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and Catrina Schläger

## Working Class in the Middle?

Occupational classes and their  
views on work, society and politics

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# INTRODUCTION

To anyone setting out in search of the working class or asking whether class society still exists great thinkers such as Karl Marx, Pierre Bourdieu or Max Weber inevitably spring to mind. But it is not the aim of the present study to test theoretical frameworks or to develop them further. Rather we want to capture the attitudes and utterances of working people and their views on work, society and politics. Many political parties are currently claiming that their policies are aimed at the »hard working middle«. But who does that refer to? What characterises the working population? Is there still a working class? Where is it positioned in society? And what are its political demands?

»I would say the middle layer, the working class, so really the class that makes up most of society.« That is how one young man from Bochum who graduated from school at 16 and now works in a hardware store replied to the question of where he sees himself in society. Indeed, many others replied in a similar way and thus it presents the differentiation of working society pretty accurately. People working in the service sector count themselves as part of the working class and at the same time as part of the middle stratum of majority society. No difference or contradiction is seen between working class and middle stratum. They are regarded as pretty much the same thing. A sales assistant in a butcher's shop from Leipzig confirmed this, putting himself in the working class, which for him belongs to the »normal middle [part of society], neither rich nor poor«. We categorise working people from the manufacturing and service sectors as belonging to the »new working class«, and in some cases even office workers, small business owners (or small traders) and the solo

self-employed. Another novelty is the need to recognise the proportion of women in this new class, given that they predominate among service workers and office clerks.

Even we were surprised by some of the survey findings. Half of respondents feel they belong to the working class, but at the same time the large majority of occupational groups from manufacturing and services put themselves in the middle of society. Jena sociologist Klaus Dörre identifies the reason for this crowding of the working class into the middle part of society as »a potent self-conception of society's middle that almost obliterates class issues« (Dörre 2019: 26). The desire for social recognition, to belong to the middle stratum, is very pronounced. People work to be part of the middle. Belonging to the middle connotes the promise of prosperity, equal opportunities and being a respectable member of society.

This view that one is part of the majority of society was also put forward by a hairdresser from Leipzig: »You aren't alone. There's a lot of us.« On this basis the working class are the people »who keep the show on the road«, as a production worker (manufacture of switch cabinets) from Thuringia put it. But even though our survey respondents regard themselves as making up the social majority it doesn't manifest itself in any kind of collective strength because »solidarity doesn't really exist any more«, as an energy system installer from Bochum expressed it. Another reason for the lack of (societal) strength is the absence of a sense of »self-efficacy«, or in the words of a production worker in the pharmaceutical industry from Berlin »someone from the working class has less of a feeling ... that they can change things«.

Steffen Mau, Thomas Lux and Linus Westheuser point out in their book *Trigger Points* that groups further down the »social hierarchy« tend to »feel less competence or authority to talk about politics« and indeed tend to have a less coherent sense of their social position (Mau et al. 2023: 391). We were unable to discern any kind of collective identity as a working class characterised by a strong sense of belonging together, not to mention common political aims, in contrast to an everyday sense of belonging. Or to put it another way, we found a class in itself rather than a class for itself.

What members of this class have in common is that they are people »who really have to work for their money and don't have much left over«, according to a senior industrial electrician from Hamburg. Many of those we spoke to say they are doing well, but they often worry about falling down the social ladder. A warehouse worker from Cologne was clear that he knew what it would mean to fall off the edge: »I know where it is.« Such self-descriptions are often linked to statements about a lack of recognition or appreciation as pillars of society. To that extent these self-attributions tally with chronicler of inequality Julia Friedrichs' observations: »the working class looks different from a hundred years ago, but they are still people who work to earn the money they need to live on« (Frie-



drichs 2021: 12). Oliver Nachtwey and Nicole Mayer-Ahuja describe the relevant groups similarly: they are the »unrecognised essential workers ... who make important contributions in their work, but whose position in class society doesn't reflect this« (Mayer-Ahuja/Nachtwey 2021: 20).

People's identification with their work and pride in their achievements are strong, and across all employment categories. On being asked what is particularly important to them in relation to work the top three replies are: job security, income and work-family life balance. Mental stress and time pressure are particularly high among those sociocultural occupational groups – such as educators, carers and teachers – and service workers, in other words, occupations that involve dealing with other people. And these are precisely the occupational groups who would like more recognition of their work from politicians. People often recall »clapping for carers« during the Covid-19 crisis, but this has led neither to improvements in the care situation nor to higher pay and resources for the care profession.

Overall, 'politics' is not regarded particularly positively. This is reflected in a general alienation from the country's political elite. Not only are politicians regarded as being at the top of society, far removed from the realities of people's lives, but people also have the impression that politicians just aren't interested in the important things in life. »[They think the] migration of toads is more important« as one female warehouse worker from the Ruhr put it. There is an incredible amount of work to be done, above all to reduce social inequalities. Two-thirds of our respondents could be identified as having a medium to high level of class consciousness, in the sense of backing trade union positions. Among other things, besides a basic desire for more recognition and for more plain speaking, more specific demands were formulated for more financial security, including an increase in the minimum wage, better old age provision and affordable rents.

This fundamental sense of the injustice of socioeconomic realities finds expression in resignation and an abject acceptance of existing inequalities. A railway electrician from Saxony soberly describes the impossibility of changing existing structures in any way: »Those who are born poor will also die poor, probably«. Steffen Mau and his colleagues also note this acceptance of the social status quo. According to their analysis the »top/bottom arena« (arena of inequality with regard to socioeconomic distribution conflicts) is heavily demobilised and scarcely any social policy conflicts are fought over it (Mau et al. 2023: 30).

But even though it lacks active solidarity the new working class is characterised by strong empathy for both higher and lower social strata. The group of people attracting the most sympathy are single mothers, followed by pensioners; the first cannot work full time – or at all – because of their care responsibilities, the second because of their age. There is also considerable understanding for recipients of unemployment benefit (so-called »citizen's income« or negative tax credits) and refugees. This changes only when respondents get the idea that such people are receiving more social benefits than single parents or pensioners.

Positive feelings are also expressed about doctors and graduates because they have invested a lot of time in their education and have a lot of responsibilities. Besides a fundamental scepticism with regard to politics people also look askance at company directors and their consultants because they are not deemed to work for the good of society but rather to line their own pockets.

Many members of today's working class categorise themselves, for various reasons, as the »working middle«, or those who go to work every day and are pillars of society. Belonging to the middle stratum for such people is often more a matter of feelings rather than something real. As one single mother and manufacturing worker said, »for me first and foremost this is simply how I live my life«. Or, as activist and journalist Bertiel Berhe describes it, the myth of middle class society is maintained in social discourse but it doesn't (always) apply to social realities (Berhe 2023: 60). Anyone wanting to devise policies for such people needs to approach them with a sense of appreciation and recognition of the work they do with pride. Besides speaking to them directly this must also find expression in concrete material improvements in their living conditions. Policymakers also need to bring traditional socioeconomic distribution issues back centre stage. This is because, on one hand, there is a marked sense of injustice concerning social conditions and on the other hand, these people face real socioeconomic hardship in their everyday lives.

So, what should the reader expect from this study? In Chapter 1 we describe working society in terms of various occupational classes and socio-demographic factors. This is followed in Chapter 2 by an analysis of working conditions and the extent to which employees identify with their work. In Chapters 3 and 4 we analyse those who feel that they belong to the working class and how they locate themselves in society. The question of whether, and if yes, then who has class consciousness is the subject of Chapter 5. Chapter 6 on social attitudes and political polarisation concludes. We hope you find reading this report worthwhile.

# METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The study is based on two central methodological elements. First, qualitative data collection was carried out between February and April 2023 in the form of focus groups. This exploratory study design served the purpose of defining the scope of the term »working class« empirically. The focus groups discussed what the participants associate with the term »worker«, what kind of relationship they themselves have with the working class and how they categorise their own work in relation to society. Based on diagrams of different forms of society the groups discussed how social strata in Germany are distributed. This thematic approach enabled the participants to describe their own subjectively perceived position in society and to outline an extended picture of society in which ideal-typical occupational groups are placed in relation to each other. A total of eight group discussions were held online with 45 participants (five or six per group). Participants were recruited from the German-speaking population over 18 years of age. Group recruitment and composition was carried out using a screener to determine whether the participants felt they belonged to the working class (subjective perception). On top of that, group members were allocated in accordance with quotas for age, sex, education, region and migration background. Initially, four focus groups were conducted, comprising workers in either manufacturing or services, both with and without a subjective sense of belonging to the working class. In addition, a focus group was set up whose members do not belong to the typical working class occupations in accordance with Daniel Oesch's occupational classes model but who nevertheless consider themselves to belong to the working class. Going deeper, focus groups were conducted with employees from industry/production and »social activities«, as well as precarious and atypical employees from various occupational classes. Focus group discussions lasted around two hours and recordings of the event were transcribed and evaluated.

In addition to informing our theoretical approach, the results of the qualitative survey formed the basis of the quantitative survey. This survey was conducted among the German-speaking population (over 18 years of age) from 5 June to 23 July 2023. A total of 5,061 people were questioned in a mixed mode design, under which a representative random selection was made online (CAWI) and quota samples were drawn by telephone (CATI). The quantitative data were weighted in accordance with sociodemographic characteristics, including age, sex, education and region as control variables. In the course of gathering this socio-demographic information, sector and occupational title, as well as main activity were also analysed separately in line with the study's research interest, based on Daniel Oesch's occupational class model. The main part of the survey looked at the topical areas of respondents' general life and work satisfaction, their identification with their work (in particular paid employment), evaluations of central working conditions (such as regulated working time) and characteristics (such as flexible working time models or job security). Questions were also asked about subjective assessment of social strata and class affiliation. Political attitudes were surveyed among other things based on degrees of approval of political statements. The open-ended question on occupation was coded in accordance with ISCO and used to assign occupational classes based on Daniel Oesch's work. The quantitative results of the report were compiled by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES). Further analyses based on the survey data were carried out by scholars with the relevant expertise and published separately. The qualitative and quantitative data collection and preparation of the data set were carried out by Kantar Public (now Verian).



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# WHAT DOES THE WORKING POPULATION LOOK LIKE TODAY?

## QUICK FACTS

- The world of paid employment in Germany is very diverse. The manufacturing sector is no longer dominant. Activities of an administrative or interpersonal nature are very common.
- The new working class in Germany encompasses not only production workers, but also service sector workers. To some extent, however, office workers and small business owners (small traders) and the self-employed may also be included. What they have in common is a rather low income and the attendant financial worries, not to mention difficult working conditions.
- Gender differences are also reflected in occupational classes. While occupations of a technical nature remain clearly male dominated, women are in the majority among occupations that require »sociocultural expertise«, as well as office clerks and service workers. These are also the domains in which far more people work part-time or in mini-jobs.
- Income and wealth are unequally distributed between the occupational classes of the formally highly educated middle class and the new working class. Small business owners, the self-employed, production workers, office workers and above all service workers earn lower incomes. This is also evident in their housing arrangements, especially among service workers, 62 per cent of whom rent, which is well above average.

Work plays a central role in our lives. Nevertheless, the term is as difficult to define as it is controversial. Barbara Prainsack gets to the point in her book *What We Work For*: »Work is a bit like love in the sense that everyone knows what it is, but almost no one can easily define it« (Prainsack 2023: 26). But are all activities »work«? Or is »proper« work characterised by effort or stress or perhaps by external control? What about unpaid work, such as looking after children, housework or caring for relatives, so-called reproductive work? Undoubtedly unpaid care work counts as »work«, even when it is performed out of sight, in private and there is no written contract. Its effects on prosperity are enormous because it forms the basis for the very possibility of value creation. Having said that, there are considerable gender differences, which also affect people's options with regard to pursuing traditional paid employment. In the present report, however, we only mar-

ginally consider unpaid care work because our basic thesis concerns the extent to which occupational activity affects political attitudes and perceptions of society.

The term paid employment is often used in relation to so-called productive work. Earnings from work as a contribution to one's livelihood are the key issue here. But it is also assumed that paid employment is »an important part of personal self-development and a key element of everyday life«, determining one's »position in society« (Destatis 2024a). According to the Federal Statistical Office the number of persons in paid employment has increased continuously in recent years, standing at around 46 million in 2023. The gainfully employed in Germany are composed of just under 4 million self-employed and 42 million employees. Services are the biggest economic sector with 34.5 million employees, followed by manufacturing industry with 11 million. Around half a million people are employed in agriculture, forestry and fisheries (Destatis 2024b). The employment rate (Destatis 2024c) is 76.9 per cent. In other words, in Germany three out of four people of working age are in paid employment.

Virtually all approaches to class theory attribute an important role to occupation and occupational status (see Wright 2023: 12ff). People's attitudes are often directly or indirectly related to occupational status. And if one assumes that occupational class is decisive with regard to people's attitudes then that should continue to apply in retirement. For most of the questions we therefore looked at the group of gainfully employed and formerly gainfully employed people, broken down by occupational class. Our quantitative survey reached a total of 5,061 German-speaking persons over 18 years of age living in Germany. Just over 3,000 people were currently in employment and just under 1,300 people were former employees, in other words, retired. The service sector represents the largest group among current and former employees: 21 per cent in services involving qualified or highly qualified workers and 16 per cent involving only routine work. A similarly large group were in administrative work. Another 10 per cent each characterised their activities as managerial, technical or manual work, respectively. Only 8 per cent are or were in manufacturing.



## Daniel Oesch's occupation-based class model

Figure 1

Type of work	Employees			Self-employed
	Interpersonal	Administrative	Technical	Freelance
Graduate professions or professions requiring some other academic qualification	Sociocultural (semi-)experts	Management	Technical (semi-)experts	Self-employed professionals and entrepreneurs
Apprenticeships and traineeships	Service workers	Office clerks	Production workers	Small traders and solo self-employed

Source: Authors' presentation based on Oesch (2006).

## OESCH'S OCCUPATIONAL CLASS MODEL

For our further analyses we shall use Daniel Oesch's occupational class model (Oesch 2006 and Weber-Menges/Vester 2011). This combines a qualifications-based approach with the dominant work-based approach. With regard to the qualifications-based approach a distinction is drawn between the kind of training or education involved. The model we used based on eight occupational classes can be divided into two groups: first, occupations learned through training or on the job; and second, occupations that require a graduate education or some other kind of academic qualifications.

The nature of the work (or »work logic«) describes the kind of activities it involves. Occupations that involve direct personal interaction with other people are allocated to the interpersonal category. They include, for example, sales people, police officers, hairdressers (apprenticeships and traineeships) or teachers, educators and trained care workers, but also doctors (occupations requiring a degree or other academic qualifications). If one also distinguishes on the basis of qualifications the occupational classes »sociocultural expert« and »service worker« emerge.

Occupations primarily featuring administrative processes and regulations are allocated to the administrative kind of work (administrative work logic). This, in Oesch's scheme, gives rise to occupational classes in management (occupations requiring a degree or other academic qualifications), with occupations such as HR manager, accountant or controller, and office clerks (apprenticeships and traineeships), such as bank and office clerks, administrative assistants and secretaries. Occupations involving manufacturing or technology are allocated to technical labour. In relation to the qualifications-based approach a

distinction is drawn between technical (semi-)specialists, such as engineers, IT workers and technicians, on one hand, and production workers, such as electricians, mechanics, drivers and craftsmen, on the other.

The group of self-employed are allocated to the category of freelance work. This too can be divided into two. The so-called »liberal« professions (or self-employed professionals) and entrepreneurs include self-employed lawyers, doctors and pharmacists, as well as employers with more than nine employees. The second group includes small business owners (or small traders) and solo self-employed persons, such as shop owners, business people and farmers if they do not employ more than nine employees.

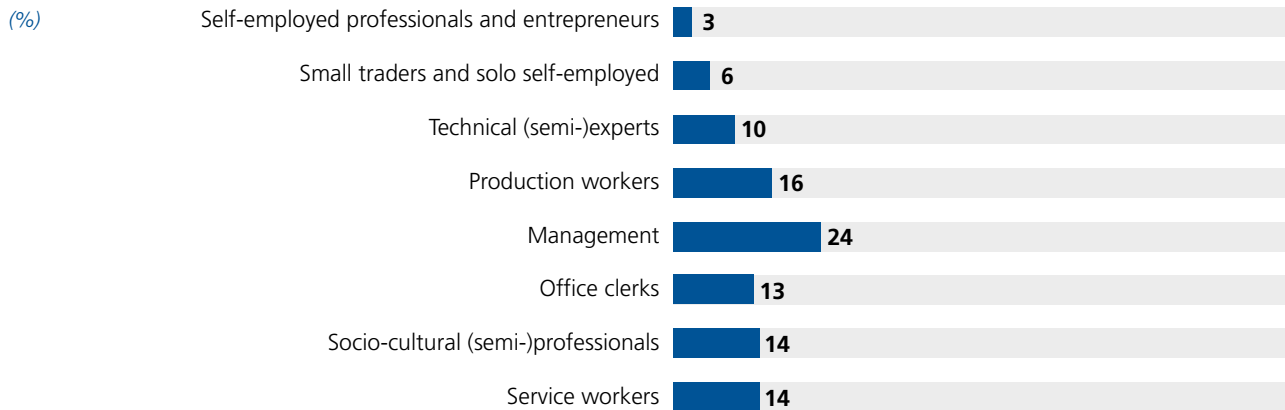
## CHANGE IN THE WORLD OF WORK

Applying Daniel Oesch's occupational class model to our survey makes it easier to grasp the transformation that has taken place in the world of work. Over a quarter are still employed in technical occupations. Some 16 per cent of survey respondents were allocated to the manufacturing group and 10 per cent to more highly trained technical (semi-)experts. For 28 per cent of respondents, however, their work is dominated by interpersonal activities (14 per cent sociocultural (semi-)experts and service workers) and 37 per cent by administrative activities (24 per cent management and 13 per cent office clerks). The smallest group in numerical terms are the self-employed: only 3 per cent of respondents could be classified as freelancers and entrepreneurs. Six per cent are small business owners and solo self-employed. Because of the small number of instances, the results on the so-called

## Frequencies of eight occupational classes

Figure 2

### What does working society look like?



Values deviating from 100%: Don't know, No answer, Rounding. Basis: German-speaking population aged 18 and over, employed and formerly employed. Source: FES Mapping the Working Class, authors' presentation.

self-employed professionals and entrepreneurs in particular can be generalised only to a limited extent.

Other studies, partly based on larger surveys, such as the 2018 micro census, the Socio-Economic Panel or Allbus, have also analysed the distribution of occupational classes in accordance with Oesch (see Mau et al. 2023; Waitkus 2023; Konietzka/Groh-Samberg 2023; Tolios 2021; Hertel 2020) and have come up with very similar figures. Only two occupational classes are not within the range of the results of the other studies. While we arrive at a figure of 16 per cent for production workers, the other surveys have between 18.5 and 25 per cent. The difference with regard to »management« is even larger. We came up with 24 per cent, but the other surveys put their proportion at between 14 and 19.1 per cent. Possible reasons for these deviations include the different times at which the surveys were carried out, unclear allocation of the open occupational questionnaire, together with a tendency to upgrade occupations on the basis of management designations, or the panel used in our online survey, which tends slightly towards higher incomes.

