

TRADE UNIONS AND RIGHT-WING POPULISM IN EUROPE

Country Study Germany

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January 2023

FRAMEWORK

THE SYSTEM OF LABOUR RELATIONS

Labour relations in the Federal Republic of Germany are characterised by a dual system, with works councils acting as bodies representing the interests of employees at the company level and trade unions taking over supra-company representation of interests, collective bargaining with companies and employers' associations, and participating in a social or "conflict" partnership (Müller-Jentsch 2017: 23). Works councils are elected by all employees, "designed for consensus and cooperation, and committed to company harmony" (Müller-Jentsch 2014: 517). Their legal foundation, the Works Constitution, provides for a tiered system of rights, including the right to co-determination, participation, and information. For example, works councils have the right to co-determination in matters related to personnel and workplace and workflow design. However, they only have the right to information when it comes to economic matters (Müller-Jentsch 2014: 519f.). In the public sector, personnel councils have similar rights, though grounded in a different legal foundation.

In the context of policies on collective bargaining, trade unions ideally negotiate sector-wide agreements. In recent years, however, the power of the sector-based collective bargaining system has eroded, in particular, due to the reduced organisation of employers' associations. Thus, the amount of people engaged in workplaces without collective agree-

ments has grown, and company-specific 'in-house' collective agreements have risen in importance (Ellguth/Kohaut 2022). The rising prevalence of these 'in-house' agreements is also described as the "corporatisation of labour relations". The system of industrial relations in Germany has been in a state of upheaval since the 1990s due to globalisation, stagnating economic growth, and the far-reaching transformation of capitalism. This has led to a weakening of trade union resources and co-determination in the workplace (Dörre et al. 2017: 220–224). Meanwhile, with the help of political programs such as the Agenda 2010, the social security net, industrial relations, and previous market-limiting institutions were pressured to compete and change throughout the country. Consequently, the German arrangement, which consists of labour law, collective bargaining autonomy, co-determination, and a social safety net, has withered. Meanwhile the principle of competition has returned to all possible sectors and areas of life; moreover, company management systems and internal structures have been financialised and re-oriented toward capital markets (Dörre et al. 2017: 220–224).

Despite the formal separation between the works councils and the trade unions, in practice, the two are closely linked. For example, the vast majority of

works council members are also members of a trade union and are often involved in that union's organisation and collective bargaining decisions (Dribbusch/Birke 2019: 7). However, this "unionisation of works councils" (Schmidt/Trinczek 1999: 107) is limited to East Germany, where the separation between works councils and trade unions dates to the reunification in 1990 and has gradually been decreasing in more recent years (Röbenack/Artus 2015; Goes et al. 2015). Alongside the institutionalised works councils, many companies elect voluntary shop stewards who act as the trade union's point of contact in the company.

FORMS OF TRADE UNION ORGANISATION

The largest trade union umbrella organisation is the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB; *Deutsche Gewerkschaftsbund*). Founded in 1949, the DGB currently has approximately 6 million members and a gross level of organisation of about 14.3 per cent (Kim et al. 2022: 64). The number of DGB members has fallen to about half of its peak of 11.8 million in 1991, which was associated with the reunification of West and East Germany (Kim et al. 2022: 65). The DGB brings together eight trade unions, which are diverse in occupation and status: IG Metall (*Industriegewerkschaft Metall* – Industrial Union for Metalworkers) which, in addition to the metal industry, also organises workers in steel, electronics, textile, and wood industries and skilled trades industries and businesses); NGG (*Gewerkschaft Nahrung-Genuss-Gaststätten* – Union for Food, Beverages, and Catering); ver.di (*Vereinte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft* – United Services Union); IG BAU (*IG Bau-Agrar-Umwelt* – Industrial Union Construction, Agriculture, Environment); GEW (*Gewerkschaft Erziehung und Wissenschaft* – Union for Education and Science); EVG (*Eisenbahn- und Verkehrsgewerkschaft* – Railway and Transport Union); IG BCE (*Industriegewerkschaft Bergbau, Chemie, Energie* – Industrial Union Mining, Chemicals, Energy); and GdP (*Gewerkschaft der Polizei* – Police Union). Ver.di and IG Metall are the largest of these eight unions, with 1.9 and 2.2 million members, respectively. Together, these two account for 71 per cent of DGB membership (Greef 2021). The member unions of the DGB are non-denominational and ideologically and politically neutral. Nevertheless, in West Germany, a "privileged partnership" exists between the *Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands* (SPD; Social Democratic Party of Germany) and the DGB. However, this partnership has become fragile in the wake of the labour market reforms undertaken within the context of the Agenda 2010 package adopted by the

SPD and the Grünen (Greens) in 2005 (Dribbusch/Birke 2019: 7). The DGB is directly involved in key policy areas including labour market policy and social policy, as well as in corporatist mechanisms such as the Minimum Wage Commission and, most recently, in "concerted action" to address inflation and the energy crisis.

