a different works councillor:

...because violence triggers counter-violence, and the truth is, as I said, I mean, there are so many incidents with foreigners, with all of them, but nothing ever happens to them. It’s all played down. No one’s even interested. And, I mean, if me or my family, my kids or something, if something were to happen with one of these foreigners and there’d be no consequences, then, I’d of course, basically, yeah, use violence myself. I’d take the law into my own hands at some point. Because that would be, in a way, one step too far and then ... I’d, if my family or something, I mean if I notice they’re being harassed or something, or if what happened in Hamburg – no,

Cologne – on New Year’s Eve were to continue....⁵ That’s the kind of stuff I say helps provoke the violence, the counter-violence, and you’ve got to defend yourself, right? You can’t just look on and turn the other cheek (Deputy chairman of a works council).

Right-wing Populism – A Challenge for Trade Unions

Our research proves that a serious national-social threat has emerged. There is indeed a “seedbed for a new fascism” (Habermas, 2016: 39, translated) in Germany. The *völkisch*⁶ right relies increasingly on a social populism that allows it to successfully use social dislocations as a resource for mobilisation. In different forms, the ethnicisation of the social “reality” that it promotes also finds support among trade union activists and works councillors. As has been discussed, the language and terminology used by respondents are on the level of “second-degree decisions” – that is, they already follow a party line. Anyone who argues in the hermetic manner of the extremist cannot be dissuaded from their convictions overnight. Right-wing populist trade unionists have suitable answers to every critical inquiry.⁷ Their own convictions are proactively immunised against any sort of criticism. Together with the affinity for violence, this points to a consolidation and radicalisation of right-wing attitudes.

We speak of a national-social threat because, in addition to emphasising the social-populist dimension, this is intended to highlight openness to traditional Nazi ideologies. We use the term *völkisch*-populist with a similar intention. Notions of the people as a homogeneous community are the ideological cement that holds together radically right-wing worldviews. These terminological choices point to the fact that more conceptual work is necessary. It appears that the advocacy of violence as a criterion for distinguishing between right-wing populism and right-wing extremism no longer applies, and that the distinction between traditional fascist positions and the new right becomes partly obsolete. If that is the case, the phenomenon to be described must be renamed.

Irrespective of this, there can be no doubt that the involvement of radical right-wing workers in workplace representation and trade unionism is also driven by legitimate motives of social protest. Nevertheless, the formations that these workers sympathise with are not representatives of a new workers’ movement. Workers’ movements of the Marxist type are an expression of class action aimed at improving collective positions in social space. Such class movements break up the causal mechanism of exploitation or, in weaker terms, unjust distributional conditions, and are directed against the appropriating classes. Movements of a Polanyian type, by contrast, primarily seek protection from market-driven competition. They attack a diffuse market power that can encourage a tendency among wage earners to erect class-unspecific barriers to protect themselves from the maelstrom of the market. Pegida and the AfD

⁵ This is a reference to events in Cologne city centre during the New Years’ Eve celebrations in 2015, when a large group of men, apparently migrants, committed sexual assault on a mass scale.

⁶ The German adjective *völkisch* refers to something originating from the people, and articulates notions of the “popular” with ethnic and racial homogeneity. With the rise of ethnic German nationalism in the nineteenth century, it was commonly used to refer to Germanness and was later a standard Nazi term.

⁷ This does not apply to all respondents who are sympathetic towards formations of the new right. The sample also includes an employee with higher qualifications who is a Greenpeace member. He votes for the AfD because he is concerned about the impact of migration flows on social cohesion. And there is the works councillor who supported the Left Party (*die Linke*) for a long time, but who now criticises its migration policy and therefore favours the right-wing populists. In the case of these respondents, who formulate predominantly left-wing positions, it is not yet possible to say that they subscribe to a system of right-wing populist axioms.

stand for movements of a Polanyian type. Rather than exploitation, these movements direct themselves at such causal mechanisms as “population replacement” or “immigration into the social system”. The motives which lead to populist revolt, however, cannot be neatly divided into the socio-economic and the cultural. Radically right-wing workers defend their lifestyle. But the internalised dispositions and judgements of taste that produce these lifestyles are rooted in socio-economic (class) relationships. What is fundamental to the interviewees’ worldviews is the feeling that they do not benefit adequately from the prosperity of German society – both materially and culturally. That is why respondents have joined unions and got themselves elected to works councils. To relativise or even question their social protest would therefore be to ignore empirical facts.