## THE NEW WORKING CLASS

What we mean by the »old working class« is basically production workers, with reference to Daniel Oesch's eight-category model. Adding service workers to this we can talk of a »new working class« (see, for example, Abou-Chadi et al. 2021). The following look at the socio-economic differences between occupational classes shows that service workers are often worse off with regard to income and assets than production workers. Expansion to a

new working class thus definitely makes sense with a view to capturing the transformation of the world of work. But small traders and solo self-employed are often in a worse financial situation than production workers, too. Claire Ainsley, in her book *The New Working Class*, points out that the traditional working class in the United Kingdom makes up roughly 14 per cent of the population, but that structural changes in society have given rise to a new working class, which is multi-ethnic, low- to middle-income and tends to be employed in areas such as catering, care or retail (Ainsley 2018). In general the occupational classes with a lower formal education earn low incomes and often have poorer working conditions, too, as we show in the chapter on working conditions and identification. As a result, if being working class is held to be associated with precarious working and living conditions, office clerks, as well as tradespeople and solo self-employed also have to be included besides production workers and service employees. It is also important to note that a division into eight occupational classes is too crude to capture the reality of the precarious working population (Waitkus 2023). There is also considerable diversity within the occupational classes. It makes a difference whether someone is employed as a production worker at a global corporation in the auto sector under a collective labour agreement, or just a labourer at a small manufacturing company in a structurally weak region. These differences in income and status are found in every sector of work and are very familiar to the working population. Whether a teacher or a firefighter have civil servant status (in the German system) or are mere employees; whether the cashier at a discount store is a shift supervisor or merely a temp; or whether a salesperson at a bakery has the relevant qualifi-

cations and receives a share of sales – all of this matters when it comes to wages and status. Participants in the focus groups were asked to rank people in different occupations in terms of a social stratification model according to income and (social) recognition (with 1 at the top and 7 at the bottom). It became clear during the discussions how differentiated the various areas of activity are today and how they are perceived.

*Moderator:* What's the difference between someone with a bakery and, for example, someone at Rewe (German supermarket chain)?

*Caretaker, 47 years of age, Berlin:* In a bakery, there isn't much going for you unless you're actually a baker yourself.

*Moderator:* So a bit below the cashier?

*Warehouse worker, 27 years of age, Stuttgart:* If you work on commission as a salesperson, you can also earn decent money.

[...]

*Warehouse worker, 27 years of age, Stuttgart:* I'd have said [level] 4 and 5 definitely. Depending on whether they are salespeople working on commission or something, maybe even [level] 3 and 4 in some cases.

Different developments can also be identified also in the case of activities that require a high level of formal education.

*Saleswoman in the textile industry, Bochum, 57 years of age:* teacher.

*Moderation:* Where would you put the [teacher]?

*Service staff in catering, 29 years of age, Hamburg:* I'd put her at [level] 3.

*Saleswoman in the textile industry, 57 years of age, Bochum:* It depends on what kind of school someone works at, secondary or primary school, it makes a difference.

[...]

*Salesperson at a DIY store, 33 years of age, Bochum:* I'd have said 3, people with civil service status 3 and others 4.

*Warehouse worker, 27 years of age, Stuttgart:* Doctors make a lot of money.

*Moderation:* What level?

*Installer of energy systems and treatment plants, 60 years of age, Bochum:* I'd also disagree. Things can also be totally different. My GP says, for example, that she can only just about make ends meet.

The issue of collective bargaining also plays a role, which is also evident in the study focus groups.

*Nurse, 53 years of age, Leipzig:* There are also unskilled labourers who are paid under collective agreements, for example, with IG Metall or Bau-Steine-Erden. They can actually get paid quite good money.

This kind of differentiation can pose a problem when it comes to the formation of class consciousness, as we describe in the relevant chapter of the present study. The different perceptions of status, working conditions and incomes have a disintegrative effect on occupational classes.

In what follows, the »new working class« encompasses the occupational classes of production workers and service workers. At some points we also refer to other groups, however. We also show in some chapters how the sense of belonging of the working class and class consciousness are distributed in the different occupational classes. Part and parcel of this new complexity, too, is the fact that the new working class is much more diverse than the generally accepted image of the old, rather male dominated working class. We therefore begin our sociodemographic look at occupational classes with the question of gender differences.

## GENDER AND OCCUPATIONAL CLASSES

It is interesting to break down the occupational classes by gender. The male dominance in technical occupations is scarcely surprising. The dominant image of male occupations in the technical domain is clearly reflected in the figures: 83 per cent of production workers are men. In the case of technical (semi-)experts, too, just under three-quarters are men. Having said that, figures of 17 per cent for women among production workers and 26 per cent among technical (semi-)experts are not negligible.

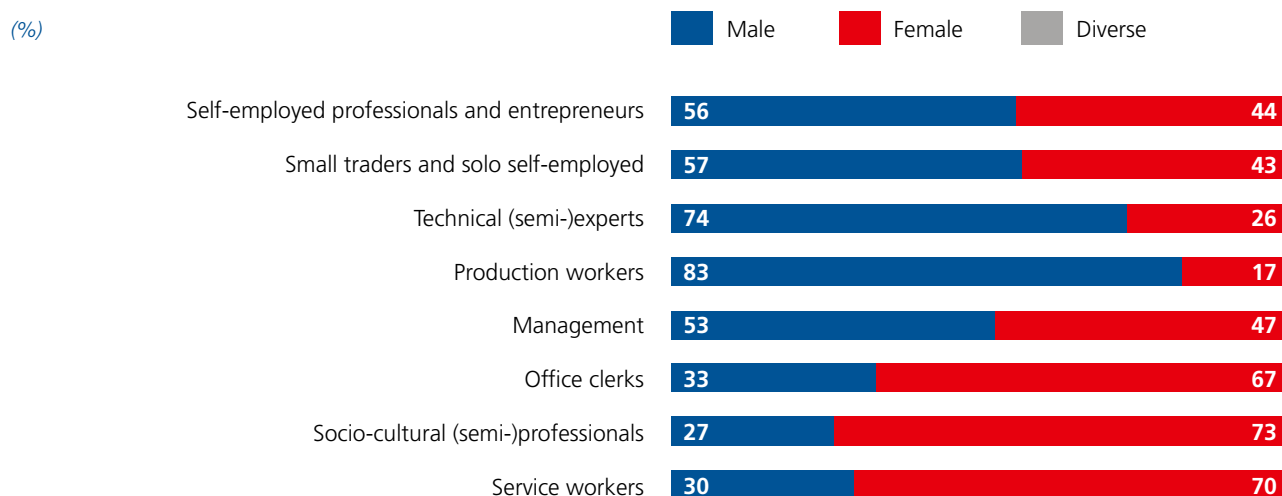
There are somewhat more men than women among the self-employed and management employees, but the differences are not huge. Particularly in management men (53 per cent) and women (47 per cent) are almost on a par.

Women are clearly in the majority in three other occupational categories, however. The category of sociocultural (semi-)experts stands out here. Almost three-quarters of such employees are women. But 70 per cent of service workers and 67 per cent of office clerks, too, are women.

In these circumstances the distribution of full-time and part-time work by occupational class is scarcely surprising. Given that women perform the bulk of (unpaid) care work, part-time and mini-jobs are most prevalent in the female-dominated occupational classes. Almost a quarter of employees work part-time, while 71 per cent work full-

## Frequencies of the eight occupational classes and gender

Figure 3



Values deviating from 100%: Don't know, No answer, Rounding.  
 Basis: German-speaking population aged 18 and over, employed and formerly employed.  
 Source: FES Mapping the Working Class, authors' presentation.

time. Three per cent of employees are in training and 2 per cent work in mini-jobs. Part-time working is above average among sociocultural (semi-)experts (38 per cent), service workers (37 per cent) and office workers (35 per cent). Even among the so-called self-employed professionals and entrepreneurs 26 per cent work say they work part-time. Among the other occupational classes the proportion is

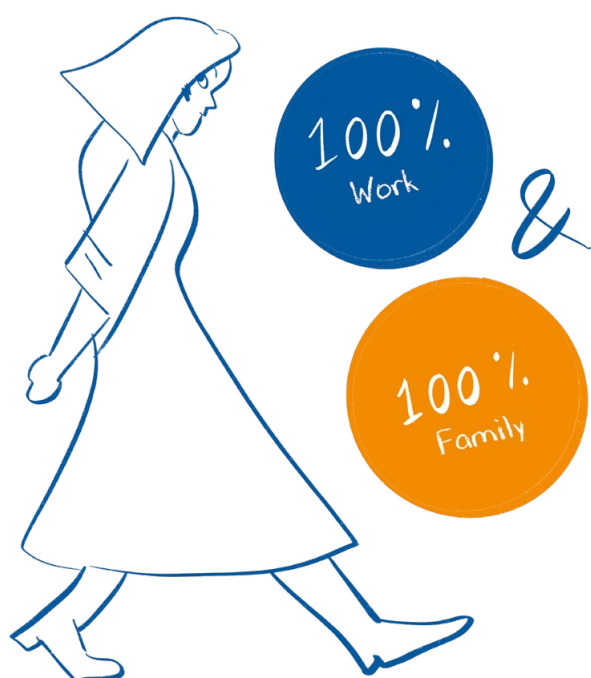
between 9 per cent (production workers) and 18 per cent (management). It is striking that mini-jobs are so prominent among service workers (9 per cent). In all other occupational classes the share is close to the average of 2 per cent. The kind of work varies sharply by occupational class, probably because of the unequal gender distribution and unequal involvement in unpaid reproductive work.

## A SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC LOOK AT OCCUPATIONAL CLASSES

What other socio-demographic correlations can be found with regard to occupational classes?

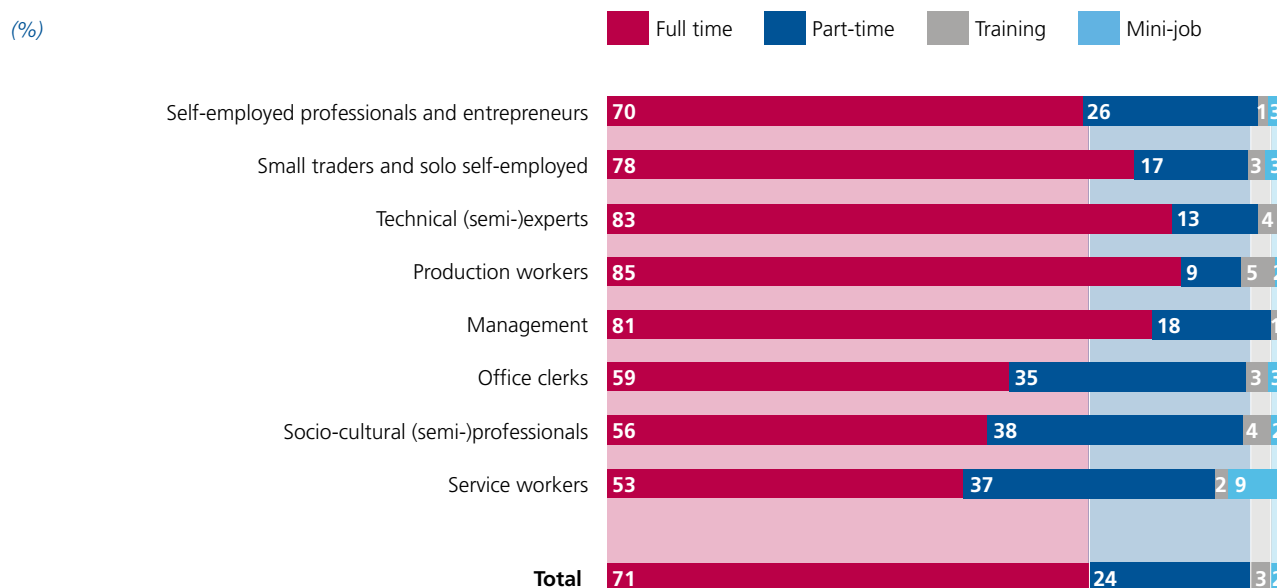
**Age:** Looking only at those in paid employment it appears that the self-employed are somewhat older than all other categories. Apparently, people often take the leap into self-employment only after they have worked as employees. Sometimes this occurs only after retirement. Technical (semi-)experts, on the other hand, are somewhat younger than all other occupational classes.

**Urban-rural background:** Small traders/solo self-employed (13 per cent) and production workers (9 per cent) seldom live in large cities. Almost half the people in these two occupational classes live in places with fewer than 20,000 inhabitants; 20 per cent of them even live in places with fewer than 5,000 people. By contrast, a quarter of liberal professionals and entrepreneurs live in cities with over 500,000 inhabitants. Technical (semi-)experts tend to be urban oriented.



## Frequencies of the eight occupational classes by type of occupational activity

Figure 4



Values deviating from 100%: Don't know, No answer, Rounding. Basis: German-speaking population aged 18 and over, employed and formerly employed. Source: FES Mapping the Working Class, authors' presentation.

**Children:** The figures for children under 18 years of age in a household vary between 24 and 39 per cent. Sociocultural (semi-) experts most often have children (39 per cent), followed by technical (semi-) experts (35 per cent) and management (33 per cent). By contrast only 24 per cent of office workers and 27 per cent of service workers live in a household with children. Although the differences are not large, the difference between the higher educated middle strata and the formally lower educated new working class is striking.

**Migration background:** Around a quarter of German citizens have a migration background, in the sense that a parent or they themselves were not born in Germany. In our survey the proportion of people with a migration background averages between 14 and 18 per cent across the occupational classes. Management, office clerks and service workers have the lowest proportion of people with a migration background. The highest values are found among technical (semi-)experts (18 per cent) and production workers (17 per cent). Production workers are most likely to say that one of their parents immigrated to Germany (15 per cent). People who were not born in Germany themselves are found more often among sociocultural (semi-)experts (11 per cent), technical (semi-)experts (10 per cent), and self-employed professionals and entrepreneurs (10 per cent). None of these correlations are statistically significant, however, because of the small number of instances.

## INCOME AND ASSETS

Given that income generally depends on the level of qualification it's scarcely surprising that there is a correlation between class affiliation and income. The occupational classes with the highest incomes are self-employed professionals (the traditional liberal professions) and entrepreneurs, technical (semi-)experts and management. Low incomes, by contrast, are found in particular among small traders, production workers, office clerks and above all service workers.

Besides net household income, which is difficult to ascertain in surveys, we asked about financial situation in terms of whether a household is able to put money aside at the end of the month, their money is sufficient to make ends meet, or whether they have to resort to savings or loans. Some 59 per cent of respondents have enough money at the end of the month. Some 6 per cent need to dip into savings and 3 per cent need to resort to loans. Here, too, clear distinctions emerge between the occupational classes. The new working class in particular often comes under financial pressure. Only 44 per cent of service workers and 45 of small traders and solo self-employed can put money aside at the end of the month. The figure is only 51 per cent among production workers. Office clerks are just below average on 57 per cent. The situation is similar in relation to those who need to dip into savings or are dependent on loans. Among service workers 16 per cent, among production workers 12 per cent and among small

## Occupational classes and financial situation

Figure 5

Which of the following statements most closely describes your household's financial situation?

- My household can put money aside at the end of the month.
- My household cannot put money aside at the end of the month, but it's enough to make ends meet.
- My household has to draw on savings to make ends meet.
- My household has had to resort to loans in the current crisis, for example, consumer credit, instalment credit, or an overdraft.



Values deviating from 100%: Don't know, No answer, Rounding. Basis: German-speaking population aged 18 and over, employed and formerly employed.  
Source: FES Mapping the Working Class, authors' presentation.

traders and solo self-employed 11 per cent find themselves in the red. All other occupational classes are below average.

By contrast, technical (semi-)experts, and self-employed professionals and entrepreneurs do fairly well financially: 74 and 72 per cent of them, respectively, are able to put money aside at the end of the month. Only 4 per cent of

technical (semi-)experts fall short with their monthly income.

Once again we see the difference between formally highly educated occupational classes of the middle stratum and the new working class. But there are also differences of level within the group of qualified workers. For example, sociocultural (semi-)experts are often worse off than people with the same level of qualification, such as technical (semi-)experts and management. In the case of skilled and semi-skilled occupations, on the other hand, office workers often appear to fare somewhat better financially than production workers and service workers.

### WHO LIVES IN RENTED PROPERTY?

Wealth or asset ownership is always reflected in housing conditions. A slight majority of current and former employees do not rent. Only service workers clearly fall outside this pattern: 62 per cent of service workers currently live in rented accommodation. By contrast, the self-employed are most likely to own their own home. Only 30 per cent of small traders and solo self-employed, as well as 38 per cent of self-employed professionals and entrepreneurs live in rented accommodation.





Once again it can be seen that people on lower incomes are more likely to rent. In general people who rent are younger or dissatisfied with their housing situation, but also their occupational situation. Pensioners, by contrast, are less likely to rent. Respondents living in larger cities, in turn, are more likely to live in rented accommodation.

For a more detailed look at issues related to the development of occupational classes and wealth inequality, see Nora Waitkus, who also discusses the analytical limitations of the eight occupational class model with regard to this issue (Waitkus 2023). ←

## 2 WHAT IS THE STATUS OF PAID EMPLOYMENT TODAY?

### QUICK FACTS

- Paid employment is generally viewed positively: two-thirds of respondents are satisfied with their working conditions, 85 per cent are proud of their work.
- Mental strain and time pressure are high especially among sociocultural (semi-)experts and service workers.
- Security of employment and an adequate income are high priorities, closely followed by – also rated as very important – reconciliation of work and family life.
- 54 per cent of respondents would like a four-day week with no loss of pay; 23 per cent are against this. Only those occupational classes who have a positive view of their financial situation can contemplate accepting lower pay.

### RUSHED AND PUSHED TO THE LIMIT – THE WORKING CONDITIONS OF THE WORKING CLASS

We measured the value attached to work in respondents' personal lives on the basis of three dimensions: the first dimension includes working conditions, in other words, working time, time pressure, mental and physical strain, as well as the possibilities for personal development. The second dimension concerns identification with work, for example, how much pride someone attributes to their work or the level of respect they feel. Thirdly, we looked at socio-economic features of work, such as how important security of employment, flexible working time or a four-day week are to respondents.

Most respondents enjoy good working conditions. Just under two-thirds say that they have regular working time. This is true in particular for production workers and technical (semi-)experts. These groups also feel less harassed or under time pressure. Employees in management, sociocultural (semi-)experts and service workers, by contrast,

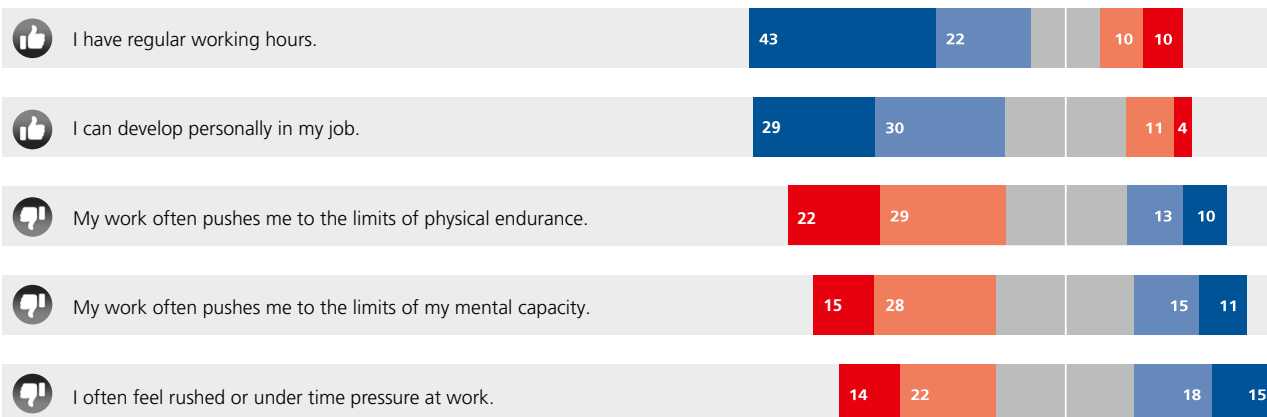
### Working conditions

Figure 6

Further statements about work and working conditions now follow.