THE POLITICAL SYSTEM AND RIGHT-WING PARTIES AND MOVEMENTS

The Federal Republic of Germany is a federal, parliamentary representative democracy, governed by a coalition of the SPD, the Greens, and the libertarian *Freie Demokratische Partei* (FDP; Free Democratic Party) since September 2021. Additional important parties include the conservative *Christlich-Demokratische Union* (CDU; Christian Democratic Union) and *Die Linke* (The Left). The Left was formed in 2007 through the merging of the *Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus* (PDS; Party for Democratic Socialism) and the *Wahlalternative Soziale Gerechtigkeit* (WASG; Social Justice – the electoral alternative), which split from the SPD amidst its criticism of the Agenda 2010. The PDS succeeded the *Sozialistischen Einheitspartei Deutschlands* (SED; Socialist Unity Party of Germany) after the end of the *Deutsche Demokratische Republik* (DDR; German Democratic Republic). The right-wing populist party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD; Alternative for Germany) was founded in 2013. As of 2022, the AfD has representatives in the European Parliament, in 15 of 16 German state parliaments, and has been in the German *Bundestag* (national parliament) since 2017. In addition to the AfD, there are several other extreme right-wing parties, including the *Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (NPD; National Democratic Party of Germany), which is not represented in any German parliaments and is of marginal importance, and the locally active micro-parties *Der dritte Weg* (The Third Path), *Die Rechte* (the Right), *Freie Sachsen* (Free Saxons), and *Freie Thüringer* (Free Thuringians).

Founded in 2013 in the wake of the European economic and financial crisis as a primarily liberal-economic anti-Euro party, the AfD has since developed into an ethnonationalist, anti-immigration, anti-refugee, and, in some areas, extreme right-wing party rife with aggressive and anti-establishment rhetoric. Compared to other European countries where such parties have long been a part of the political landscape, the emergence and nationwide success of this right-wing populist party is a relatively new situation for the Federal Republic of Germany. Next to a current of neo-liberal economics, the AfD has had a

conservative and “*völkisch*”-nationalist tendency from its very beginning. The propensity for the latter was exemplified by Thuringian party leader Björn Höcke. Even though his ‘wing’ of the party was officially disbanded, this aspect of the AfD remains quite strong and has, in fact, become increasingly important over time. The party members on this side of the AfD spectrum maintain close ties to the New Right and extreme right, i.e., to the New Right think tank *Institut für Staatspolitik* (Institute for State Politics) and *Compact*, as well as to right-wing movements such as the *Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes* (PEGIDA; Patriots Against the Islamicisation of the Occident), an anti-asylum, anti-establishment extreme right movement founded in Autumn 2014 and succeeded by many local offshoots. PEGIDA was able to draw a crowd of 20,000 participants at a rally during the peak of its popularity in January 2015. Moreover, AfD actors maintain ties with the heterogeneous yet extreme and right-wing dominated *Querdenken* movement, founded in 2020 in protest of the government’s coronavirus pandemic mitigation measures.

The AfD’s economic and social policy agenda is highly disputed within the party itself. Its programme continues to be primarily economically liberal, while the ethnonationalist forces strive for a “national-social”, social-populist policy. They try to present themselves as the advocate for the “little people” and German workers, blaming “irresponsible immigration policies” for grievances such as child poverty, poverty among seniors, and unemployment (Kim et al. 2022: 68). The party’s discourse thus reinterprets the conflict over wealth distribution between those at the top and bottom of society as a conflict between insiders and outsiders, i.e. between motivated Germans and unmotivated foreigners. This can be seen in Björn Höcke’s speech in 2018: “The social question of the day is not primarily the distribution of national wealth from top to bottom or from the old to the young. The new social question for Germany in the 21st century is the question of distribution of national wealth from the inside to the outside” (Hank 2018). Only in 2020 did the AfD finally adopt a social and pension policy programme, the result of a laborious compromise between economic liberals and ethnonationalist forces (Kim et al. 2022: 68). Nevertheless, the inner-party struggle for direction continues (Kim et al. 2022: 70).

