

Seven decades after Nazism, Germany's far-right

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Seven decades after Nazism, Germany's far-right AfD are making landmark electoral breakthroughs - often with the support of workers who once voted for the Left.

On 1 September right-wing populist party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) achieved stunning second place finishes in two former East German regions, Brandenburg, and Saxony. Its 23.5 percent of the vote in the former and 27.5 percent in the latter marked a significant breakthrough two years after the AfD had become the largest opposition party in the national parliament or Bundestag.

In late October they repeated the feat, finishing second in the east German region of Thuringia with 24 percent of the vote. This result was more than double the vote share they had achieved on the previous occasion.

Over seventy years after the defeat of Nazism, the rise of the AfD has sent shockwaves through the German political system. What's more, their success owes significantly to support from parts of the working class. The AfD received a disproportionate number of votes from trade unionists in the 2017 federal election (15 per cent, compared to 12.6 per cent overall); in the eastern states the party even managed to win 22 per cent of trade union votes. This led the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, one of Germany's leading newspapers, to ask whether a new right-wing workers' movement was emerging.

But what is behind this lurch to the right among workers? To answer this question we set about investigating workers' responses to the 2008 economic crash, which provides the backdrop to the rise of the populist right across the West.

Since 2010, with the help of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, we have mapped the changes in German workers' attitudes to crisis, politics, and the far-right. During this time, we encountered a striking contrast between the picture of a successful German economy — one that triumphed as global export leader until early 2019 and pushed unemployment in the domestic market to under 5 per cent — and how it was perceived by its workers.

Workers and Crisis

In our research we found a different perception of the crisis among workers than is generally portrayed in public discourse. Workers did not see 2008 as conjunctural but rather as something that was ongoing. 'There's always crisis' was the dominant opinion, with the crash just another phase in a seemingly endless cycle of pressure on working conditions, demands for flexibility, and performance testing.

For workers, 'crisis' was experienced in the workplace as permanent restructuring, as well as questioning of qualifications, experience, and professional status. Anger emerged from this among a

segment of the workforce, but it remained without a defined target — meaning it did not lead to widespread protest or resistance. Furthermore, the demands raised by the workers were increasingly difficult to address in a finance-driven market economy.

Germany overcame the financial crisis relatively rapidly, leading many in the trade unions to expect that successful crisis corporatism would lead to stronger representation of workers' interests in the political field. However, we noticed no such development. In fact, the 'crisis of representation' continued unbroken. The state was perceived to be captured by political and economic elites and the delegitimisation of the organs of institutional politics continued apace. This became a breeding ground for the extreme right's anti-establishment criticisms.

But if the immediate aftermath of the economic crash saw systemic obstruction and political locking out of criticism and anger, this period was broken by the so-called 'refugee crisis' in autumn 2015. The refugees and asylum applicants who had made it to Germany became a target of popular anger, planes for the projection of rage and perceived helplessness, while the rightward-turning AfD positioned itself to speak for popular anger against a political establishment that many felt had locked them out. This marked a turning point in the history of post-war Germany.

Populism and the Workplace

Although migration is not the cause, it functioned as a catalyst for increased everyday racism and prejudice. Since the refugee crisis', right-wing orientations on social questions are now more openly expressed. Migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers came to be perceived by some workers as messengers of misfortune on the one hand, a mirror of our own social vulnerability, as well as representing a social bottom above which they can still raise themselves.

This is where the particularities of right-wing populism come into play. Alongside and sometimes instead of situating social disputes on a vertical axis — between 'above' and 'below', or, in class terms, between capital and labour — populism tends to construct a horizontal politics of 'us' against 'the others'. In the hands of right-wing populists the vacuous notion of 'us' is redefined along national and ethnic lines.

The AfD's electoral successes have had the effect of normalising right-wing prejudice. Trade union opposition to this is criticised by some parts of the workforce, arguing that the AfD ought to be treated as a party 'like any other'. The line of demarcation vis-à-vis ultimately anti-democratic politics has, unfortunately, grown increasingly blurred.

The multi-ethnic composition of workforces can partially function as a 'firewall' against everyday racism. According to our survey, however, this only works where workplace integration has been successfully practiced against ethnic division over a longer time. We also observed a reconstitution in worldviews, forms of living, and political outlooks among migrants during this period.

It would be wrong to deny that right-wing activists have a sense for processes of workplace transformation. They often appear as those 'taking care' of the 'minor everyday concerns', combined with the criticism that works councils and trade unions no longer operate in the interests of workers but as mediators between workers and management at best, more oriented towards the latter in terms of appearance and experience.

Climate change provides a useful example of how the populist right are weaponising perceived left-wing causes against the trade union movement. The AfD regard climate change as 'fake', and advocate for maintaining production of fossil fuel engines as a contribution to securing the employment of automobile workers, as well as the continuation of anthracite mining in western

Germany and lignite mining in the east.

For some workers, that approach by the AfD offers an illusory promise of security against the politics of the social-ecological transformation advocated by the left and liberal parties, and the unions themselves.