To what extent do the following statements about your employment apply to you personally?

(%) ■ It applies fully ■ It mainly applies ■ It partly applies ■ It mainly doesn't apply ■ It doesn't apply at all

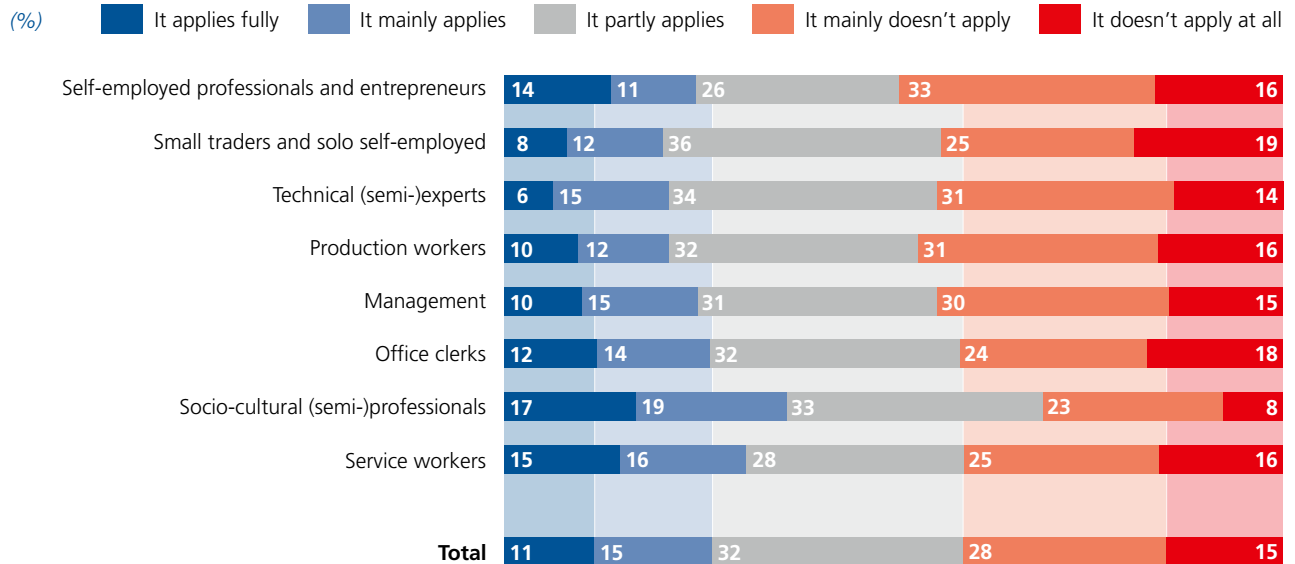


Values deviating from 100%: Don't know, No answer, Rounding. Basis: German-speaking population aged 18 and over, employed and formerly employed. Source: FES Mapping the Working Class, authors' presentation.

## Limits of mental stress

Figure 7

To what extent does the following statement about your employment apply to you personally?  
**»My work often pushes me to the limits of my mental resilience.«**



Values deviating from 100%: Don't know, No answer, Rounding. Basis: German-speaking population aged 18 and over, employed and formerly employed.  
 Source: FES Mapping the Working Class, authors' presentation.

report that their working time is often irregular and that they are subject to time pressure. A look at the general conditions affecting self-employed (liberal) professionals and entrepreneurs, as well as small traders and solo self-employed (less regulated working time and less of a feeling that they are under time pressure) completes the picture with reference to »soft« factors affecting working conditions: room for personal development in one's work and mental and physical strain. This explains why these two groups feel less strain due to time pressure, namely – unsurprisingly – because they experience a high degree of personal development (both groups over 50 per cent) in their activities. In the case of service workers more than two-thirds report feeling subject to time pressure in the course of their work. In the focus groups a connection was made with financial pressure:

»Savings have to be made everywhere. Wage costs have to be cut. As a result we have to let people go, although the [amount of] work generally remains the same. In other words, it doesn't get any less [...]« (Saleswoman in the textile industry, 57 years of age, Bochum).

Mental strain is high especially among the sociocultural occupations (36 per cent) and service workers (31 per cent), in other words, in occupations that primarily involve working with other people. On one hand, there is a certain

sense of fulfilment in the job, but on the other the human factor can be particularly challenging for this occupational group:

»[...] apart from a half hour break we're supposed to be on the job. So they're just people, sure, that's what's great and what's really nice about the job, but on the negative side .. you don't really get a minute of peace.« (Educator, 61 years of age, Cologne)

This tension reveals itself when the occupation is perceived as important but nevertheless is not awarded the recognition it deserves.

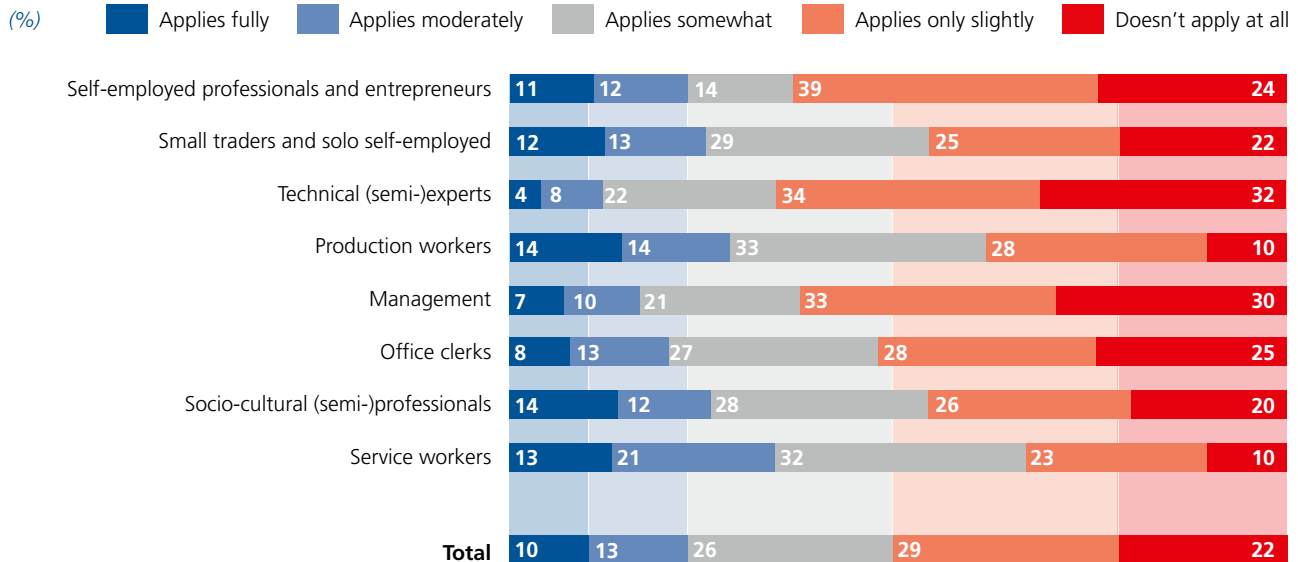
»Somehow or other I find myself in quite an important position in society, for example, during the Covid-19 period, where people saw which professions are really important to keep things going, and they included all the social professions above all, but at the same time there was the same old low esteem for them...« (Educator, 33 years of age, Cologne)

High physical strain is reported above all by production workers (28 per cent), but even more so by service workers (34 per cent). Service workers as a group thus combine mental and physical strain, two features defined in the focus groups as central to the new working class. Everyday work is described as noisy, stressful and exhausting. Some

## Limits of physical capacity

Figure 8

To what extent does the following statement about your employment apply to you personally?  
»My work often brings me to the limits of my physical capacity.«



Values deviating from 100%: Don't know, No answer, Rounding. Basis: German-speaking population aged 18 and over, employed and formerly employed.  
Source: FES Mapping the Working Class, authors' presentation

sort of compensation is sought in leisure time (»You can be happy when you get home and you can enjoy some peace and quiet – butcher, 25 years of age, Leipzig). At the same time, it is becoming clear that flexible working time is increasingly playing an important role (see above) – in retail and cater-

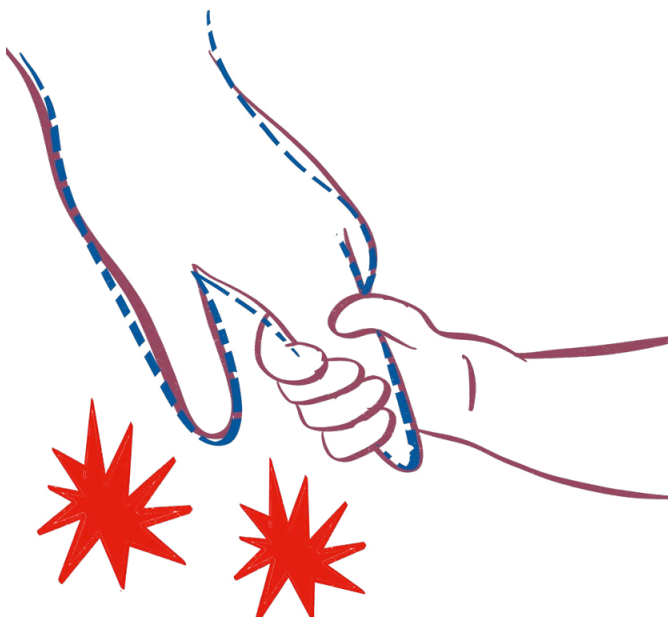
ing in particular, unregulated working hours and working at the weekend are usual.

»I work in retail so I also have to work weekends.«  
(Butcher, 25 years of age, Leipzig)

Higher mental and physical strain, as well as time pressure feature most prominently in occupational classes with the highest proportion of poorly educated people. Among production workers 53 per cent declared that their highest educational qualification is a school leaving certificate, as did 49 per cent of service workers and 36 per cent of office workers. In other words a low level of education tends to go hand in hand with low wages and poorer working conditions.

## PAID EMPLOYMENT INVOLVES MORE THAN MERELY EARNING A LIVING

Work is pivotal for people in our society, both socially and personally. The question »What do I want to be when I grow up?« plays a central role even in school education; paid employment is a central part of life for all genders and takes up a large part of the day and also of life:

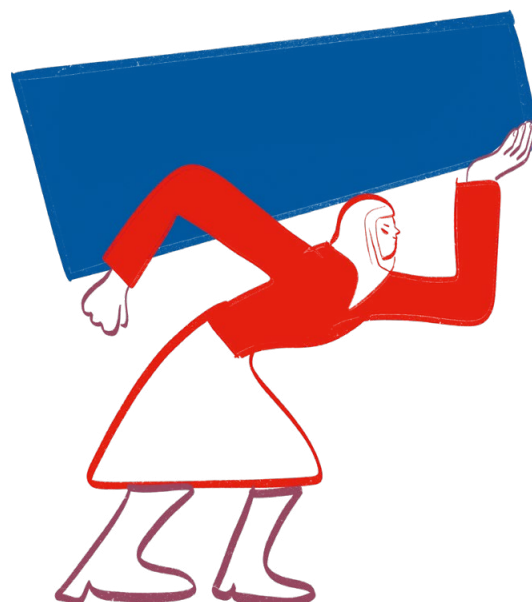


»I have to agree with that. You're really at work for a large part of the day.« (*Educator, 53 years of age, Berlin*)

»I suppose that to some extent that's the key, to find a job you like and then just to try to turn working time into living time. Otherwise you feel that you've lost so much time from your life« (*Educator, 33 years of age, Cologne*).

Identification with work is measured in terms of the pride someone feels in their own activities, the perceived importance of the activity for society, the respect it's paid and relations with colleagues. This dimension demarcates the personal and social level of paid employment. Identification with one's own work is thus very high across all occupational classes in these variables.

»Pride in one's own work« elicits particularly high levels of agreement (completely/somewhat): 85 per cent of respondents are proud of their own work performance. This value is highest among small traders and solo self-employed, followed by self-employed (liberal) professionals and entrepreneurs, service workers and production workers, as well as technical and sociocultural (semi-)experts. This pride in one's work is not reflected to the same extent in perceived respect. While almost 89 per cent of small traders and solo self-employed stated that they are proud

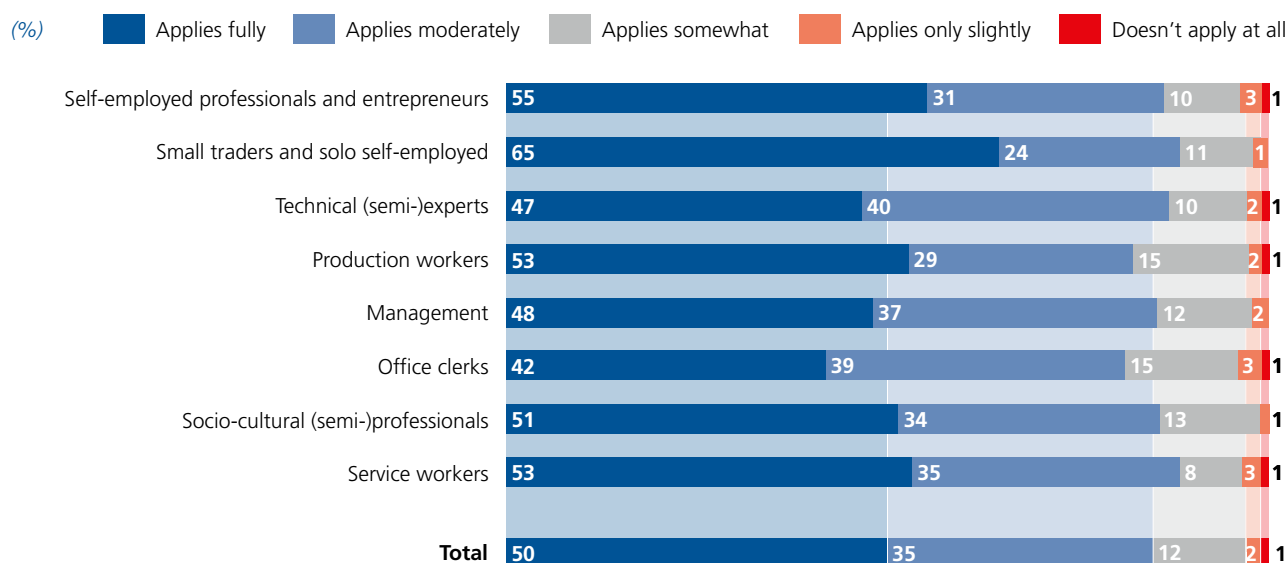


of their own work performance, 22 per cent of respondents said that they did not receive sufficient respect for their activities (more than half even reject, completely or somewhat, the statement »I don't receive sufficient respect for my work«). Although 88 per cent of service workers are proud of their work, 35 per cent of them report insufficient societal recognition and respect. Only 38 per cent reject the statement »I don't receive sufficient respect for my

## Pride in one's work and occupational classes

Figure 9

To what extent does this statement on identifying with one's own work apply to you personally?  
»I'm proud of my performance at work.«

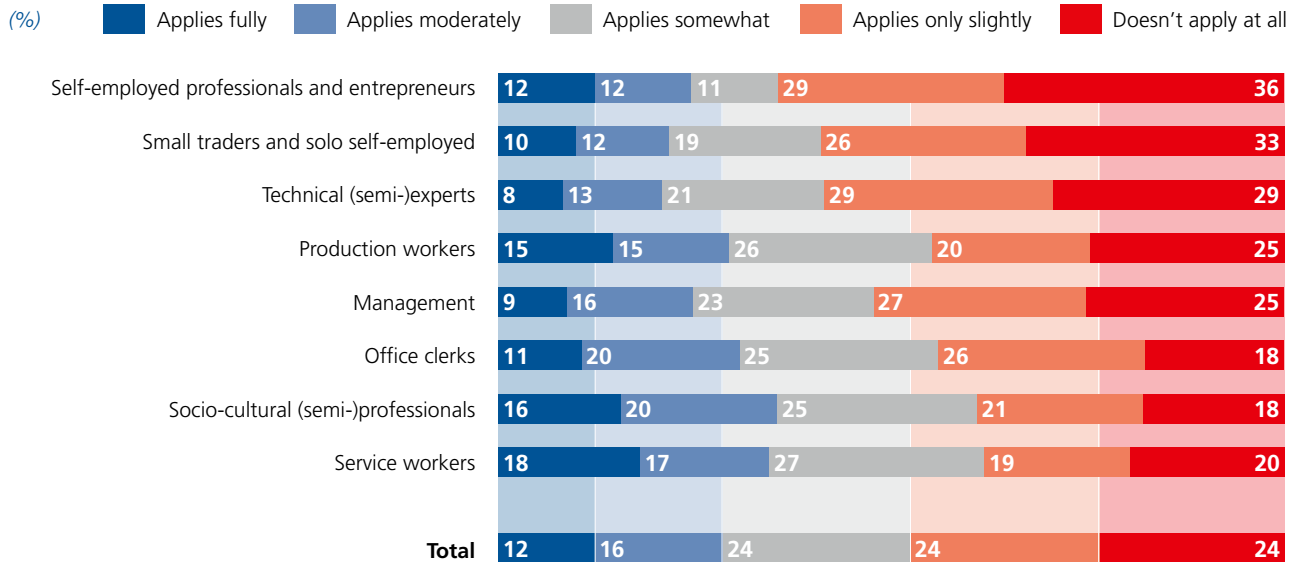


Values deviating from 100%: Don't know, No answer, Rounding. Basis: German-speaking population aged 18 and over, employed and formerly employed. Source: FES Mapping the Working Class, authors' presentation.

## Insufficient respect for my work

Figure 10

To what extent does the following statement apply to you personally?  
»I don't get enough respect for my work«



Values deviating from 100%: Don't know, No answer, Rounding. Basis: German-speaking population aged 18 and over, employed and formerly employed. Source: FES Mapping the Working Class, authors' presentation.

work« completely or somewhat, the lowest value among all respondents. In her book *Dramas of Dignity* about cleaners at Potsdamer Platz in central Berlin Jana Costas describes very vividly and impactfully both their pride and their strong work ethic, but also how susceptible they are to having their dignity violated or threatened (Costas 2023).

But other occupational classes with above average pride in their work also experience too little recognition. For example, sociocultural (semi-)experts and production workers have the impression that they receive too little respect for their work (36 per cent and 30 per cent, respectively).

»It's simply about people actually recognising what I contribute here, and really I think that's just not happening. [...] Recognition in the sense of people showing that you're appreciated, whether it's your employer, politicians, on television, that people simply make you aware that they appreciate what you actually do and achieve for this world. That would also be nice.« (Medical assistant, 22 years of age, Nuremberg)

The issue of respect is also often raised in relation to other occupational classes:

»I think that IT people, in other words anyone whose work has something to do with technical things, earn a lot, while the people who actually

make sure that we are able to live our lives, that we're able to get on with things, that the streets are clean, that we're protected, that we're taken care of ... that is actually not given enough attention [...].« (Pensioner, former office administrator, 60 years of age, Berlin)

Respondents do not want more social benefits as a way of paying them respect; what really matters to them is to receive an income that is appropriate for what they do and reflects the importance of their profession for society, and also »more time« for the working middle.