In an effort to present itself as the party of the workers and the “little people”, the AfD has made repeated attempts to gain influence in the workplace by attacking trade unions head-on as corrupt and part of

the establishment (e.g. Köhlinger/Ebenau 2018: 6), presenting itself in contrast as a genuine representative of workers. The poster child for this effort, long-time SPD and IG BCE member Guido Reil, joined the AfD because of Germany’s refugee policy and was elected to the European Parliament in 2019 (Kim et al. 2022: 70). The AfD has repeatedly joined protests, including those against the closure of the Opel manufacturing plant in Eisenach in 2018 and the Siemens site in Görlitz in 2019, attempting, each time, to instrumentalise the events for their cause (see Mayr/Rietzschel 2018).

In addition, there are a number of alternative workers’ associations, including *Arbeitnehmer in der AfD* (AiDA; Workers of the AfD) founded in 2014, *Alternative Öffentlicher Dienst* (AÖD; Alternative Public Service) in 2015, and *Alternativer Arbeitnehmerverband Mitteldeutschland* (ALARM; Alternative Employees’ Association of Central Germany) in 2017. These associations boast slogans such as “Social without turning red” and “Red for workers is now blue”. However, they are largely inactive and have not found a foothold in the workplace (Kim et al. 2022: 70).

ELECTION RESULTS OF THE “ALTERNATIVE FOR GERMANY”

In the September 2021 federal elections, the AfD party received 10.3 per cent of the vote, garnering as much as 18.9 per cent of the vote in eastern Germany and 8.2 per cent in the west (Tagesschau 2021). Election analyses show that trade union members were slightly more inclined to vote for the AfD than the average voter, with 12.2 per cent of members voting for the party (DGB 2021). Among blue-collar workers, the AfD received 21 per cent of the vote, making it the strongest force after the SPD for this demographic group. Previously, in the 2017 federal elections, the AfD won 12.6 per cent of the vote; trade union members’ and blue collar workers’ support for the party was above average as well (15 per cent and 19 per cent, respectively) (DGB 2017; tagesschau.de).. State election results paint an even clearer picture (cf. election analyses on tagesschau.de). In 2019, 41 per cent of blue-collar workers in Saxony voted for the AfD (with 27.5 per cent of the total Saxon electorate voting for the party). In Brandenburg, this figure also came in at around 44 per cent (with 23.5 per cent of the total electorate). Finally, in Thuringia, 39 per cent of blue-collar workers voted for the party (with 23.4 per cent of the total electorate). More recently, the party received 35 per cent of the vote (20.8 per cent of the total electorate) from the working class in Saxony-Anhalt in 2021.

In each of these four federal states, the AfD was the strongest party for this voter group. Even in state elections for Baden-Württemberg, where the party lost 9.7 per cent of the vote from 2016 (falling from 15.6 per cent), it was able to maintain its status within this demographic sector, garnering 26 per cent of blue-collar workers' votes (down only slightly from 30 per cent in 2016).

This thus demonstrates that, although the AfD enjoys support from all sociodemographic groups, and despite its essentially liberal-economic orientation, it has a considerable amount of support among blue-collar workers, an important trade union membership group. The AfD consistently overperforms with this group compared to the average across the electorate, and in some federal states, it is the most popular party among the working class.

THE SITUATION ON ENTERPRISE LEVEL

RIGHT-WING WORKS COUNCIL LISTS AS "EXTERNAL OPPONENTS" OF TRADE UNIONS

Not limiting their efforts to government, right-wing populists are also attempting to gain influence in the workplace. Alongside the AfD's aforementioned, and rather insignificant alternative workers' associations, a right-wing pseudo-union has sprung up in the auto industry. The *Zentrum Automobil* (ZA) was founded in 2010 in Baden-Württemberg and initially represented the Daimler Plant in Stuttgart-Untertürkheim in the works council (Kim et al. 2022; Aderholz 2021, 2022; Ackermann/Haarfeldt 2019; Häusler 2018; Herkenhoff/Barthel 2018; Neumann 2018; Strauch 2018). The ZA list won works council mandates in every election it joined, a total of 19 mandates in seven companies (Aderholz 2021: 323), including at Daimler sites in Stuttgart-Untertürkheim, Sindelfingen, and Rastatt and at the Leipzig BMW and Porsche facility under the name *IG Beruf und Familie* (IG Work and Family) (for an overview, see Schroeder et al. 2019: 189). In the Spring 2022 works council elections, ZA and its offshoots won less than 25 of the total 18,000 seats. In Stuttgart-Untertürkheim, they gained one seat, though lost votes overall (-11) and at the BMW and Porsche facility in Leipzig, Saxony, they lost two-thirds of the votes. At the Volkswagen facility in Zwickau, Saxony, the Free Saxons-affiliated Alliance of Free Works' Councils gained one seat (2 out of 37); however, they were only able to do so because, in the 2018 elections, one stand-alone candidate was not able to fill the seats associated with the 20 per cent of the vote they received (Göpfert 2022; Riebe/Schröder 2022).