Seeds of Discord

Capitalism and its crises were a constant presence in the answers of the workers we surveyed. A central finding of our investigation is the conclusion that contradictions are intensifying in the world of work. 'There's always crisis,' people said, 'but it's getting worse'.

The dimensions are multi-faceted, ranging from anxiety over how long a worker's job might be safe, growing unrest about accelerated flexibilisation, a constant mix of out- and insourcing, the ongoing unbounding of work, working hours and conditions, and the extension of a wide belt of precarious employment around no-longer-secure core workforces. Rising pressure to perform is almost always at the forefront of problem descriptions.

New processes of transformation (digitisation, decarbonisation, new transnational value chains) have added to older experiences of rationalisation and restriction to raise the tempo of change and expand insecurity. This also applies to more qualified workers, for whom market-driven self-direction and promises of autonomy mutate into losses of control.

A triad of losses of control, recognition, and prospects devalues trade union-based solidarity. This occurs at a time in which — inversely — the workplace system of order tends to be coming apart at the seams. Capitalism as an incentive system is based on a promise: whoever performs their work well and effectively, and qualifies themselves for it through education and training, receives a promise of (relative) prosperity and security. And, if things go well, this is followed by upward social mobility.

This was the foundation of every corporatist policy. Our experience is that workers feel that promises of security have vanished in a regime of unpredictability. Workers report that now only 'raw numbers' matter, people and their labour are written off. Where even continuous self-optimisation no longer promises to secure advancement, one risks slipping into downward mobility.

The Far-Right Challenge for the Unions

Unlike Germany's discredited political parties, trade unions can still claim a degree of legitimacy in the country. In their political orientation and decisions, the trade unions have positioned themselves clearly against right-wing populism. Nevertheless, they face significant challenges in the practical fight. Ever since right-wing populism ceased 'hiding behind the curtains' in the workplace, it has developed new tools to advance its politics.

This emergence from the shadows has changed the relationship between right-wing populism and the trade unions. Trade union and right-wing populist activism are no longer mutually exclusive. AfD supporters can receive support from their fellow workers and have that reflected in union positions. Today, one sometimes encounters colleagues who are engaged in trade union representation as well as being active politically for the AfD.

This blows up the two predominant union logics: that of unions representing workers' interests without politics, and that of unions being aligned to left-wing forces. Where right-wing populism or extremism makes it into the workplace and is not immediately linked to an anti-trade union attitude, it becomes an internal organisational and political problem.

Right-wing populism in the workplace can also take on an individual shape separate from the trade union or in opposition to it, as the allegedly more decisive advocate for the 'little guy'. Thus, trade union secretaries who enter conflict with the populist right at workplace assemblies encounter various rejections from their own camp.

Some works councils advise full-time colleagues against bringing up politically explosive issues like refugee policies and migration altogether. Fear of membership losses make some trade unions — not only in eastern Germany — more careful in how they deal with right-wing populists.

Workers, meanwhile, view the role of the trade unions more critically and sceptically today than they did in the past. The message of those we surveyed was: everyday trade union work no longer does enough to address the processes of downward mobility, loss of control, and fear about the future harboured by workers. They often can no longer effectively protect workers from the demands of the market. Trade unions do not have a lasting influence on job security nor working conditions.

Turning the Tide

This is acknowledged in parts of the union movement — which is why we see conferences about 'transformation' and 'the future'. But those initiatives offered thus far have been inadequate for the challenges posed by the right-wing populism. This is, in part, because change often seems to be little more than new labels: 'pragmatism' is replaced with the 'vocabulary of shaping things', for instance.

The longing glance towards the corporatism of years past, the alleged 'social market economy' — the economic foundations of which have long since eroded — cannot possibly offer a solution in light of the increasingly depressing workplace realities and political threats Germany faces.

To cut the ground from under the Right's feet we need more: answers must be provided to losses of control, recognition, and prospects, even within the limits of the current system. Right-wing populism has positioned itself to benefit from the pressures placed on workers by an increasingly rapacious market. That can only be because of a failure of the union movement to develop their own democratic economic responses to these problems.

This calls for a debate in which the prospects for trade union policies are openly contested. Rather than responding to capital's intensification of contradictions with corporatist peace offerings, we must strengthen trade unions' organisational power through conflict and mobilisation.

In labour policy terms, this means new collective perspectives against a capitalism that is tightening the screws of incentive in all spheres while also failing to fulfil its promises of meritocratic mobility and security. It also means organising processes of mobilisation and participation for a democratic, interest-based politics from below. These are related: mobilisation and participation must occur in areas that are charged with interest politics (such as incentive policies), and substantive labour policy goals (such as influence over staff evaluations) must be defined in democratic voting and activation processes.

Taking on such a process of transformation is, in our view, a decisive labour policy answer to the growth of right-wing populism. To meet this challenge, we're going to need to acknowledge that many of its root causes are in the world of work itself.

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