A collegial working environment also plays an important role in the perception of their own activities. In relation to the social and political outlook of the working class, which is the focus of this study, such collegial solidarity favours class consciousness. Some 80 per cent of respondents enjoy working with their colleagues. Participants in the focus groups emphasised »pulling together« and »collegiality«:

»Yes, I think it's important to show a lot of collegiality, so that the team really sticks together. [...] I feel very, very comfortable at my company because this team spirit is just right, this collegiality.« (Warehouse worker, 27 years of age, Stuttgart)

With almost 89 per cent sociocultural (semi-)experts score highest on this issue, on a par with the technical (semi-)experts group. This completes the picture of an occupational class whose activities intrinsically involve dealing with people.

## NO CONTRADICTIONS IN WORKING LIFE: SECURITY AND FLEXIBILITY

The most important things for employees are financial security and reconciliation of work and family life. More specifically, job security is ranked first (mean value of 3.2 on a scale from 1 to 7), followed by a decent income (6.1)

and reconciliation of work and family life (6.0). The values for these three factors are very close to one another and across all occupational classes. The reconciliation issue is slightly more important for women than for men, but even then there are only 5 percentage points difference. In a nutshell, employees want (alongside the abovementioned recognition) money and time.

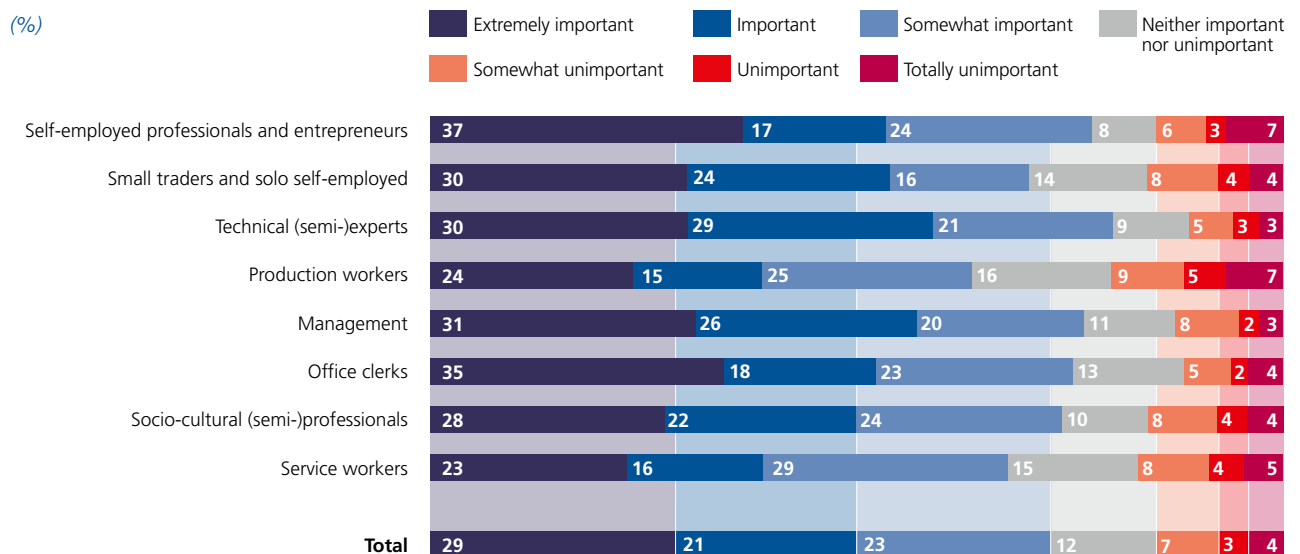
Flexible working time models and opportunities for personal occupational development are ranked high, but not as much as the other factors, although it should be noted that flexible working time models in particular are a key lever when it comes to (work/family life) reconciliation and the desire for more time outside paid employment. Production workers report that they have regular working hours and indeed this group has the lowest level of approval with regard to the importance of flexible working time, at 39 per cent (»extremely important« and »important«). Sociocultural (semi-)experts, who report a high level of irregular working hours, are much keener on flexible working hours (50 per cent) than production workers.

On the subject of the organisation of working time there is currently a lively public debate – not to mention trade union demands – on the introduction of a four-day week. A variety of different models may be imagined. More than half (55 per cent) of respondents regard a four-day week on the same wages as a good thing, 16 per cent could conceive of it even on lower wages, while 25 per cent basically reject a four-day week.

## Flexible working time models

Figure 11

### How important is »flexible working time« in occupational activity?

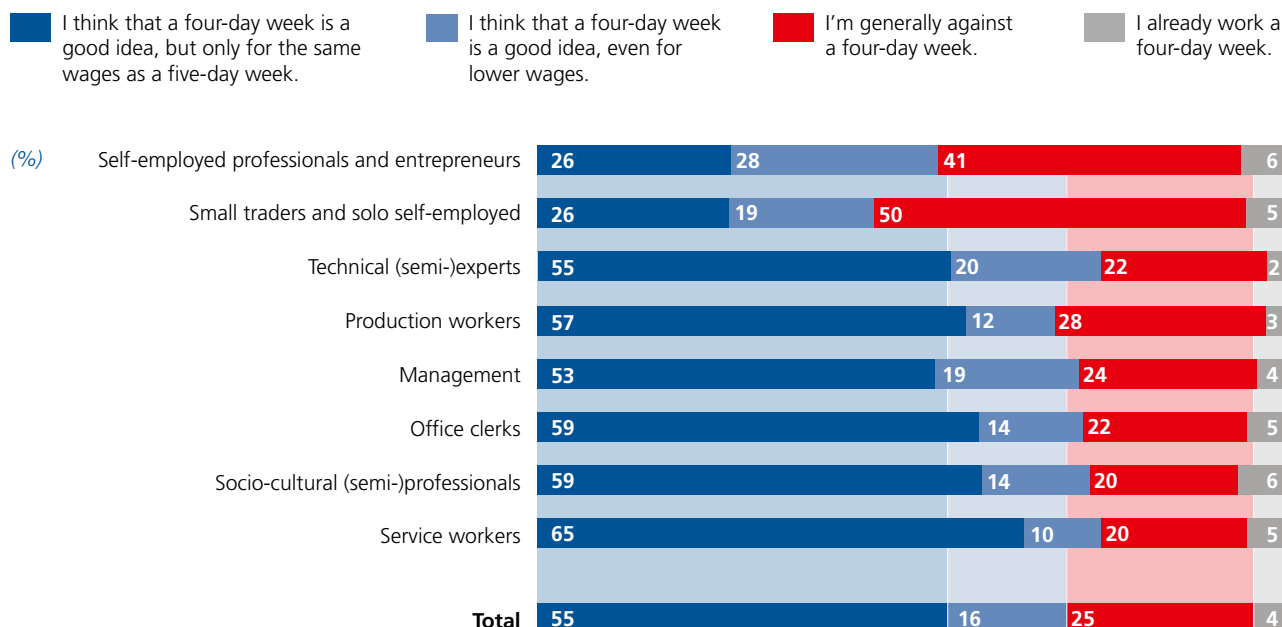


Values deviating from 100%: Don't know, No answer, Rounding. Basis: German-speaking population aged 18 and over, employed and formerly employed. Source: FES Mapping the Working Class, authors' presentation.

## Attitudes to a four-day week

Figure 12

Currently there is a lot of discussion of a four-day week. That would mean that people in full-time work would only work four days a week instead of five. What do you think about that idea?



Values deviating from 100%: Don't know, No answer, Rounding. Basis: German-speaking population aged 18 and over, employed and formerly employed. Source: FES Mapping the Working Class, authors' presentation.

Different occupational classes have different preferences. Service workers, sociocultural (semi-)experts and office workers, followed by production workers favour a four-day week on the same wages. Among dependent workers primarily technical (semi-)experts and managers would accept lower wages for shorter working time, in other words employees who take a positive view of their financial situation. Thus time is regarded as a valuable commodity by groups who are in a position to afford it. Here a gain in

personal time (in the form of part-time working) is associated with greater life satisfaction:

»So the fact that I work part-time means I don't have a problem with free time. I normally work four days a week. I have enough free time.« (Customer services assistant, 30 years of age, Bochum)

For people who don't have a positive view of their financial situation or regard it as secure wages come before time in the hierarchy of priorities. At the same time, full-time employment is described as scarcely compatible with other demands in today's world:

»Working full time has become really exhausting in today's world, generally speaking.« (Medical assistant, 22 years of age, Nuremberg).

The nature of the activity is also a factor in the hours people are required to work:

»So in my experience working 40 hours in a social profession is just not possible, and that includes caring etc. So it's just too much.« (Educator, 33 years of age, Cologne)



Finally, we can say that most employees at first glance are satisfied with their work and working conditions. Furthermore, over three-quarters identify with their profession. It also appears, however, that occupational groups in the new working class suffer more under time pressure and from mental and physical strain. As the contributions to the focus groups make clear these work load peaks are not always the result of occupational activity alone, but the demands of the occupation in combination with the challenges of everyday life increase respondents' mental load and stress. In occupational groups that tend to be characterised by low or medium wages time resources cannot be compensated by a reduction in working time. Thus once again the financial situation affects the degree of freedom with which people are able to shape their lives and everyday routine. ←

# WHO FEELS THEY BELONG TO THE WORKING CLASS?

## QUICK FACTS

- The perception of the working class has become very differentiated. Workers are described as people who work hard, both mentally and physically, receive a low wage and have little scope to assert themselves socially or politically.
- Almost half of the respondents see themselves as members of the working class. The change is evident across the occupational classes. Although there are strongholds among production workers and service workers there are also high proportions among other occupational groups, such as technical (semi-)experts, office clerks, and sociocultural (semi-)experts.

»So for me a worker is someone who basically makes something or somehow a product and not just mentally.« *(Facility manager in a care institution, 59 years of age, Stuttgart)*

But the picture quickly changed in the course of the discussion and other factors, such as physical and mental load or strain were also raised that strongly characterise the working class. Thus the working class was expanded to include workers in the service sector and sociocultural (semi-)experts.

»For me, a cleaning lady is also a worker, and sometimes she works harder than a workman. I wouldn't make a sweeping judgement that a cleaner isn't a worker, or that I'm not a worker in the catering industry, because I work my arse off. So I work.« *(Service employee in catering, 29 years of age, Hamburg)*

»A delivery driver, for example, is just as stressed these days, or is at the bottom of the service industry, every bit as much as a worker who gets their hands dirty or something like that.« *(Sewage treatment and energy plant installer, 60 years of age, Bochum)*

We have already emphasised that, purely from an occupational standpoint, there is still a working class today, although it is much more differentiated. But regardless of objective categorisation in terms of occupational classes the question arises of whether people regard themselves as workers and members of the working class today. Without such an identification no class consciousness can emerge, which is a condition of common organisation and political interest representation. We therefore needed to find out what the term working class means to people today. What determines a sense of belonging and how is it expressed? And who feels that they don't belong?

The following situation was re-enacted in the focus groups. There's a knock at the door, someone opens it and before them stands a worker. The participants were asked to describe the person. The first attributes that came to mind primarily concerned traditional ideas about »male production workers« and the underlying conception of labour:

»As far as I know workers tend to wear work clothes when they come home from work, and that people who aren't from the working class tend to wear shirts - not checked shirts, but plain-coloured shirts, I suppose.« *(Control and signalling electrician, 48 years of age, Leipzig)*

»So for me there has to be something to do with physical work, that they work with their hands in some way.« *(Female warehouse employee, 45 years of age, Essen)*



»I don't think any more that it's just construction workers with hard hats, but also carers, all the social professions, which are all also very demanding.«  
(Educator, 33 years of age, Cologne)

Finally, two structural elements were adduced that also characterise the working class and unite them beyond the diversity of their constituent occupations: economic weakness and political impotence.

»For me a worker is someone who doesn't earn much.« (Service staff in catering, 29 years of age, Hamburg)

»People who really have to work for their money and who don't have much left over.« (Industrial electrician, over 60 years of age, Hamburg)

»So I think that maybe someone from the working class has less of a sense that they can change things.« (Female production worker in the pharmaceutical industry, 53 years of age, Berlin)

»And workers' interests aren't necessarily represented any more, but rather those of the middle to upper middle class.« (Student, 24 years of age, Bochum)

No one objected to the term »worker« in the focus groups, with most regarding it as a suitable description of themselves. The term »working class«, on the other hand, was more controversial. Some couldn't identify with it at all on the grounds it was obsolete, not in keeping with the times, and not really much use. The negative connotations of working class were also frequently mentioned. Perhaps this was one of the reasons not all focus group participants – even if objectively they belonged to the working class in terms of the nature of their work and level of qualifications – categorised themselves as members of this class. Others greeted the term with strong approval, however, whether because of the nature of their employment, their political attitudes or their family socialisation.

»I don't really associate the word with anything, working class.« (Hairdresser, 29 years of age, Essen)

»Actually, the term ›working class‹ really has such negative connotations, although I actually like it because we are part of society, we work to be part of it. So I don't know why this term has such a negative connotation, because actually it says exactly what we are or what I am.« (Female production worker, 56 years of age, Cologne)

## Sense of belonging to the working class, overall and by age, sex and education

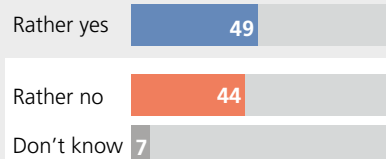
Figure 13

There's a lot of talk about the so-called working class these days.  
Do you feel that you belong to the working class?

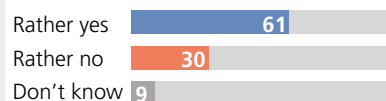
(%)

Rather yes Rather no

### Total

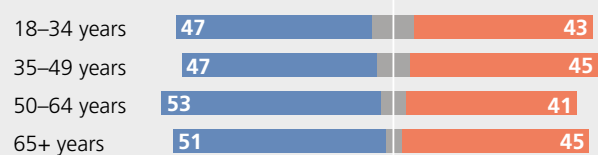


Would you say that the working class still exists today?



Basis: German-speaking population above 18 years of age that doesn't feel that it's a member of the working class or »no data/don't know«.

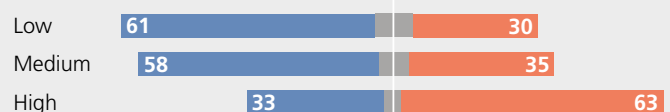
### Age



### Gender



### Education

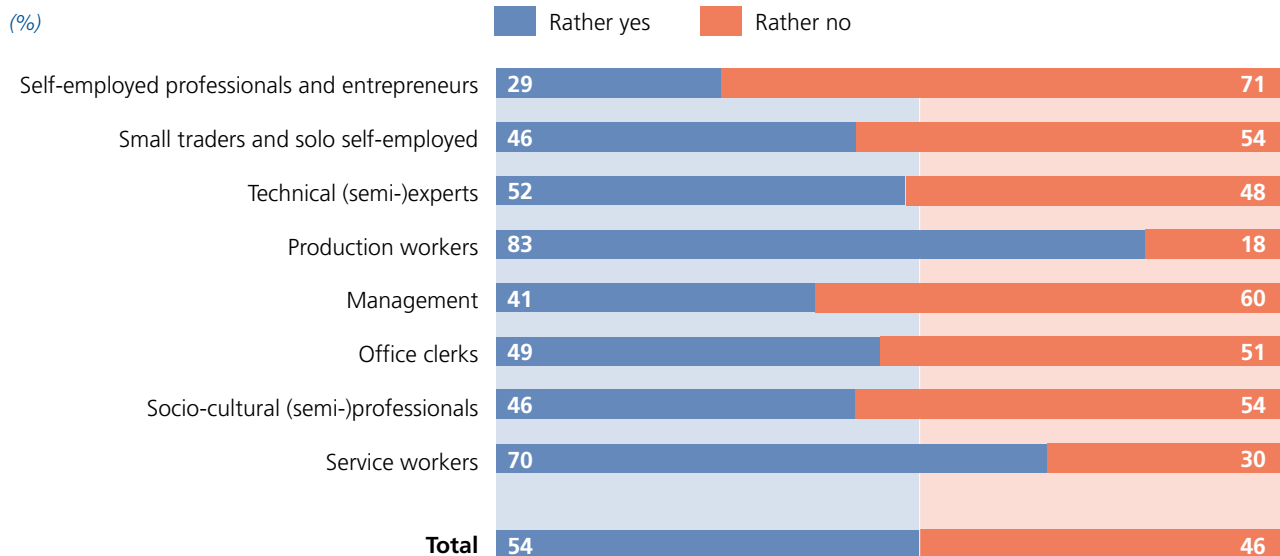


Values deviating from 100%: Don't know, No answer, Rounding. Basis: German-speaking population aged 18 and over, employed and formerly employed.  
Source: FES Mapping the Working Class, authors' presentation.

## Who feels that they belong to the working class?

Figure 14

There's a lot of talk about the so-called working class these days.  
Do you feel that you belong to the working class?



Values deviating from 100%: Don't know, No answer, Rounding. Basis: German-speaking population aged 18 and over, employed and formerly employed. Source: FES Mapping the Working Class, authors' presentation.

»My great-grandfather was arrested by the Nazis because he was involved in the SPD. And I'll always be a working-class child.« (Female office administrator, 49 years of age, Nuremberg)

»But I rather see myself as on the workers' side. There just this strong social streak that I've always had. For example, I've also worked with disabled people in the past and with refugees, which I find really exciting. And this purely commercial thinking and this capitalism – in inverted commas – it's all well and good, but it's just not me, I suppose.« (Hospital dispatcher, 48 years of age, Berlin)

In the quantitative study participants were asked directly whether they considered themselves to belong to the working class. Almost half (49 per cent) felt able to state it outright. Some 44 per cent, by contrast, do not regard themselves as part of the working class and 7 per cent were undecided. Looking only at employees and former employees the figures are even more striking: 54 per cent feel that they belong to the working class. This strong sense of subjective belonging really surprised us. The high values could be because »work« as such is rated very positively and »working class« is considered to be synonymous with belonging to the hard working part of society.

The people who do not feel that they belong to the working class or cannot decide were then asked whether, in their view, there even is a working class today. Some 61

per cent affirmed that there was. Overall we may deduce from our study that the working class as a societal construct still exists in people's perceptions. There are no major differences across the age groups with regard to the sense of belonging. Older people (from 50 years of age) tend to see themselves as belonging to the working class more than younger ones. The extent to which the traditional picture of the working class has changed can be seen in the analysis by gender. Although, in relation to all respondents, men (51 per cent) still tend to see themselves as working class more than women (48 per cent) the difference is small and overall gender doesn't really exert much influence on the subjective sense of belonging (any more). Not surprisingly, the effect of education is clearly visible in the study: 63 per cent of people with a higher education do not consider themselves to be part of the working class, while people with a lower (61 per cent) and medium education (58 per cent) are much more likely to feel that way.

In Daniel Oesch's class model the new working class is pretty much made up of two groups: production workers and service workers. Breaking down the data by occupational class at first glance there appears to be a correlation between objective and subjective criteria: 83 per cent of production workers and 70 per cent of service workers assign themselves to the working class. The sense of belonging is accordingly strongest in the new working class in comparison with other occupational classes. But high values were recorded even in the other occupational groups: for example, 52 per cent of technical (semi-)experts, 49 per



cent of office clerks, 46 per cent of sociocultural (semi-) experts and also 46 per cent of small traders and the solo self-employed regard themselves as members of the working class. These high approval rates seem to indicate that in public perception the working class is much more differentiated, and even if there are still strongholds, other occupational groups can be added to it, at least in terms of their self-perception.