In 2020, the association renamed itself *Zentrum* (Centre), to signal its openness to other sectors (Aderholz 2022: 85) and is now attempting to enter companies in the health and social sector under the name *Zentrum Gesundheit and Soziales* (Centre Health and Social) in Baden-Württemberg, Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt, and Thuringia (Interview 4; Interview 1; Göpfert 2022; Riebe/Schröder 2022). In this process, *Zentrum* has tried to piggyback off the success of the very heterogeneous, often conspiracy theory-laden Querdenken movement, which was founded in response to the federal government's coronavirus pandemic mitigation measures in 2020. For example, this group organised "five-minute vaccination strikes" against compulsory vaccination in the workplace. Notably, the *Zentrum* presents itself as inconspicuous and harmless, and its right-wing ideology is not immediately recognisable (see the *Zentrum's* self-portrayal on its website: <https://zentrum-gesundheit-soziales.de/>).

Following its founding, the *Zentrum Automobil* initially took an "anti-class struggle" stance, switching later to an "anti-corporatist populist" strategy (Kim et al. 2022: 74). Analogous to the AfD's anti-establishment discourse (against the establishment or 'system' parties), their strategy is directed at the so-called "co-management" of the DGB trade unions and criticises the alleged misappropriation of membership fees for political work (Schroeder et al. 2020: 28) – alongside strong loyalty to company management. *Zentrum* presents itself as a "carer" (Schäfer et al. 2020: 83) for the interests of manufacturing plant workers; "The specifically anti-corporatist character of this populism can be found in the insinuation that company management and established trade unions are a unified, corrupt power bloc joined through the cover of a social partnership" (Kim et al. 2022: 74). *Zentrum* focuses its works council efforts on being present in manufacturing, neglecting committee and caucus work (Schäfer et al. 2020: 83; Interview 1) and agitates using issues such as freedom of expression, sub-contracting, electromobility, the energy transition, or climate policy and interprets these in the context of a conspiracy between the union and the company (Herkenhoff/Barthel 2018: 80f.; Monecke 2021: 213f., Kim et al. 2022: 74, Aderholz 2021). *Zentrum* might not appear openly ethnonationalist due to the multinational composition of its workforce in Stuttgart-Untertürkheim, for example (Kim et al. 2022: 77). However, its lack of overt political positioning in its self-representation, close links between ZA and the AfD, as well as with the extreme right-wing Compact magazine, PEGIDA, and Querdenken, as well as ties between ZA founder Oliver Hilburger and the neo-Nazi band *Noie Werte* have been proven many times (Aderholz 2021: 326–327; Schroeder et al. 2019: 187). A

resolution on incompatibility with ZA, surprisingly adopted by the AfD in 2021, was repealed on Höcke's recommendation during the AfD national party conference in June 2022 with over 60 per cent of the vote (Göpfert 2022). Höcke advertises for *Zentrum* on social media and portrays it as an "umbrella organisation" (Riebe/Schröder 2022).

"INTERNAL RIGHT-WING POPULISM" WITHIN TRADE UNIONS

Alongside anti-union works council rosters, described by Klaus Dörre as "external opponents" of the trade unions, the trade unions are also confronted with "internal right-wing populism" (Dörre 2020: 199). This refers to the presence of trade union members as well as union members with right-wing orientations, AfD sympathies, and voting preferences who do not see any contradiction between their workplace and trade union involvement and voting for the AfD or participating in right-wing movements (see the electoral successes of the AfD among trade union members described in the section on AfD election results).