In its attempts to nationalise and ethnicise the social question, *völkisch* populism can be linked to a spontaneous tendency towards exclusive solidarity, which is widespread among industrial workers and above all among core and permanent employees. Exclusive solidarity is not only defined against what is above, but also against what is foreign, different and unwilling to labour. *Völkisch* populism, which operates with the imagination of an ethnically and culturally homogeneous “national body”, reinforces such tendencies and is therefore explosive for any trade union (class) solidarity. This is precisely why trade unions have a key role to play in the social debate about the national-social threat. Often trade unions are the only democratic organisations that are still able to reach workers who are sympathetic towards the *völkisch* right.

However, it is unclear what a successful confrontation with radicalised populism would look like. Right-wing works council lists such as the *Zentrum Automobil* are the lesser problem. With their own lists, right-wing organisations face open competition from trade union works councillors. They are then external opponents who can be easily identified from the trade union perspective. This is not the case with the right-wing workers we interviewed. Without exception, the interviewees were convinced trade unionists. At work, they do not stick their heads above the parapet. Outside our core region, they would not even reveal in trade union contexts that they are AfD sympathisers. This is why trade unions find it difficult to deal with such “internal” right-wing populism.

Two lines of anti-populist policy can be identified. The first calls for tough measures by employers and works councils to deter authoritarianism. “Clear boundaries” tend to be practised by academically educated trade union secretaries with backgrounds in the antifascist movement, who cannot act otherwise because of their self-image. For proponents of the second line, often expressed by those with a working-class background, this is not enough. Such individuals argue that if the organisation limits itself to (legally difficult to enforce) exclusions from the union and from works councils, it would leave the employees prey to the influence of Pegida and the AfD.

Realistic strategies need to be located between these two poles. In the longer term, however, one of the main concerns of trade unions must be to change the ways in which workers generate their everyday perceptions of wage inequality and insecurity. They need to address the shifts in the language of the left that have occurred with the rise of neo-liberalism, which have been described by French sociologist Didier Eribon:

Gone was any talk of exploitation and resistance, replaced by talk of ‘necessary modernization’ and of ‘radical social reform’; gone the references to relations between the classes, replaced by talk of a ‘life in common’; gone any mention of unequal social opportunities, replaced by an emphasis on ‘individual responsibility’. The notion of domination, and the very idea of a structuring opposition between those in positions of dominance and those who were dominated disappeared from the official political landscape on the left, replaced by a more neutral idea of a ‘social contract’ or a ‘social compact’ (Eribon, 2014: 128–129).

That has to change. If trade unions want to refute the accusation of the New Right that they are part of the establishment, they must once again become more of a social movement. They have to publicly address relations of class and exploitation, and at the same time make possible “the collective definition of the questions that it is legitimate and important to take up” (Eribon, 2016: 154).

However, we are currently very far from an intact social space within which such changes could be achieved. Recently, there was a strike by more than 1.5 million participants of the metalworkers’ union IG Metall over a new collective bargaining agreement for the sector. Thanks to that agreement, workers are entitled to request a temporary reduction of their working week to twenty-eight hours, which means that they have more individual time for care, education and rest from shift work. Unlike in the 1980s, the strike results have provoked only a faint echo from the academic left. In this respect, the academic left in particular can learn from the workers and trade unionists interviewed who make their rejection of AfD and Pegida public. These respondents unanimously advocate an inclusive, democratic class politics that emphasises common interests – “let’s say, of Chinese and German workers” (Trade union secretary, IG Metall) against the dominance of capital. Trade unionists who position themselves in this way still make up the majority of activists. Any accommodation of trade unions to the right-wing populist revolt would jeopardise the support of these activists. However, no interviewee who regards the wealth of the rich as a central cause for the poverty of the poor, as does Erik Olin Wright (2015: 8), would suggest that an inclusive class politics is making struggles around gender, race or the environment less important. Class politics and trade union solidarity are universalistic in their internal logic: in order to be effective, they must unite across gender boundaries, nationality and ethnic divisions. That is why they are incompatible with *völkisch* concepts of integration.

In this context, it is important that the corporate world of work certainly offers spaces in which class experience contradicts *völkisch* ideas. Trade union practitioners are building on this. They can rely on the fact that movements against sexist and racist discrimination have always achieved their greatest successes when the “democratic class struggle” (Korpi, 1983) has been reasonably successful in favour of wage labourers. The 1968 revolt rediscovered the class struggle – probably in an exaggerated way. At the same time, it was also a cultural rebellion for sexual liberation, the emancipation of women, civil rights and, later, a catalyst for movements in favour of ecological sustainability. In the struggle against *völkisch* populism, such a movement is needed – in workplaces, nationally and globally. From a scientific point of view, it is important that the debate with the populist right is conducted aggressively, with staying power, and is accompanied by a continuous exchange of experiences. To support this through empirical research could become the noble task of an “organic public sociology” (Burawoy, 2005: 7).

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