Least likely to count themselves as working class are self-employed professionals and entrepreneurs (29 per cent), as well as management (41 per cent). Taking a second look, however, it appears that besides objective occupational classification in terms of level of qualifications and type of work other mechanisms are in play that determine people's sense of belonging to the working class.

Statistical regression models were used to determine the strongest effects on belonging to the working class. It appears that a low income, physical strain because of work, a distinct sense of pride in one's work, the feeling that one receives too little respect for one's work and a sense of the social importance of one's work have a positive influence on people's sense of belonging to the working class. ←

# HOW IS SOCIETY AS SUCH PERCEIVED?

## QUICK FACTS

- The social status (promise of prosperity and societal recognition) that attaches to the middle stratum of society is enormously attractive. Both working class and middle class occupational groups regard themselves as in the middle of society.
- In the perceptions of production workers and service workers German society is like a pyramid with a broad lower stratum at the base, a shrinking middle stratum and a small upper stratum at the top. They see themselves primarily as belonging to the lower middle stratum.
- Basically there's a strong sympathy with social strata both above and below. But this can switch to rejection if expectations of fairness are thwarted.

Subjective categorisation into a particular social stratum allows conclusions to be drawn about the social status of different groups of people and their self-positioning in the social system. The majority of employees and former employees in our survey see themselves as in the middle of society: 53 per cent assign themselves to the middle stratum, a good third (36 per cent) describe themselves as upper middle or upper class, while only 11 per cent state that they belong to the lower middle or lower stratum. Based on our data this results in a kind of onion-shaped society, with a broad middle stratum, fairly large upper strata, and very small lower strata. A similar picture emerges if one compares these data with the micro census of 2018 (Destatis 2021), notwithstanding the slightly different questions: the great majority see themselves as middle class. The result is the opposite when it comes to distribution in the upper and lower strata: in the micro census the lower strata are bigger and the upper strata smaller. The reason for this, in addition to the slightly different research question, is the different sample size and composition.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> While the microcensus covered 1 per cent of the population, 5,061 people were interviewed in this survey. In addition, there is the shortcoming that people from higher income groups tend to be overrepresented in opinion surveys because they're the ones who tend to participate in them.

## Subjective affiliation to a social stratum

Figure 15

There are various strata in our society. Some position themselves at the top of society, others at the bottom. Where do you position yourself on a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 indicates »bottom«, 4 »middle« and 7 »top«?

(%)

Top	2
Rather at the top	6
Upper middle	28
Middle	53
Lower middle	8
Rather at the bottom	2
Bottom	1

Values deviating from 100%: Don't know, No answer, Rounding. Basis: German-speaking population aged 18 and over, employed and formerly employed. Source: FES Mapping the Working Class, authors' presentation.

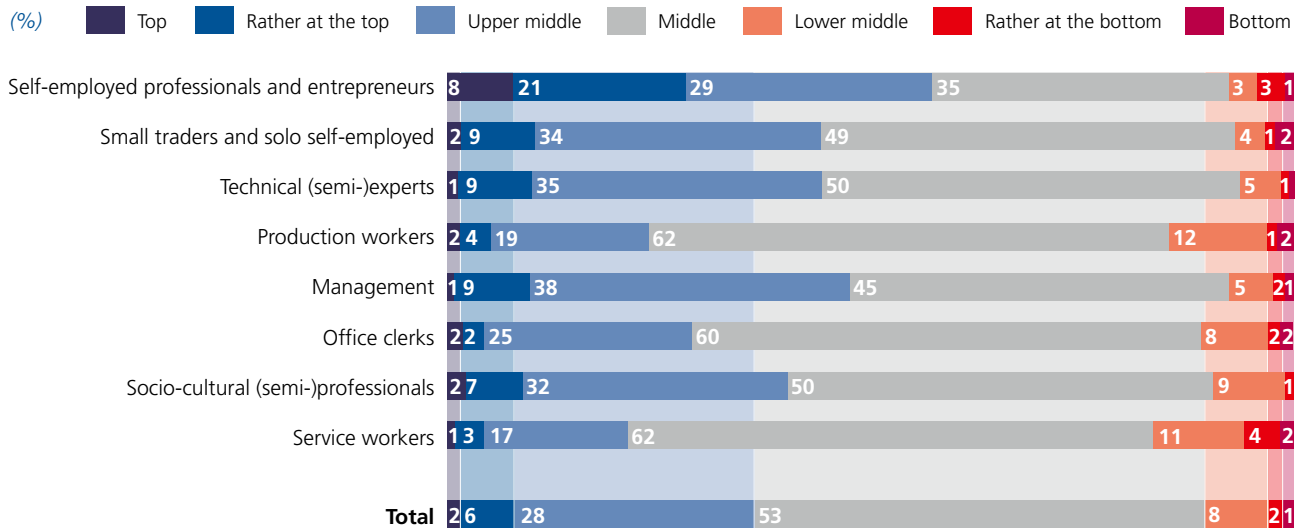
## Subjective social stratum affiliation

Figure 16

There are different strata in our society.

Some people place themselves at the top of society, others at the bottom.

Where do you place yourself on a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 is »bottom«, 4 is »middle« and 7 is »top«?



Values deviating from 100%: Don't know, No answer, Rounding. Basis: German-speaking population aged 18 and over, employed and formerly employed. Source: FES Mapping the Working Class, authors' presentation.

In terms of occupational classes all occupational groups other than self-employed professionals and entrepreneurs assign themselves mainly to the middle stratum. The occupational groups that we count as belonging to the working class mostly consider themselves as belonging to the middle stratum. Over 60 per cent of production workers and service workers are grouped here. The figure for office clerks is also 60 per cent, while for sociocultural and technical (semi-)experts, as well as the solo self-employed and small traders it is (just under) 50 per cent. Even 45 per cent of people in management occupations position themselves in the middle. Almost a quarter of those who categorise themselves in the lower middle stratum are production workers and a quarter are service workers. With regard to socio-demographic factors, different patterns emerge, which unsurprisingly show clear correlations with level of education and level of income. The higher one's educational qualifications or income from employment the more likely one is to assign oneself to the middle or upper middle stratum. Age also exerts some influence. Older people are more likely to assign themselves to the middle and the upper strata. Simplifying somewhat, Boomers or people approaching that age are more likely to be or to consider themselves upper middle class. Young people who have only just embarked on their working lives and thus have scarcely been able to accumulate assets are more likely to categorise themselves in the lower middle class compared with other age cohorts. Women tend to see themselves

more as in the middle stratum and, compared with men, less often in the lower middle stratum.

Taking membership of the working class as the basis we find a mirror image of the data. Out of those who feel themselves to be members of the working class 56 per cent categorise themselves as in the middle social stratum, 28 per cent even above that and only 16 per cent below it. By contrast, the majority (52 per cent) of those who do not see themselves as members of the working class consider themselves to be in the upper strata of society. However, 42 per cent of those who don't see themselves as part of the working class regard themselves as in the middle stratum.

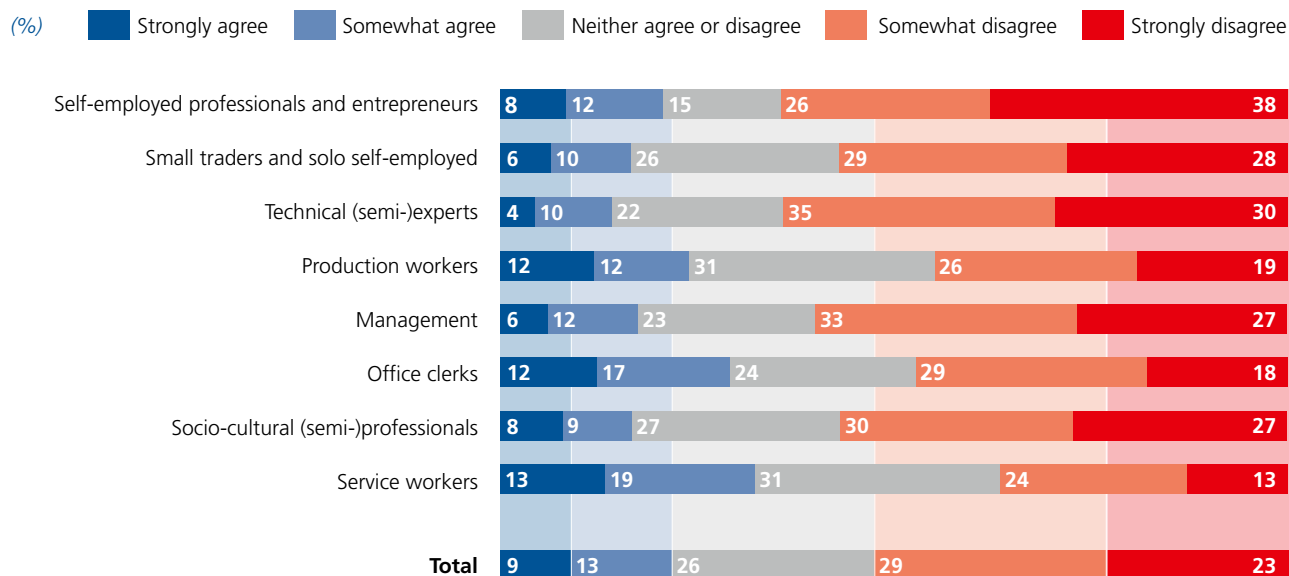
The findings of the quantitative survey lead one to conclude that the social status (promise of prosperity and societal recognition) that attaches to the middle class is enormously attractive. Both working class and middle class occupational groups regard themselves as in the middle of society.

Hand in hand with the matter of stratum or class affiliation and social status is the question of whether it will be retained in the future. In light of the debate on ubiquitous fears of moving down the social ladder our data show that such worries are less pronounced than the public debate might suggest. Only a fifth (22 per cent) are concerned, based on rapid changes in society, of being left behind. At the same time, just over half (52 per cent) of respondents stated they have no problems with change. Fears of losing social status are most severe among service workers

## Who is afraid of change?

Figure 17

To what extent do you agree with the following statement?  
»Society is changing so quickly that I'm afraid of being left behind.«



Values deviating from 100%: Don't know, No answer, Rounding. Basis: German-speaking population aged 18 and over, employed and formerly employed. Source: FES Mapping the Working Class, authors' presentation.

(32 per cent), office clerks (29 per cent) and production workers (24 per cent). Least worried about change are technical (semi-)experts (65 per cent) and self-employed professionals and entrepreneurs (64 per cent). But most management occupations (60 per cent), small traders/solo self-employed and socio-cultural (semi-)professionals (each 57 per cent) also consider themselves to be well equipped to cope with change. This is scarcely surprising because these occupational groups have a lot more resources than members of the working class to maintain their social status.

## THE WORKING CLASS'S VIEW OF SOCIETY

The question of social stratum affiliation was also taken up in the focus groups. On one hand, the picture emerging from the quantitative analysis was confirmed, because there is a clear effort on the part of the new working class to enter the middle class. On the other hand – in contrast to what the quantitative data might suggest – society is perceived rather as a pyramid than as an onion.

In the focus groups we showed the participants a graphic portraying the four different social models (see Figure 18 Diagram of different forms of society). In the first step they were asked what model of society currently matches German society. The participants vacillated between the pyramid (B) and the onion (C) as the most ap-

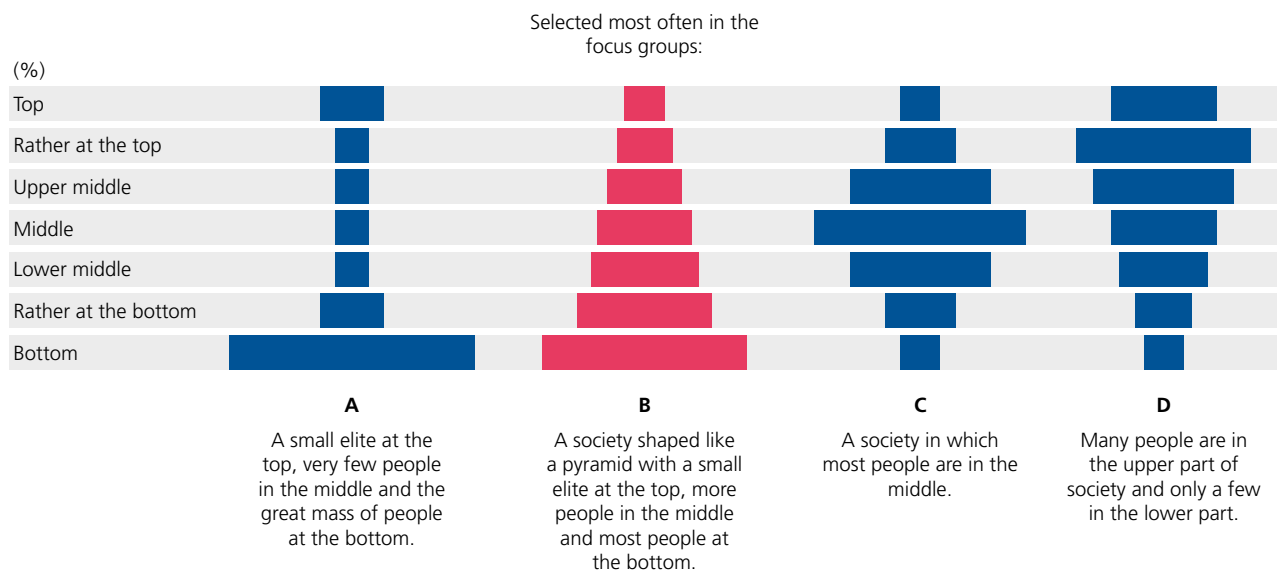
propriate representation. The majority of focus group participants ultimately opted for the pyramid, however, with a broad lower stratum at the base and tapering off towards the top. Thus it is characterised by only a smaller middle stratum and at the top there is a very small upper stratum. Here the qualitative and quantitative findings of the study deviate from one another: while we can derive pretty much an onion shaped society from the quantitative data, the qualitative data suggest a pyramidal social structure. The bases for this deviation lie, on one hand, in the structure of the sample and on the other – and much more importantly – in the perceptions of the focus group participants. There are two reasons for this.

First, a person's selection of a form of society is closely correlated with their own positioning in the system and thus with the social status attributed to them. Regardless of where one places oneself, a person's social status is secured in terms of their demarcation from what lies above and below them. If someone sees themselves rather as a member of the lower social stratum, what matters is their delineation from the lower strata. Production workers or service workers can lead a decent life with their hard earned wages. In order to legitimise their own social status necessarily there have to be a lot of people financially worse off than they are. Because under no circumstances does someone want to see themselves as a member of the lower stratum.

Second, there is a fundamental gap between people's perceptions and reality. Since 2012 the IPSOS study *The*

## Diagram of different forms of society

Figure 18



Source: Interview guidelines by KantarPublic (Verian), Project: Mapping the Working Class, authors' presentation.

*Perils of Perception* has investigated in more than 40 countries the cleft between perception and reality with regard to certain facts and come to the conclusion that they often diverge substantially. Examples include the proportion of immigrants in the total population, crime rates and the distribution of wealth. Those conducting the study cited polarised media debates as the main reason for this gulf. This media effect is also evident in our qualitative research: the focus group interviews were conducted shortly after the so-called Hartz IV reforms came into force, including the so-called »citizen's benefit« (replacing so-called »unemployment benefit II«), and the media debate portrayed a veritable mob of lazy unemployed.

In the second step, the participants were asked to place themselves in the selected form of society. The same pattern manifests itself here as in the quantitative survey. People see themselves as part of the middle stratum or the lower middle, but definitely not as part of the lower stratum. Because people know that there are many more people who are much worse off than them, but also that they are not that far away from that.

»So obviously there are also people who are much worse off, and let's face it, who live from hand to mouth, who after the 20<sup>th</sup> of the month don't really know how they're going to cope over the next 10 days or how they're going to afford everyday things, food, hygiene products etc.« (Industrial electrician, over 60 years of age, Hamburg)

»Take me for example, in that case I'd put myself probably in the middle, somewhere in the lower

middle ... OK, there's always someone lower than me, obviously people who flip burgers or I don't know who. Anyway my work is also replaceable. If I don't go to work any more, other people can take my place. That's what I think anyway.« (Female warehouse worker, 45 years of age, Essen)



»Yes, I think that old age poverty is a huge issue, too. If you think about it, many people who've worked all their lives, for example, especially in low paid jobs, for example, as cleaning ladies or whatever, who hardly earned anything« (Female HR employee, 64 years of age, Bochum).

In the last step the focus group participants were shown pictures of different occupations and asked to position them in the relevant model of society. In this task they exhibited not only a very clear understanding of their own position in society, but also those of other occupational groups. Overall, a pronounced awareness of »fine distinctions« was revealed. For example, when it came to social positioning, not only economic resources, such as income or wealth were referred to, but also other factors, such as level of education (semi-skilled work, skilled work or academic qualifications) or also lifestyle issues (such as how holidays or free time are spent).

A discrepancy was also identified between pay and value to society. For example, the groups discussed the fact that wages (especially for people at the lower margins of society) rarely tally with the value of an activity to society. People also criticised the fact that politicians had broken their promise to upgrade certain occupational groups – in other words so-called »key workers« – in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.



## VIEWS ON THE HIGHER AND LOWER STRATA OF SOCIETY

Not only did the focus group participants have a very clear assessment of their own position in society, but they had very differentiated views on higher and lower social strata. Figure 19 provides some examples to illustrate these impressions.

Overall the focus groups expressed fundamental empathy towards people lower down the social scale. The groups of people who attracted the most sympathy in all focus groups were single mothers. They were attributed almost hero status because despite their dual burden consisting of care work and holding down an often badly paid part-time job they managed to put all their efforts into giving their children the best life possible. They were closely followed by pensioners, who had worked their whole lives but now had to make do with a very modest pension. There was also basic sympathy with unemployment benefit recipients, if they were unemployed through no fault of their own. People fleeing war, violence and hunger were also the object of sympathy, in principle, and focus group participants accepted that they should be helped. This basic sense of empathy soon turned into outright rejection, however, if their sense of natural justice was violated. What this boiled down to was that there is no way single mothers and pensioners should be worse off than unemployment benefit recipients and refugees who receive social benefits but don't make an effort to get a job.