It has long been known that right-wing attitudes are also widespread among trade union members and that their affiliation to a traditionally anti-fascist association does not 'immunise' them against them (Fichter et al. 2005; DGB 2000; Decker et al. 2016: 42; Hilmer et al. 2017). The studies mentioned above do not find any difference in extreme right-wing attitudes between trade union members and the general population ("mirror image thesis"). In the past decade, a right-wing populist party and extra-parliamentary movement has emerged, comprised of AfD, PEGIDA, and the Querdenken movement, and in a form not previously present in the Federal Republic of Germany. These groups have achieved significant electoral wins and have successfully mobilised the populace, effectively normalising right-wing discourses in the public sphere, such as anti-asylum positions. After decades of persisting as only a "right-wing populist undercurrent" (Dörre 2016: 264) in democratic parties and organisations, the far right is now openly emerging and forming itself as an independent political force. This is leading to a "climate change" (Detje/Sauer 2018: 199) in the workplace as well; corresponding statements and behaviour are becoming more overt, and people feel more self-assured in expressing right-wing ideologies, even among trade union activists and works councils (Interview 2; see Dörre et al. 2018; Bose et al. 2018; Sauer et al. 2018; Brinkmann et al. 2020). Accordingly, trade union secretaries have sometimes been met with rejection when making the New Right,

asylum, and migration a topic at works council meetings, for instance; works councillors from their own camp occasionally discourage colleagues from bringing up such sensitive topics for fear of escalation (Sauer et al. 2018: 65–68; Schneeweiß 2019). Moreover, some active works councils organised busses to PEGIDA demonstrations in their spare time (Dörre et al. 2018: 59) and, in the security industry, there was a discussion of how to craft company contracts in a way that they would only benefit German employees (Schneeweiß 2019: 225–226). Finally, engagement in the workplace and participation in Querdenken protests are by no means mutually exclusive.

To better understand the reason for these trends, recent quantitative and qualitative studies have looked at the causes of right-wing populist success among trade union members and blue-collar workers (Hilmer et al. 2017; Brinkmann et al. 2020; Dörre 2020; Menz/Nies 2019; Dörre et al. 2018; Sauer et al. 2018; Bose et al. 2018). Like the earlier studies (DGB 2000; Fichter et al. 2005), these more recent investigations situate the increase in right-wing attitudes among workers and trade union members as a result of the broader profound transformation of capitalism and the resulting increase in social inequality and insecurity. The workplace is "fertile ground" for right-wing populism given the exacerbation of problems in the working world and increased pressure to perform, workloads, precarity, and competition, alongside a devaluation of skills caused by rapid technological change, loss of control, and concerns about individual's ability to shape their own life (Sauer et al. 2018).

An effective response to the changes wrought by the globalised market is seen as difficult to achieve through the work of collective associations (Detje/Sauer 2018: 204) and trade unions are perceived as less capable of asserting themselves since "the traditional trade union instruments [...] no longer adequately address the process of decline, loss of control, or fears about the future held by large swaths of employees" (Detje/Sauer 2018: 206). Moreover, there are feelings of political alienation, powerlessness, and lack of political influence along with experiences and feelings of devaluation as both blue-collar workers and East Germans, and a fundamental "criticism of the system" (Dörre et al. 2018: 77). These can be capitalised upon by extreme right-wing and right-wing populist forces, who offer up the identity of a powerful German worker and an "ethicised" take on widespread social criticism.

Both internal right-wing populism and external opponents present challenges for trade unions. How to respond to both remains controversial; there is no magic formula, but a wide range of experiences.

PROBLEMS IDENTIFIED BY THE TRADE UNIONS

RIGHT-WING POPULISM CONTRADICTS THE TRADE UNIONS' SELF-UNDERSTANDING AND DEMOCRATIC VALUES

An unambiguous anti-racist and anti-fascist position is part of the DNA of the DGB and its trade unions. The unions support campaigns, calls to action, and demonstrations against neo-Nazis, PEGIDA, and the AfD. For example, they organise large events on the International Day against Racism; support initiatives like that for the relatives of those murdered in Hanau; promote projects against the right; carry out anti-racist and discrimination-sensitive educational work (including support for the Respect! Initiative [*Respekt!-Initiative*], the Stand Up Against Racism Alliance [*Aufstehen gegen Rassismus*], and the Yellow Hand – Don't mess with my buddy! Association [*Gelbe Hand – Mach' meinen Kumpel nicht an!*]); publish public brochures with arguments against the right; support refugees; and much more.

All DGB trade unions have enshrined in their statutes the commitment to a pluralist, democratic society and the fight against fascist aspirations, along with resolutions of incompatibility for “persons whose conduct has supported measures and crimes against humanity” (IG Metall statutes §3 para. 6, p. 11). In addition, trade unions have statutes prohibiting membership for people who are members of “oppositional” (anti-union and anti-democratic) organisations (ver.di statutes, §6 para. 2, p. 9), which, in the case of IG Metall, includes more than ten organisations classified as right-wing extremist groups, including the NPD. Section 80(1)(7) of the Works Constitution Act explicitly stipulates that the works council is tasked with acting against racism in the workplace, taking appropriate countermeasures, and opposing all forms of discrimination.