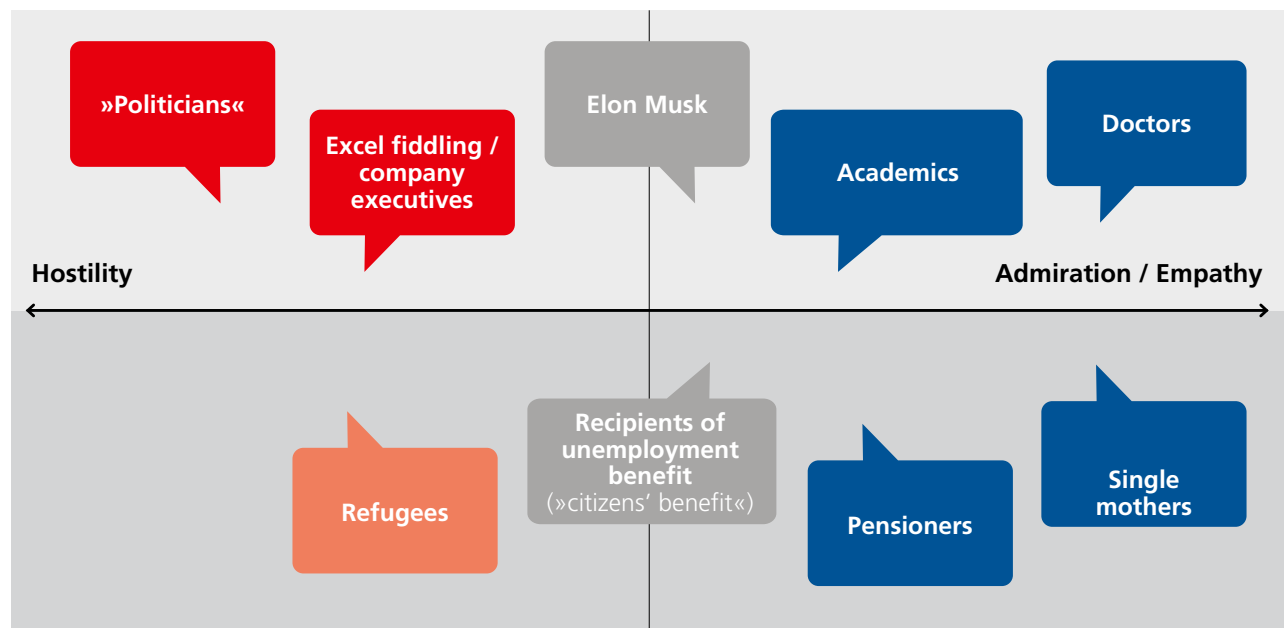
»I don't think that single mothers get enough.«  
(Carer in a care home, 61 years of age, Kiel area)

»I mean, we all go to work, and even they could go to work to some extent, even if it was only on a temporary basis. I just don't think enough is done about it, and for example if you look at a single mother with two children, who gets the wages you might expect, let's say, and doesn't need any help from the state, then again it's somehow unfair, because maybe she doesn't have enough money. (Medical assistant, 22 years of age, Nuremberg)

»So now pensioners, especially now women, who didn't go out to work in the past, so they really ..., and then they're probably on their own because their husband has already died, and then there's only ..., probably they've only got a small pension, because a woman only gets 60 per cent and probably she doesn't even get anything because she didn't work, so I think they, older women, are pretty poor.« (Sales woman in the textile industry, 57 years of age, Bochum)

»Exactly, but I don't think you have to make it depend on getting help somehow, but on the group. So what's the reason behind it, am I a pensioner and therefore I don't have enough, okay, yes, you have to change that. If I'm 20 years old and I'm on Hartz IV





Source: FES Mapping the Working Class, authors' presentation.

benefits and I'm too lazy to go to work, no, that's still far too much for you.« (*Catering service staff, 29 years of age, Hamburg*).

The unfairness outlined here also comes to light in our quantitative data. Some 48 per cent of respondents take the view that there is no incentive to get a job because many jobs scarcely pay more than unemployment benefit: 61 per cent of service workers, 57 per cent of production workers and 54 per cent of office clerks believe this to be the case. The most effective means of halting this downward spiral is to raise wages, whether by increasing the minimum wage, by financially upgrading certain occupational groups and/or by extending collective bargaining coverage.

Basic empathy is also expressed towards the upper social strata. Doctors are viewed particularly positively because their working conditions are tough (the shift system) and their responsibilities are enormous (life and death). No one wants to change places with the »gods in white coats« because they have virtually no free time and are under enormous stress. Similarly a deeply entrenched sense of the meritocratic principle means that graduates are also granted strong recognition because they have invested so much time in their education, as a result of which it's justified that they earn more. Elon Musk stands as a synonym for all super rich people and billionaires. People are ambivalent towards them: on one hand, people are awe struck by the wealth that they've acquired through their own efforts, but at the same time people are uncomfortable, wondering how it can be right that one person can accumulate so

much money. Two groups at the top of the social pyramid were frequently criticised: politicians and business executives. Both were found to be extremely alienated from the realities of people's lives and considerable scepticism was expressed concerning how much work they actually do. Company bosses who earn millions but have no idea whatsoever about the actual business, or the »Excel fiddlers«, consultants who earn an outrageous amount by playing with Excel spreadsheets, again without any knowledge of the company. Politicians are criticised in the same way, with the reproach that they are only in it for themselves and not for the majority.

»And I'd also say that the upper stratum must have a certain intelligence. You have to be honest about that, doctors, lawyers, notaries, whatever. You have to have some brains for that. And most of them enter these professions later. So of course they have to earn more. That's absolutely fine.« (*Production worker in the chemical industry, 50 years of age, Essen*).

»I always call them the Excel fiddlers, people who are, I don't know, 27 years old, have studied something, have a BA in something, and then want to tell me how to do my work when they've got no idea what they're doing, but get paid three times as much. That really annoys me.« (*Industrial electrician, 60 years of age or above, Hamburg*)

»Just like the former boss of Deutsche Bahn, and all the bosses at Deutsche Bahn, who are dismissed for incompetence, but still get a golden handshake.«  
(*Warehouse clerk in the textile industry, 60 years of age, Cologne*)

»There are a few high-flyers who earn money like there's no tomorrow, look at all our politicians, and loads of other jobs who don't actually know what's real anymore.« (*Insurance agent, 60 years of age or above, Leipzig*)

»In many cases, [politicians] are far removed from the reality of life. Very few people remember that they somehow went to university and didn't have much money.« (*Account manager e-commerce, 30 years of age, Bochum*) ←

# HOW PRONOUNCED IS PEOPLE'S CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS?

## QUICK FACTS

- Socio-cultural (semi-)professionals (43 per cent), production workers (37 per cent) and service workers (39 per cent) score highest when it comes to class consciousness. However, many people lack a sense of community and an understanding that more can be achieved through solidarity, both in politics and society.
- Trade unions are indispensable when it comes to the assertion of workers' interests – at least 60 per cent of respondents in all occupational classes agreed with this. However, only 18 per cent of respondents are trade union members. In the production sector, however, more than a quarter are union members.

## IS THE WORKING CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS OF ITS OWN CLASS?

The structural existence of a working class, together with a subjective sense of belonging does not automatically have consequences at the practical level, either politically or socially. Or to put it another way, there is no working class without class consciousness. But what is the state of class consciousness in Germany? What factors result in a strong class consciousness and who has it? If policies are to be made (once more) for the working class we need answers to these questions.

Awareness of being part of a social structural group with a common identity is a condition for collective action. Interest representation, for example, by trade unions, is one result of this sense of community. Obstructing that is what Andreas Reckwitz calls the »singularisation of the world of work« (Reckwitz 2019: 181ff). In jobs in cultural and knowledge work employees and their supervisors strive for the special and the outstanding – in other words, for what distinguishes them from others. As a result, there is a loss of solidarity. This is also reflected in the kind of work characteristic of so-called »routinised services« (according to Reckwitz, this is comparable with the occupational classes of service workers and production workers):

»I don't think that solidarity even really exists any more ... Yes, these days it's basically every man for himself. Everyone is just trying to get by.« (*Sewage treatment and energy plant installer, 60 years of age, Bochum*)

At the same time, the replaceability of the individual is characteristic of these occupational classes. This means that while on one hand these occupational classes are losing cohesion and solidarity, on the other hand they are gaining nothing by way of a unique selling point to make up for their lost community.

»It depends a lot on the sector, in my opinion. In other words many jobs are going in the direction of demanding absolute expertise and specialisation, with training, while for others it doesn't make any difference, anyone can do it.« (*DIY store salesman, 33 years of age, Bochum*)

»Yes, I don't think that any jobs are as secure as they used to be. They can kick you out absolutely any time. (*Saleswoman in the textile industry, 57 years of age, Bochum*)

»Nowadays the basic view is that anyone can be replaced easily. That's just how it is. No one is indispensable.« (*Catering service staff, 29 years of age, Hamburg*)

There is thus no space for collective agency in production and service jobs. A common class identity could fill this void. In order to test the extent to which such class consciousness still exists in the German population an index was developed to measure it, based on an index developed – after E.O. Wright – by the DFG research project »Class Structure and Class Consciousness in the Federal Republic of Germany« (Erbslöh et al. 1987).

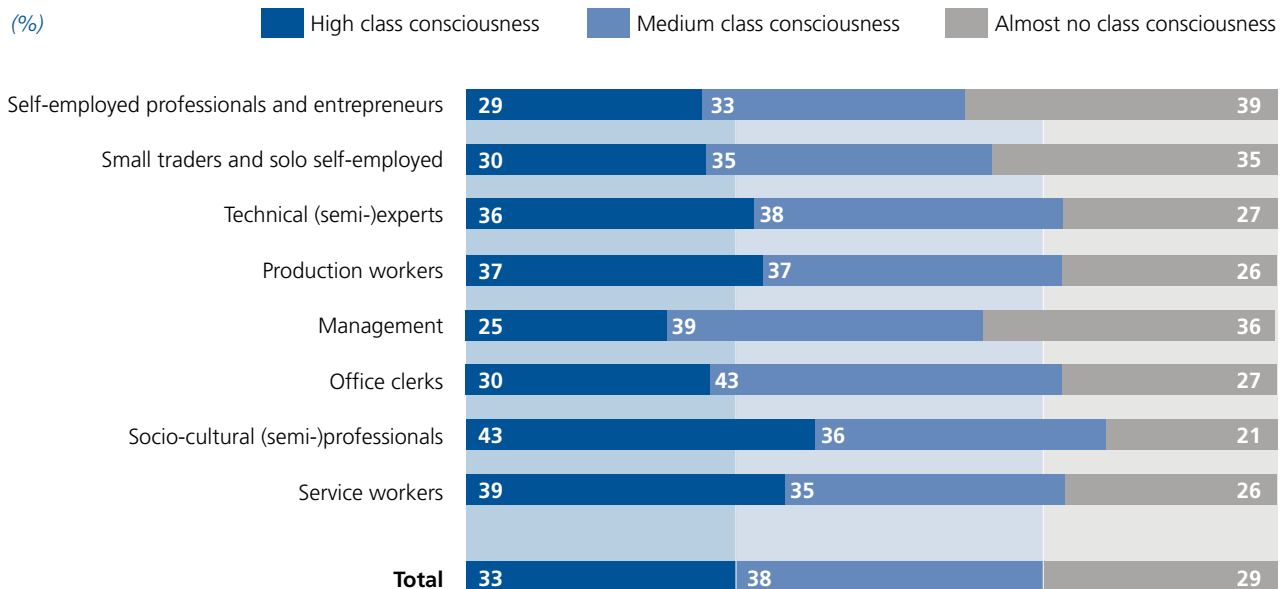
We have reproduced this index with the following questions:

**Question 1:** What if there was a long strike for better wages and working conditions that had a massive impact on daily life in Germany. What kind of outcome would you be hoping for?

- The workers achieve a large proportion of their demands.
- The workers achieve some of their demands, but also make major concessions.
- The workers achieve only a few of their demands.
- The workers return to work without achieving their demands.
- \*\* Don't know/No answer.

## Class consciousness index

Figure 20



The class consciousness index is based on index development – based on Wright – by the DFG research project »Class Structure and Class Consciousness in the Federal Republic of Germany« (Erbslöh et al. 1987). The index is based on the following questions:

- (1) »What if there was a long strike for better wages and working conditions that had a massive impact on daily life in Germany. What kind of outcome would you be hoping for?«
- (2) To what extent do you agree with the following statement? »Workers in our society need trade unions in order to assert their interests.«
- (3) To what extent do you agree with the following statement? »Big companies have far too much power in Germany.«

Values deviating from 100%: Don't know, No answer, Rounding. Basis: German-speaking population aged 18 and over, employed and formerly employed. Source: FES Mapping the Working Class, authors' presentation.

### Questions 2 and 3: Agreement with/rejection of the following statements:

- Workers in our society need trade unions in order to assert their interests.
- Big companies have far too much power in Germany.

The selected questions are used to create a statistical model to measure »class consciousness«.<sup>2</sup> According to this model two-thirds of respondents exhibit a high or medium class consciousness, and only 29 per cent have no or only a low level of class consciousness.<sup>3</sup> Among Oesch's occupational classes, self-employed professionals and entrepreneurs, with 29 per cent, and management, with 25 per cent, exhibit the lowest values on the class consciousness index. The highest values are found among socio-cultural (semi-)professionals, with 43 per cent, closely followed by service workers (39 per cent) and production workers (37 per cent). Based on a regression analysis, technical (semi-)ex-

perts, production workers, socio-cultural (semi-)professionals and service workers score significantly higher on the class consciousness index than self-employed professionals and entrepreneurs (5 per cent significance level).

Besides the occupational classes there are other variables that predict the outcome on the class consciousness index. In terms of educational qualifications, »no qualifications« has a greater negative effect on class consciousness than a general leaving certificate (*Hauptsabschluss*) or an elementary school leaving certificate (*Volksabschluss*), the so-called »*Mittlere Reife*« (usually awarded after ten years of schooling and roughly equivalent to the UK GCSE) results in higher values on the index, while obtaining the Abitur (roughly equivalent to the UK A levels) has no significant effect. Women also tend to have a higher class consciousness than men.

With regard to the working conditions already described in Chapter 2 on the status of work it appears that a high level of mental stress in one's job, but also a percep-

<sup>2</sup> The quality of the model was tested using a confirmatory factor analysis: Question 1 has a correlation of 0.442 to the superordinate factor »class consciousness«, question 2, 0.589 and question 3, 0.301. The quality criteria (CFI, RMSEA, and SRMR) testify to a very good model quality. The selected questions can therefore describe »class consciousness« well.

<sup>3</sup> Characteristics »no class consciousness«, »hardly any class consciousness« and »partly yes, partly no«.

tion that what one does is important to society can exert a positive influence on class consciousness. People who say that they are able to develop personally in their job and who are also happy to go to work score lower on the class consciousness index.

## EFFECTS OF TRADE UNION MEMBERSHIP

The relationship between class consciousness and solidarity-based collective action is reflected in trade union organisation. In Germany in 2019 16.3 per cent (Zandt 2023) of the working population were members of the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB). The distribution of respondents in our survey, 18 per cent of whom were trade union members, corresponds fairly closely to this. According to our survey, production workers (27 per cent) and technical (semi-)experts (26 per cent) are the most strongly represented, which also corresponds to the proportion of trade union members in IG Metall. Also worth noting is that service workers, at 21 per cent, and socio-cultural (semi-)professionals, 20 per cent, are the third and fourth largest groups. This is also reflected in the rising membership of the Ver.di trade union.

Membership of the DGB has been falling continuously for 30 years, however. While in 1994 9.8 million people were still trade union members, by 2022 this had fallen to 5.6 million. Nevertheless, the answers to the individual questions of the class consciousness index indicate very

high approval ratings: over half of socio-cultural (semi-) professionals, service workers and production workers strongly agree that trade unions are necessary for the assertion of workers' interests. In the focus groups there was some critical discussion of whether trade unions are too cosy with politicians and employers and whether individual unions compete to outdo one another.

»Maybe trade unions still exist [and they've got the workers' backs]. But the role they're playing is getting worse and worse. [...] What I mean is that these days they take the side of the employers and politicians a lot and they're not really with the workers any more.« (Sewage treatment and energy plant installer, 60 years of age, Bochum)

»They compete with other unions to see who can get the upper hand, but it's not about the workers. So it's not about working colleagues and representing their rights, but that the unions somehow make their presence felt and become big, become strong.« (Caretaker/facility manager, 47 years of age, Berlin)

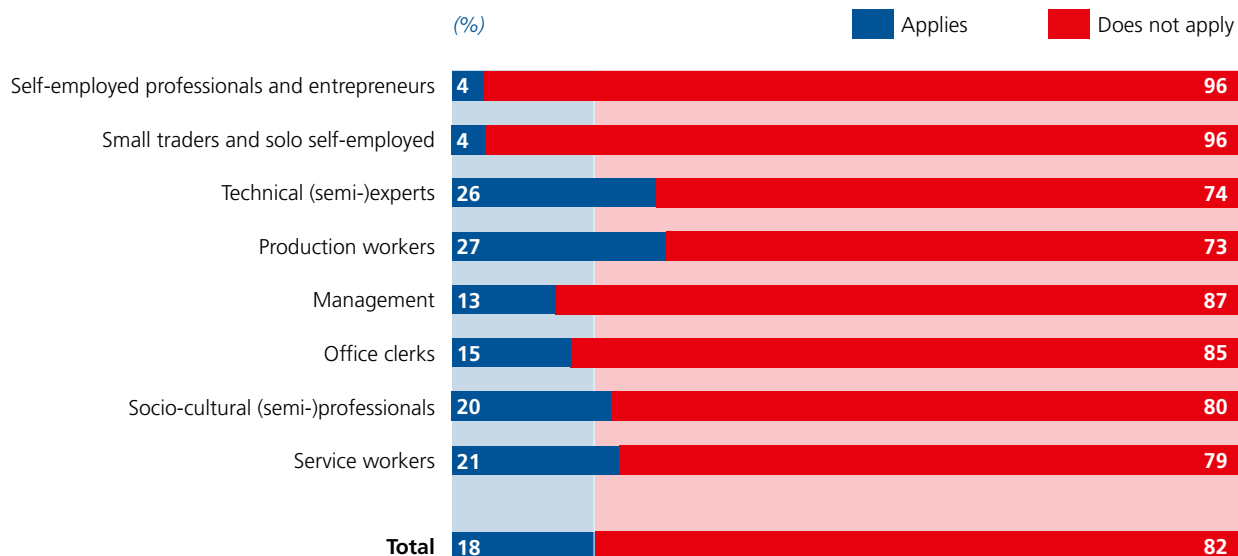
Solidarity and joint action are very important to respondents; indeed, they're at the very heart of trade union organisation:

»So I can only say that when people, when we're discussing things, [...], we're much stronger in the shift

## Trade union membership by occupational class

Figure 21

Does the following statement apply to you?  
»I'm a member of a trade union.«



Values deviating from 100%: Don't know, No answer, Rounding. Basis: German-speaking population aged 18 and over, employed and formerly employed. Source: FES Mapping the Working Class, authors' presentation.

if we all stick together, but we haven't done that. Get together, talk it over and then you down tools, so in other words now regardless of the unions, but I don't think people have recognized the [potential] strength.« *(Pensioner, former office administrator, 60 years of age, Berlin)*

»So the community of solidarity, if all six of us were to act as a team, team-oriented comes to mind, the cohesion, I don't think that's really there any more.« *(Logistics administrator, 60 years of age, Hamburg)*

It's important to note that sympathy with regard to labour disputes doesn't go beyond sectoral boundaries, which means that we can hardly talk of class solidarity.

»I always tell myself that it's pretty unfair that, for example, the railways are going on strike, even though there are, I don't know, geriatric nurses who've needed more pay for years or who've had to work for it. I always find it a bit ridiculous that these professional groups go on strike, I don't want to cast aspersions, but they don't necessarily need a pay rise. I think there are other professions that need it more.« *(Retail salesman, 32 years of age, Bochum)*

Statements can be made about relations between different variables and trade union membership only to a limited extent for individual occupational classes, because of course group sizes are very small. But it does appear that socio-cultural (semi-) professionals are more likely to be trade union members if they are only to some extent satisfied with their working conditions. This means that they consider trade unions to have the power to influence these working conditions positively. When it comes to service workers the perception that their work is socially important is the main aspect that has a positive effect on trade union membership. Trade union membership thus probably depends on an expectation workers need to come together to achieve more visibility and recognition for one's particular sector. So it's not just about higher wages, but also other aspects, although it's a fair assumption that more visibility and recognition will also result in higher earnings.

Despite falling membership working people see trade unions as an opportunity not only to have their interests represented in society, but also to raise the profile of their work. ←





# POLITICAL ATTITUDES AMONG THE WORKING POPULATION

## QUICK FACTS

- German society is not divided, but rather characterised by consensus. Nevertheless, there are policy areas in which society appears to be less united. For example, there is a fairly even distribution of different answers to the question of how to reconcile prosperity and climate protection. But there are not two blocs with opposite views confronting one another, as in a divided or polarised society. There are also areas that are even more strongly characterised by consensus, such as the strong approval of same-sex marriage.
- If the working population are divided up into three attitude groups – nationally oriented, open to the world, or neither one nor the other – it appears that just under half of all respondents belong to the so-called »flexible middle« (by contrast, 29 per cent are nationally oriented and 22 per cent open to the world). A national orientation is much more prevalent among production workers (44 per cent) and service workers (34 per cent), whereas openness to the world is higher than average among technical (semi-) experts (36 per cent) and socio-cultural (semi-)professionals (33 per cent).

## HOW POLARISED IS WORKING SOCIETY?

The question of how polarised German society really is in relation to attitudes on important political issues has arisen time and again in recent years and is hotly disputed. Social science research has come to the conclusion that we are not dealing with a split society, but that in many respects consensus reigns. Based on the well received *Trigger Points* by Steffen Mau, Thomas Lux and Linus Westheuser, we not only looked at the four arenas of inequality presented by the authors, but also calculated the degree of polarisation pertaining to a political statement assigned to each of the arenas (Mau et al. 2023: 65f). The polarisation index used measures the distribution of attitudes, with values between 0 and 1. The value 0 stands for complete agreement, implying that all respondents chose the same answer category. A value of 1, by contrast, indicates complete polarisation, in the sense that respondents are distributed half and half between the two extremes. A value of 0.5 indicates that respondents are evenly distributed across all answer categories. Measured values are often very far from the extremes of 0 and 1. It is interesting to compare the respec-

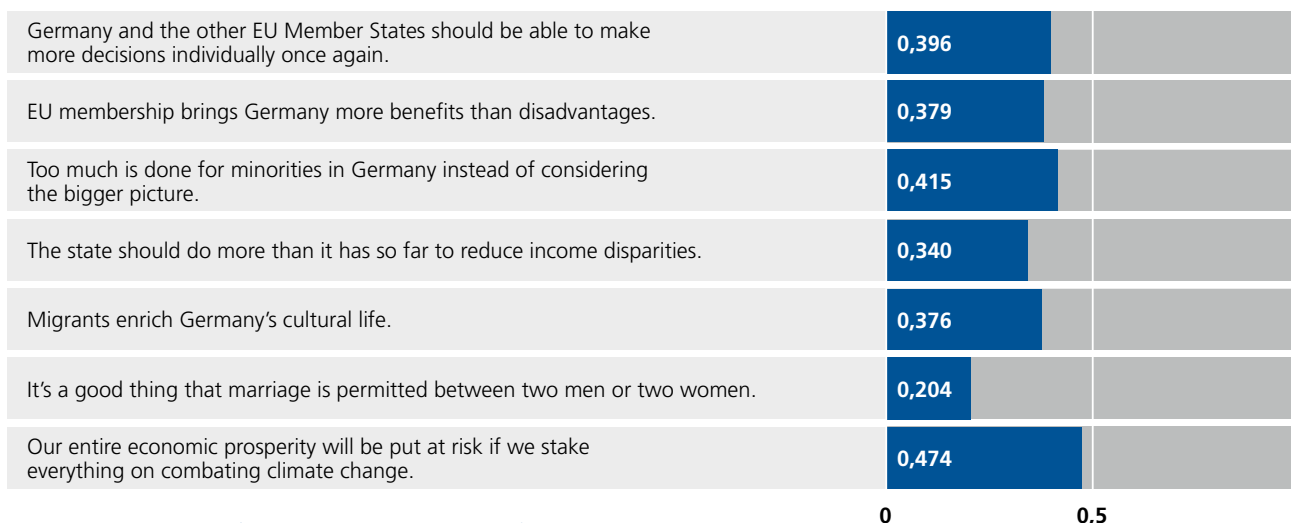
tive distributions, however. Higher values indicate a higher degree of polarisation (cf. van der Eijk 2001; Ruedin 2023). Looking at the seven questions on political attitudes we selected it turns out that all the values lie between 0 and 0.5 – in other words, in the range between complete agreement and even distribution across all categories. Values higher than 0.5 and heading towards complete polarisation do not occur. This tallies with the findings of other social science surveys, namely that, rather than a polarised society, it would be more accurate to talk of a society in which attitudes differ on certain issues. The biggest disagreement in this connection concerns the extent to which we might jeopardise economic prosperity by staking everything on combating climate change (level of polarisation 0.450). Attitudes on same-sex marriage point towards consensus, with by far the lowest level of polarisation (0.222).

Mau and his team of authors allocate the current societal conflicts to four arenas of inequality (Mau et al. 2023: 47f). The arena of today-tomorrow inequalities pertains to environmental conflicts and time conflicts of the kind that often arise in environmental and climate policy. Inside-outside inequalities concern issues of access and membership of the kind that often arise in connection with migration and integration policy. Top-bottom inequalities are about distribution conflicts such as we often encounter in relation to social, tax and distribution policy. The arena of us-them inequalities concerns recognition conflicts and anti-discrimination. These inequalities often arise in the area of equality and recognition policies. The last four



## Level of polarisation of political attitudes

Figure 22



PI = 0, complete agreement (all respondents in a single category).

PI = 1, complete polarisation (respondents distributed perfectly at the two extremes).

PI = 0.5, no agreement (respondents are distributed evenly across all categories).

Basis: German-speaking population 18 years of age and above, employees and former employees. Based on Mau et al. 2023; van der Eijk 2001 and Ruedin 2023. Source: Mapping the Working Class; authors' presentation.

statements in the table can each be assigned to one of Mau and his co-authors' four inequality arenas (and were also surveyed by them at a different point in time). In what follows we look more closely at these arenas in accordance with their level of polarisation or rather disagreement. We use the three other statements together with the question of the cultural enrichment of migration to form three broad segments of society, which we examine at the end of the chapter.

### ARENA OF TODAY-TOMORROW INEQUALITIES

Some 46 per cent of respondents strongly or somewhat agree with the statement »We put our whole economic prosperity at risk if we stake everything on combating climate change«; 29 per cent reject the statement to varying degrees and 26 per cent are undecided. Occupational classes with a higher level of formal education reject it more strongly. Self-employed professionals and entrepreneurs, as well as socio-cultural (semi-)professionals are more likely to disagree than agree. The threat to prosperity posed by climate protection policy is regarded as greatest by the new working class: 58 per cent of production workers and 50 per cent of service workers agree with the statement. It is hardly surprising that so many production workers agree, given that their jobs often depend on energy-intensive industries whose futures would be put in the balance. Fewer than one in five of them reject the statement.

At 0.45, the level of polarisation for this statement regarding today-tomorrow inequalities is the highest in our

survey. Steffen Mau and his co-authors conducted their survey almost exactly one year earlier, but arrived at a very similar value of 0.43.

### ARENA OF INSIDE-OUTSIDE INEQUALITIES

We surveyed attitudes related to access and membership on the basis of the statement »Germany's cultural life is enriched when migrants come here«. In 2022, the team behind *Trigger Points* found a polarisation level of 0.32 in relation to this statement – we found it to be somewhat higher, at 0.382.

Overall, 34 per cent see migration as culturally enriching, while 29 per cent take the opposite view.

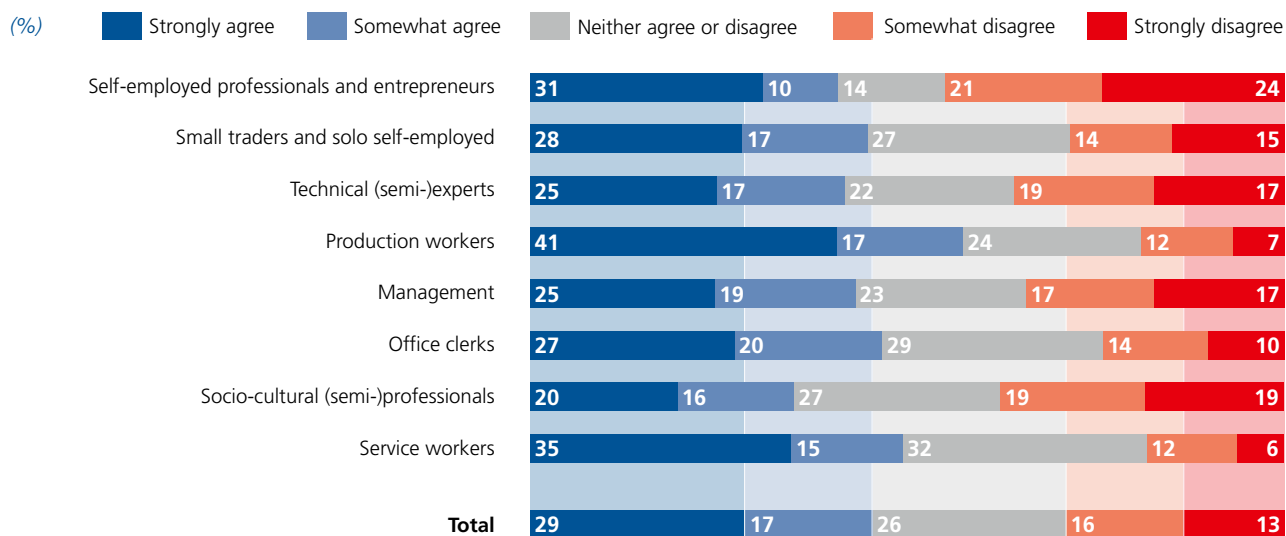
By contrast, more than a third are undecided. The strongest agreement once again comes from the occupational classes with a higher level of formal education and higher income: 47 per cent agreement among the socio-cultural (semi-)professionals, 44 per cent among self-employed professionals and entrepreneurs, and the same for technical (semi-)experts, with 39 per cent among management. Markedly below average agreement is found among service workers (21 per cent), production workers (26 per cent) and office clerks (28 per cent). The strongest disagreement with the statement can also be found among these three occupational classes with the lowest level of formal education: production workers at 40 per cent and service workers and office clerks each on 35 per cent.

## Occupational classes and climate change policies

Figure 23

To what extent do you agree with the following statement?

»We put our whole economic prosperity at risk if we stake everything on combating climate change«



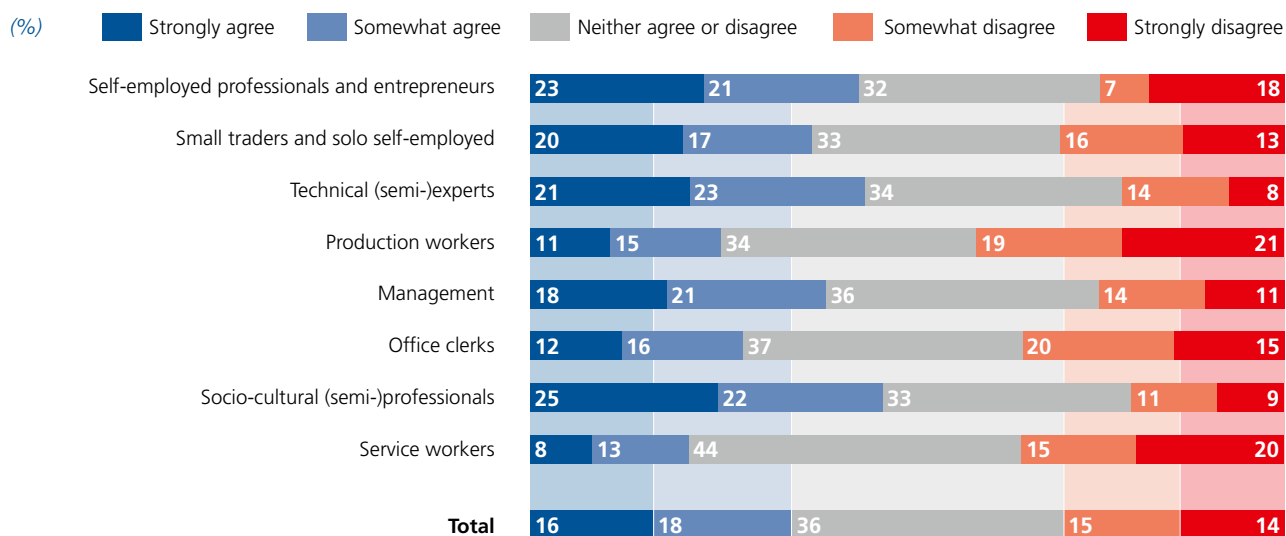
Values deviating from 100%: Don't know, No answer, Rounding. Basis: German-speaking population aged 18 and over, employed and formerly employed.  
Source: FES Mapping the Working Class, authors' presentation.

## Occupational classes and migration

Figure 24

To what extent do you agree with the following statement?

»Germany's cultural life is enriched when migrants come here«



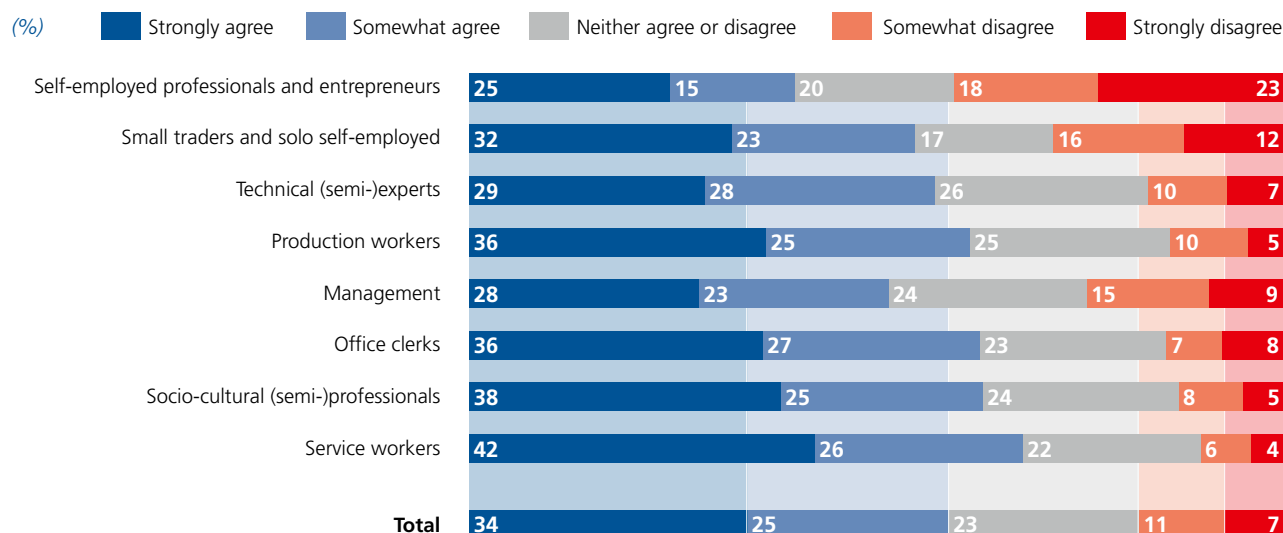
Values deviating from 100%: Don't know, No answer, Rounding. Basis: German-speaking population aged 18 and over, employed and formerly employed.  
Source: FES Mapping the Working Class, authors' presentation.

## Occupational classes and state intervention to reduce income disparities

Figure 25

To what extent do you agree with the following statement?

»The state should take measures to reduce income disparities more than in the past.«



Values deviating from 100%: Don't know, No answer, Rounding. Basis: German-speaking population aged 18 and over, employed and formerly employed. Source: FES Mapping the Working Class, authors' presentation.

## ARENA OF TOP-BOTTOM INEQUALITIES

Distributional and socio-political conflicts are seen as important factors in the development of class consciousness among the more disadvantaged occupational classes. But although social inequalities are criticised strongly and increasingly considered problematic, people's satisfaction with their own situation and belief in meritocracy mean that top-bottom conflicts tend to play a rather subordinate role in social disputes (Mau et al. 2023: 70ff).

We found a degree of polarisation of 0.331 for the statement »the state should take measures to reduce income disparities more than in the past.« This is the second lowest value for all the statements we examined. However, it is slightly higher than the polarisation found by Mau and his team a year earlier in relation to the same statement (0.26).

In total, 59 per cent of working people and former working people would like to see more state intervention to reduce income disparities; 23 per cent are undecided and 18 per cent take the opposite view. The strongest disagreement is found, slightly surprisingly, among the self-employed: 41 per cent of self-employed professionals and entrepreneurs, and 28 per cent of small traders and solo self-employed would not favour more action from the state for this purpose. This once again highlights internal differences among the self-employed, because another 40 per cent of self-employed professionals and entrepreneurs and even 55 per cent of small traders and solo self-em-

ployed do favour a reduction in income disparities by the state. The strongest advocates, however, are found among service workers (68 per cent), followed by socio-cultural (semi-)professionals (63 per cent), office clerks (63 per cent) and production workers (61 per cent).

## ARENA OF US-THEM INEQUALITIES

Conflicts about recognition and discrimination often result in questioning or criticism of one's own behaviour. They are thus often regarded as highly conflictual and emotionally fraught. It is thus striking that we found the lowest level of polarisation – 0.222 – with regard to the statement »it's a good thing that marriage is permitted between two women and two men«. The survey for the book *Trigger Points* even found a value of 0.17. Clearly there is very strong consensus on this issue.

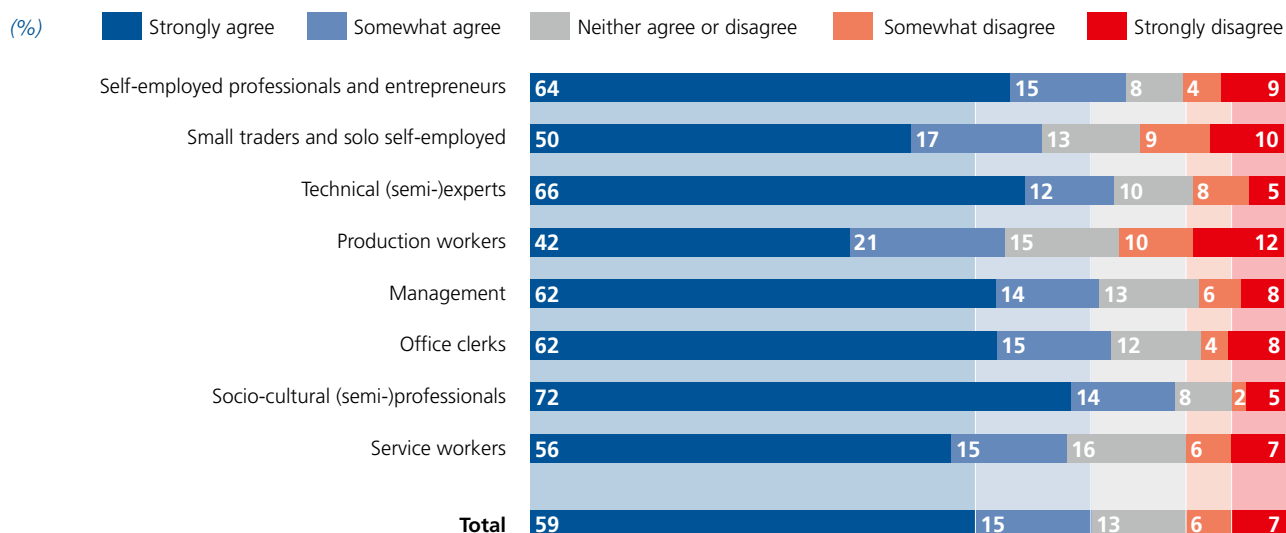
A look at the occupational classes and their attitudes to same-sex marriage similarly shows a high level of approval. In total, 74 per cent of all respondents agree, while only 13 per cent disagree with the statement. The strongest disagreement is found among production workers (22 per cent) and small traders and solo self-employed (19 per cent). But even in these two groups a clear majority of people welcome the possibility of marriage for homosexual couples. The strongest agreement is found among socio-cultural

## Occupational classes and same-sex marriage

Figure 26

To what extent do you agree with the following statement?