Even when right-wing populist actors appear to participate in a democratisation project, their nationalism and anti-pluralism are fundamentally in contradiction with the basic trade union values of solidarity, equality, self-determination, diversity, and democracy. As an “organisation of solidarity in an unfair society” and as a representative of all wage earners, no matter their origin, gender, or disability, the trade unions see it as their task to work against exclusion, misanthropy, and nationalism. This extends to responding to attacks on migrants and colleagues with an anti-fascist orientation.

WITH THE SOCIAL QUESTION, RIGHT-WING POPULISM OCCUPIES A CORE TRADE UNION ISSUE

Right-wing actors take up justified criticisms of the system, social inequality, feelings of political impotence, conservative efforts to maintain the status quo, concerns about the future, including price increases, cost of living, climate change, energy transformation, and so on. However, their responses to their valid worries are exclusionary, backwards-looking, and ultimately anti-worker (Dörre 2020; IG Metall 2018; Köhlinger/Ebenau 2018; IG Metall 2019a: 56). The “social question” – the commitment to social equality, social security, redistribution from top to bottom, co-determination, and participation of the disadvantaged – is at the heart of the trade unions (IG Metall official, quoted by Bose 2018: 239). With their co-optation of the social question, right-wing actors are thus attacking trade unions at their core (IG Metall official, quoted in Bose 2018: 239).

The present constellation of multiple crises and recent political and economic developments (such as inflation, price increases, rising gas prices, and the threat of an economic crisis due to Russia's war of aggression on Ukraine) could further boost right-wing forces even more in the near future. Given their years-long and comprehensive mobilisation, first against refugees and asylum policy, then against the federal government's measures to mitigate the coronavirus pandemic, actors on the far right can adopt additional issues such as the rising cost of living and the energy crisis at their weekly “Monday demonstrations” with relative ease.

RIGHT-WING POPULISM BENEFITS FROM PROBLEMS ARISING FROM THE TRANSFORMATION OF TRADE UNIONS AND THE SYSTEM OF ORGANISED LABOUR RELATIONS

Over the course of the 1990s, trade unions increasingly transformed from “traditional communities of value” to modern service organisations (Fichter et al. 2005; DGB 2000: 20; Bose 2018: 232). The primary motivation for joining a trade union is generally a wage increase; this motive alone says nothing about the nature of the member's commitment to the union. Being busy with securing production sites, serving as a representative for staff, and recruiting new members, the focus on social policy, participation, and strengthening basic trade union and political convictions in trade union work took a back seat. Furthermore, it is often not possible to provide close support in the workplace due to membership losses and subse-

quent restructuring processes. The low level of commitment to values and increasing distance between union officers and the workforce makes it easier for right-wing actors to present themselves as close to the base in the workplace (Aderholz 2022: 93). The right is able to make gains precisely in the spaces where trade unions are less present in companies due to a lack of staff and resources. For more than a few union members, union policy and social policy are not linked (Bose et al. 2018: 225); unions are seen as politically neutral and responsible only for improving working conditions. In this understanding, there is little that is incompatible with a right-wing worldview (ibid.).

RIGHT-WING POPULISM WEAKENS TRADE UNIONS' OWN FIGHTING STRENGTH

Confronting right-wing attacks on their own workplaces shifts an additional burden onto the shoulders of volunteers and full-time union officials. Right-wing comments and related incidents sometimes lead to uncertainty and excessive demands; the effort to convince and educate and public relations work all take time as well as financial and human resources. These are often not readily available, especially in sectors with many small companies where there are only a few union members and much depends on the commitment of the individual activists. In companies, where right-wing lists have works council mandates, IG Metall works councils are also burdened by measures such as “shadow representation”, or the informal representation of employees who would not be entitled to representation according to the number of works council seats (IG Metall works council report in a company with a ZA mandate, quoted from Aderholz 2022: 95).

The division of the workforce by attacks from the right also weakens the capacity to organise for common interests in a time when union power is already weakened due to changes in the industrial relations system and the erosion of the collective bargaining system, among other factors. A strong stance against racism and right-wing populism can also lead to union membership losses. For example, between October 2015 and March 2016, around 200 members left IG Metall in protest because of the union’s active involvement in the No PEGIDA Initiative in Passau (Sauer et al. 2018: 202). During the same general timeframe, one region in Saxony saw several hundred resignations, some of which explicitly named the DGB trade unions’ solidarity with refugees as the reason for leaving (Bose 2018: 227). In some areas where trade unions are already weak, these resignations have the potential to be existential.