»It's a good thing that marriage is permitted between two women and between two men.«



Values deviating from 100%: Don't know, No answer, Rounding. Basis: German-speaking population aged 18 and over, employed and formerly employed. Source: FES Mapping the Working Class, authors' presentation.

(semi-)professionals, more than three-quarters of whom favour same-sex marriage.

Attitudes towards sexual diversity have changed substantially in Germany in recent decades. But we might well ask whether such a value transformation has also occurred in relation to other issues of recognition and anti-discrimination. For example, we found the second-highest level of polarisation in relation to the fairly vague statement »Too much attention is paid to minorities in Germany instead of looking at the bigger picture«. The value of 0.406 indicates that responses to this statement vary widely. Furthermore, in political debate, questions of recognition and anti-discrimination (us-them inequality) are often linked to questions of belonging and access (inside-outside inequality arena).

### SOCIAL ATTITUDE GROUPS BY OCCUPATIONAL CLASS

The political statements from the four arenas of inequality exhibit different levels of polarisation. Although the range of opinion is considerable it would be wrong to talk of a societal split in any of these arenas. The sharpest disagreement is evident on the issue of the threatened loss of prosperity due to climate (change) policy. There is less disagreement when it comes to conflicts of distribution and

belonging. The strongest tendency towards consensus relates to the statement on recognition of sexual diversity. Looking at occupational classes it appears that political attitudes are differentiated primarily between the occupational classes of the highly educated and well paid middle stratum and those of the new working class, in other words those with a lower formal education and a poorer financial situation. In particular among production workers and service workers larger proportions of people are more concerned about prosperity losses than about climate change, do not regard immigration as culturally enriching and would like to see more state intervention to reduce income disparities.

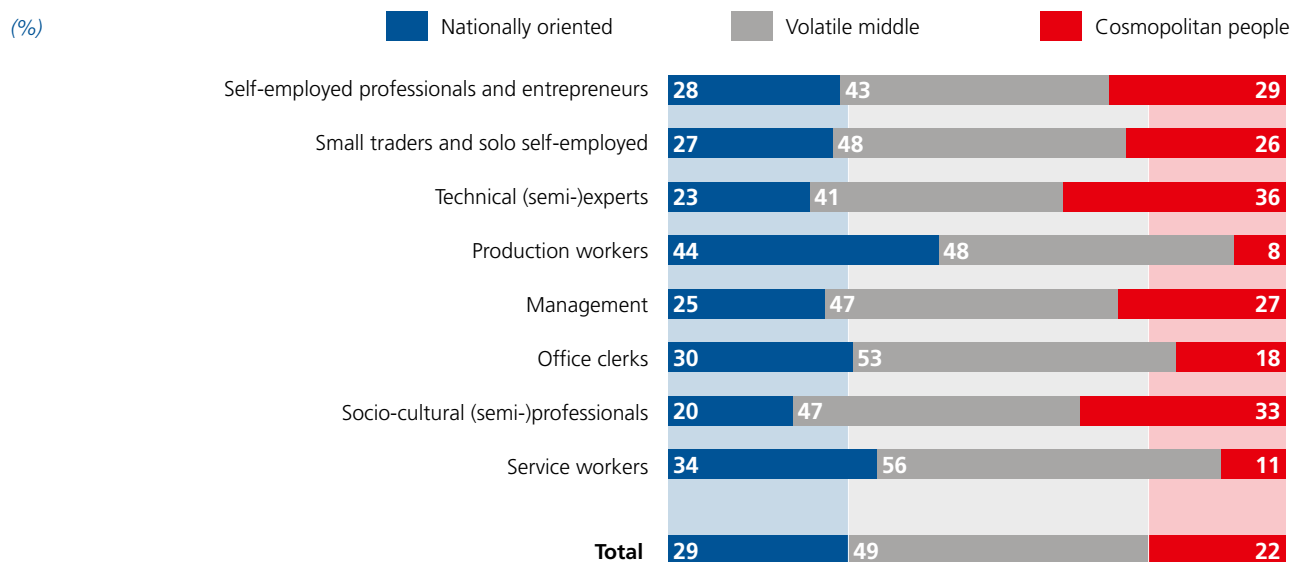
Apart from with regard to the statement on same-sex marriage, which enjoys majority support (and across all occupational classes), the middle answers (»neither agree nor disagree«) tend to make a strong showing, which by the way also refutes any notion of a divided society. Next we shall take a look at the extent to which this also applies to issues arising from a generally national or cosmopolitan orientation on the part of the working population.

## Social attitude groups by occupational class

Figure 27

People were grouped together in terms of their social attitudes on the basis of four statements:

- Germany and the other EU countries should be able to take more decisions individually again.
- EU membership brings Germany more benefits than disadvantages.
- Too much attention is paid to minorities in Germany instead of looking at the bigger picture.
- Germany's cultural life is enriched when migrants come here.



Values deviating from 100%: Don't know, No answer, Rounding. Basis: German-speaking population aged 18 and over, employed and formerly employed. Source: FES Mapping the Working Class, authors' presentation.

## SOCIAL ATTITUDE GROUPS

Based on earlier investigations (see Faus/Storks 2019) we undertook a segmentation of the working population using levels of agreement with four political statements:

- Germany and the other EU Member States should be able to make more decisions individually once again;
- EU membership brings Germany more benefits than disadvantages;
- Too much is done for minorities in Germany instead of considering the bigger picture;
- Migrants enrich Germany's cultural life.

Those who largely support immigration, who do not have the feeling that too much attention is paid to minorities or who speak out in favour of the European Union were allocated to the cosmopolitan group. Those who strongly and uniformly maintain the opposite opinion were allocated to the nationally oriented group. Belonging to the flexible middle are those who position themselves less definitely or who respond to the statements in a more nuanced way. This volatile middle amounted to around half of all respondents also in earlier surveys. In our survey, too, 49 per

cent of the employees and former employees we surveyed could be allocated to the volatile middle.

In our investigation the nationally oriented group totalled 29 per cent and that of cosmopolitans 22 per cent. In earlier surveys these two groups came out more or less on a par, at about a quarter each. In recent years, however, there has been a slight shift in the direction of a nationalist orientation. Affiliation to these two positions is often clearly differentiated on the basis of education and income. People with a higher formal education and higher income are more likely to be found in the cosmopolitan group, while the more nationalist group attracts more people on low incomes and low formal education. Given that education, income and occupational classes are correlated there is also a link between occupational classes and this societal segmentation.

The volatile middle represents the largest group in all occupational classes, but particularly among service workers (56 per cent) and office clerks (53 per cent). In the case of production workers what stands out is that while 44 per cent have a national orientation, a mere 8 per cent found their place among the cosmopolitans. There is also a stark gap among service workers, 34 per cent of whom have a national orientation, but only 11 per cent are cosmopolitans.



tans. The situation is a lot less black and white among office clerks, who are differentiated more closely to the average: 30 per cent are nationally oriented as against 18 per cent who are cosmopolitan.

A lot more cosmopolitan people are found, by contrast, among technical (semi-)experts (36 per cent cosmopolitan vs 23 per cent nationally oriented) and socio-cultural (semi-)professionals (33 per cent cosmopolitan vs 20 per cent nationally oriented). Among the self-employed professionals and entrepreneurs, small traders and solo self-employed and in management, on the other hand, the two groups are more balanced.

## DIFFERENCES IN POLITICAL ATTITUDES BY OCCUPATIONAL CLASSES

Our investigations show that there are fairly striking differences between occupational classes. Belonging to an occupational group thus appears to correlate with political attitudes. For example, production workers and service workers, who we characterise together as the new working class, are more nationally oriented than members of other occupational classes. They are also among the strongest advocates of state measures to reduce income disparities and are more critical of immigration than other occupational classes and are much more apprehensive about the potential harm to prosperity from climate protection policy. This analysis has been unable to clear up the question of how far this class effect can be explained by differences in education and income, however. Mau and his co-authors also come to the conclusion that class differences continue to matter in post-industrial conflicts, although they also point out »that we are dealing here with relative and gradual differences, not a fundamental antagonism« (Mau et al. 2023: 390). Classes should not be confused with »mobilised political camps« (Mau et al. 2023: 390).

Like the team around Steffen Mau we observed that members of the new working class linked many political issues and conflicts, such as immigration, with aspects of fair distribution and material scarcity (Mau et al. 2023: 391). The initial position of focus group participants from the new working class was in principle very social and solidarity oriented. The basic right to asylum was not called into question and they were at pains to emphasise that help should be given to people who need it. Having said that it quickly became clear that they were concerned about unfair distribution of social benefits as others had been paying into the system much longer but, in their view, do not benefit from it as much. Some also made the point that this is a dilemma that can't really be resolved.

»So I definitely think the refugees, take the Ukrainians. To put it bluntly, you should definitely help them when they come here from the war zone. You should definitely give them space, support them, also with money and everything, so that they're more or less OK here, but sometimes I hear stories

about what they're getting and it's just unfair to our people; for example, what I saw in the news, where people have to leave their own homes because rents are so expensive and they can't afford it, and then space is made for Ukrainians, and they're left standing there with all their gear. I think that's unfair, yes.« (*Hairdresser, 29 years of age, Essen*)

»My big problem is simply that [immigrants] often benefit more than pensioners who've paid into the system for years; they haven't actually paid into our tax system, so in theory they can't benefit from it either, in my opinion. They should be helped, for God's sake, but it can't be right that a grandmother who's paid into the system, whether in the West or the East, had children, took care of everything, then ends up with less than someone who immigrated and who's better off. I just can't understand that.« (*Butcher, 25 years of age, Leipzig*)

Jana Costas makes similar observations in her field study of cleaning staff and writes about »dramas of dignity« that »trigger and [...] exacerbate divisions and conflicts«, thus preventing cleaners from bonding as a group (Costas 2023: 210). The upshot is that, although we find that political attitudes and arenas of inequality reflect occupational classes, we cannot speak of active class conflicts. Authors such as Klaus Dörre thus talk of a »demobilised class society« that lacks political representation. Right-wing populists are able to exploit this gap to stir up sections of the working class to »lift themselves up by running others down« as a »reaction to inequality, insecurity and social degradation« (Dörre 2019: 40). Policies aimed at dealing with class issues must therefore start with the structural reasons for people's experiences of inequality, insecurity and social degradation. The arenas of inequality are polarised and susceptible to mobilisation to different degrees. Conflicts are often interrelated, however, and have a distribution conflict at their core. For example, the controversial trade-off between prosperity and climate protection also concerns access to resources, not to mention recognition of different lifestyles. It will be possible to develop a sustainable set of policies for working people only when these interdependencies are recognised and measures introduced to tackle the material and social needs of the various classes. ←

# SUMMARY AND PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The very term »new working class«, which is often used these days, indicates that the working class has changed considerably in recent decades: it has become more diverse and includes not only production workers but also service workers. Our study also shows that the working class today comprises a very differentiated group of employees who tend to position themselves in the middle of society. The working class are the people who »keep the show on the road«. Whereas in the past the term meant those who did physical labour, often in crafts or manufacturing, nowadays the service sector is very much part of it. Taking into consideration also financial situation and stressful working conditions, however, office workers, small traders and the solo self-employed should not be left out. There are gradations of pay and societal recognition in all occupational classes. In fact people are very aware of the striking differences within each job group, depending on the employer, or whether the employees are covered by a collective agreement. Such diversity may be one of the reasons there is so little political mobilisation across occupational classes. On the other hand, that doesn't mean that class consciousness no longer plays a role. On the contrary, people are extremely sensitive on the subject of what they perceive to be fair and what not.

»But I go to work really so that I have enough to live on and that doesn't really leave room for luxuries, and I suppose that also is what working class means to me.« (Hairdresser, 40 years of age, Leipzig)

This well describes the tightrope that many members of the working class have to walk on an everyday basis. Their

pay is enough to cover their daily »nut«, perhaps with one holiday a year, albeit one that they have to save up for. They are scarcely prepared for the »exigencies of life« (Friedrichs 2021: 16) because their monthly wage is scarcely sufficient to enable them to build up any assets, as we explain in the chapter »Working Society«. A broken washing machine, an unexpected car repair or work absences because of illness with their attendant loss of income impose a major financial challenge on them. This also has knock-on effects on their time and social resources, such as housing and pensions.

While our data show that most (two-thirds) workers are satisfied with their jobs, their working conditions and their position in society the surveys show that the policy measures needed to tackle this are not confined to labour policy but encompass societal life as a whole, ranging from social policy through pension provision to the issue of whether employment models are adequate to take account of current distributions of roles and tasks in society. In conclusion we would like to emphasise the following five points:

- »I know I'm at risk of falling over the edge« worries a 60 year old textile production worker about his financial situation. In order to get a grip on this sense of teetering on the edge people need a functioning welfare state and an economic policy that treats workers not merely as means to an end, but as key elements in the national economy. Among other things this requires strong labour representatives and a policy that promotes collective agreements in all sectors. And it isn't just a matter of increasing social benefits. Besides better pay, first of all it's all about security of living conditions: an adequate pension after a working life punctuated by parental leave and sick leave, and a housing policy that ensures affordable rents for people on medium or lower incomes. Among the working class this applies in particular to service workers, who disproportionately live in rental accommodation.
- »To be honest, even if I won the lottery I would still go to work because frankly I just need it.« This is what a 28 year old female chimney sweep said about her relationship to her job. People's jobs mean more to them than just a way of earning money. They are all about personal development and a feeling of doing something worthwhile for society. People are proud of their work, and especially those in jobs that keep the whole show on the road feel that they get too little respect for their work from politicians and employers. Individual policy measures of course are not enough to do much about



people's desire for more esteem. Instead what is needed is a fundamental transformation of political communication and treating people's achievements with respect. If we are going to overcome this alienation between the political elite and the people, policymakers need to address the reality of people's lives and to become more representative overall.

- »When I look at how things are today, I see men working full time, and many women are also working full time and their kids are all latchkey children.« Even though this quote from a 60 year old care worker is a bit on the social conservative side it gets to the heart of everyday working class reality: in order to make ends meet even a full-time wage is no longer enough, at least for a family. Women's employment rate has risen constantly, also as a deliberate policy aim. But that means less time for unpaid care work, which ratchets up the time pressure in everyday life. That is no doubt why new working time models, such as the four-day week, are so popular in the survey, needless to say without loss of wages, given the high cost of living. More time for care work and some sort of balance are available only to people who have »more than enough« anyway. Reconciliation of work and family life is regarded as very important and is ranked at almost the same level as a secure job and an adequate income. Policies for the benefit of the working population cannot avoid tackling the issue of time. Especially in relation to occupations characterised by a heavy mental or physical load or stress there has to be a discussion about easing people's burdens with more free time.
- »Definitely, that's the balancing act when it comes to work ... mum is tired out, but no, she has to keep going whatever happens.« Thus a teacher from Cologne describes a key feature of certain occupational groups in the working class: service workers in particular report periods of intense mental and physical stress. Policymakers really need to do something about this, boosting staff ratios in occupations involving close contact with people and increasing funding. This applies in particular to occupations in care and education, which depend very much on public funding and thus often have little financial room for monetary improvements. Better pay, better (staffing) resources, relief and further training opportunities are urgently required and do not come free of charge. This has to be campaigned for and political majorities have to be found for it.
- »Recognition in the sense of people showing that you're appreciated, whether it's your employer, politicians, on TV, that people simply make you aware that they appreciate what you actually do and achieve for this world. That would also be nice.« This is what a medical assistant from Nuremberg told us. Especially the people who regard their work as particularly important to society as a whole feel that what they do is not sufficiently appreciated. The negative sides of their work, such as

inadequate pay, the stresses that make it unlikely they will be able to carry on in the same job until retirement, not to mention the lack of prospects are often accepted to a certain extent, because they are working in an occupation they chose. Honest and constant appreciation and recognition are thus equally important if we want to address the concerns of the people who keep the country running (whether paid or unpaid). But it has to be more than mere lip service. Something actually has to be done to improve their situation, at least in the medium term.

Finally, we can say that also workers from the new working class – in other words, production workers and service workers, but also office clerks and solo self-employed, who often feel under pressure in terms of working conditions and financial situation – generally like what they do for a living. Paid employment is a source of income, often a means of subsistence, but it also confers a sense of identity. Having said that, many people find their everyday lives, which are strongly shaped by their work if only because of the amount of time it takes up, stressful and demanding. The feeling that despite so much – sometimes arduous – work it's still only just enough to keep them from falling off the tightrope is evident in the quotes from the focus groups, as well as in the survey data. Satisfaction with their working lives can quickly turn into incomprehension and even social exclusion if people start to get the impression that other groups are getting preferential treatment and that their own work is being overlooked or not appreciated. This is where policymakers need to step in if they want to come up with »policies for the working middle«. Having said that it is crucial that this does not involve the exclusion and denigration of those who cannot or no longer work. The easy option of playing off people with little money against people with even less is not only crass and fuel for right-wing populist rhetoric, but it doesn't solve the problem of social inequality.

The notion of the »working middle« is actually a good description of working society in Germany today. On one hand, because the overwhelming majority of people see themselves as somewhere in the middle of society, but on the other hand because work continues to play a central role in people's identities. The term »working class« may seem fusty and outdated to many, but many people still feel attached to it, whether because of tradition, pride or simply a sense of commitment to work and in life and a desire to get on. The middle and work are thus both regarded positively as poles of identity and also have a connecting link, a sense of having a pervasive effect on society and playing an important role. People work so that they can be in the middle. Policymakers must therefore create the necessary conditions for this by means of a class policy for the working middle. Such a policy needs to revive demobilised distribution conflicts and not merely pay lip service to recognition and dignity, but actually do something to bring about real improvements for the people who keep the country running. ←

## ILLUSTRATIONS

Graphic recording of focus group discussions within the framework of the project. »Mapping the Working Class«, created by Anne Lehmann, Copyright: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung

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This study shows, based on qualitative and quantitative findings, that the working class today comprises a very differentiated group of workers who tend to position themselves in the middle of society and are mostly satisfied with their work. However, the study also presents clear ideas about what should change in terms of recognition, pay and working hours.

The new working class are the people who »keep the show on the road«. In the past, this was generally understood to mean physical workers, often in crafts or manufacturing, but nowadays it definitely includes the service sector, too. But there are gradations in pay and social recognition in all occupational classes. People are acutely aware of the fact that there are big differences within job groups. This diversity may be one of the reasons why there is hardly any political mobilisation across occupational classes. However, this does not mean that class consciousness no longer plays a role. On the contrary, there is a very keen sense of what is fair and what is not.

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