Trade unions are in a constant state of tension. As a membership organisation, it derives its power from the size of its membership force. At the same time, unions are political organisations with democratic values that cannot be thrown out the window.

TRADE UNION SCOPE OF ACTION AND EXPERIENCES

The emergence of PEGIDA, the successes and establishment of the AfD, and the proliferation of right-wing actors in the workplace, combine to form a relatively new situation for the Federal Republic of Germany. This context poses a challenge for trade unions, which are now looking for ways to handle this situation and for new counter strategies. How best to deal with right-wing actors in the workplace and with AfD sympathies and corresponding attitudes among union members and activists is an ongoing debate; there is no silver bullet. Trade union experiences and action strategies on company policy, internal organisation, educational work including on socio-political topics, and outreach work based on published field reports, discussion papers, resolutions, scientific studies, and four interviews with experts on the DGB-wide educational field, the educational work of IG Metall specifically, the IG Metall Executive Board, and the ver.di Federal Administration are described here. Three topics for discussion emerge:

- 1) Dealing with right-wing works council lists: “Keeping quiet is not an option”.
- 2) Handling racist hate speech and the AfD: “Hate speech gets you fired”.
- 3) Interacting with members with an affinity for the right: “Clear boundaries, open doors”.

The main focus here is on the large IG Metall union and, to a lesser extent, ver.di; the differences between the unions cannot be described in detail within this context. Nevertheless, it should be noted that IG Metall, as the German union with the most members, has significantly more resources and personnel than, for example, the much smaller NGG. Recommendations made here are thus not readily generalisable to the whole of the German trade union landscape. The structure of the organised branches also varies, with large, highly unionised industrial companies on one end of the spectrum and small-scale service industry and the food service sector on the other. This diversity has practical consequences for the intensity of care work and, thus, also on the work against right-wing extremism and populism on the ground.

DEALING WITH RIGHT-WING WORKS COUNCIL LISTS: “KEEPING QUIET IS NOT AN OPTION”.

IG Metall has been hesitant to deal with *Zentrum* and other right-wing company rosters out of concern that a public and offensive, as opposed to defensive, response would exacerbate the problem and enable the right to stage itself as the victim if one “jump through every hoop” (Schroeder et al. 2020: 38). However, Roman Zitzelsberger, head of IG Metall in the Baden-Württemberg district, urged that “keeping quiet is not an option,” and called for unionists to learn how to best deal with right-wing rosters and right-wing populism within one’s own ranks (quoted from Schroeder et al. 2020: 35). According to one DGB employee, experience shows that offensive and strategic confrontation of right-wing infiltration is necessary; while union actors hesitated, ZA was able to prepare and develop almost undisturbed, apart from some responses from committed IG Metall works councils. A conflict of principle only began in IG Metall after the 2018 works council elections (Kim et al. 2022: 82). An interdepartmental anti-right working group at the IG Metall Board of Directors was founded following a decision made by the trade union congress in October 2019. This group aimed to develop an all-union strategy and hinder right-wing rosters from success in the 2022 works council elections (IG Metall 2019a: 84). In the run-up to these elections, right-wing lists were publicly discussed and problematised. IG Metall rosters juxtaposed their own positions and programme in a manner that demonstrated the sharp contrast.

Strategies on the enterprise level: Education, presence, and participation

Within the framework of a case study at a company within the automotive industry in Baden-Württemberg, Kim et al. (2022: 80–82) examined IG Metall’s response to the presence of the ZA in the works council. First, IG Metall reacted with the strengthening and intensification of the active shop steward work in order to be more present in the company and to seek direct contact with workers so as to be able to take up their issues and concerns. ZA has concentrated its efforts on being present in the workplace and speaking directly with workers, so it can present itself as a “caretaker” in contrast to the supposedly far-removed IG Metall, which makes common cause with management. The expansion of the ZA presence poses a challenge for IG Metall, as most of its resources are dedicated to committee work.

Second, IG Metall has developed its own public outreach campaign in response to the ZA’s massive PR

work, which focuses on presenting the diverse and clashing interests held by management and the union as a counter to the image presented by ZA of company management and the works council as a unified bloc. Activists and full-time supervisors on the enterprise level were supported by the *Verein zur Bewahrung der Demokratie* (Association for the Preservation of Democracy), which was founded in Baden-Württemberg in 2020 by the DGB, IG BAU, and IG Metall and is now active in other federal states. The two main officers of the organisation in Baden-Württemberg have the following responsibilities: 1) Analysing and monitoring the public relations work of the ZA so as to serve as an “early warning system for IG Metall; 2) Raising awareness about the ZA and training IG Metall actors in argumentation and methods for debate; and 3) Providing and developing PR strategies, company-specific response strategies, and support for shop stewards and councillors in disputes with the ZA in their respective contexts, for example, by producing PR materials like leaflets with rebuttals to typical ZA statements to be distributed in factories before works council elections or by carrying out surveys at the company.

Kim et al. and a DGB employee both emphasise the importance of an unbureaucratic, rapid, contextualised, and company-specific response to ZA activities. Because *Zentrum* creates a problem at the company level, the counter strategy cannot solely rely on an intensification of educational work (Kim et al. 2022: 82); it must include concrete measures for the workplace. According to the DGB employee interviewed, in order to counter *Zentrum*’s demagoguery, IG Metall needs to present itself as a proactive, fierce, and inclusive trade union during warning strikes at the beginning of a round of collective bargaining and make participation, appreciation, and solidarity in the workplace tangible through its everyday work.

Furthermore, the interviewed DGB expert also explained that there is currently a high level of sensitivity to the current situation in companies where ZA is active. Whereas in the past, many voted for *Zentrum* out of naivety or ignorance, now those voting for *Zentrum* do so because they intend to vote right; there exists now an awareness that they are dealing with extreme right networks. Education and sensitisation are aimed at counteracting the right’s attempt to downplay themselves so as to not let them fly under the radar. Moreover, that *Zentrum* only won one more mandate in the 2022 BR elections in Stuttgart-Untertürkheim rather than the two in each previous election is understood as a sign that the thus-far developed educational strategies for the workplace are indeed working.

Inter-union exchange of experience

In Baden-Württemberg, in addition to the two main officers at the Association for the Preservation of Democracy, there are two people responsible for carrying out DGB-wide monitoring, analysis, consultation, and strategy development. These officers also closely monitor *Zentrum's* recent activities in the health and social sectors. Ver.di should draw on the experiences of IG Metall with ZA to develop strategies within their context; close contact and exchange of experience between the two unions is already established.

As soon as *Zentrum's* activities in a company or sector come to light, a participation-oriented counter-strategy should be developed by the relevant trade unions in close cooperation with one another. A first step can be, for example, to specifically inform the workers about *Zentrum's* activities and character. This also includes exposing their self-minimising tactics and demonstrating that there is also an ongoing extreme right project in *Zentrum Gesundheit and Soziales*. In the long run, the goal is to strengthen the presence of trade unions, so they are perceived as assertive, confrontational, and fierce, whereas *Zentrum* is not able to achieve anything for their co-workers. The experiences garnered in the context of the 24-hour strikes for a 35-hour work week in East Germany fall along these lines. The relative weakness of the right-wingers in the independent works councils compared to the success of IG Metall in the 2022 works council elections at VW Zwickau is attributed to the offensive stance against and differentiation from the right-wingers. Secondly, IG Metall's success can be traced to their observable assertiveness and substantial experience in participatory action, e.g. in the 24-hour strikes (Rothe 2022; Bose / Schmidt 2023 (forthcoming)).

With *Zentrum's* advance into the health and social sector, there has been a corresponding cross-union exchange between the Association for the Preservation of Democracy, IG Metall, the *DGB-Bildungswerk*, and the ver.di since the summer of 2022. The aim of this collaboration is to pool knowledge and support each other in the development of counter-strategies against *Zentrum Gesundheit and Soziales*, in particular.

HANDLING RACIST HATE SPEECH AND THE AfD: "HATE SPEECH GETS YOU FIRED"

In an interview with *Deutschlandfunk*, a national public radio station, on October 24, 2015, IG Metall chairman Jörg Hofmann spoke up for a "zero tolerance for racism", encapsulated in the phrase "hate speech gets you fired" [Wer hetzt, fliegt] (Hofmann 2015). A num-

ber of members responded by leaving IG Metall (Dörre et al. 2017: 261). This motto is linked to the controversial debate in recent years on whether those who do not stand by trade union values or who are AfD members or supporters should be excluded from trade unions (see, for example, the discussion of related motions at IG Metall's trade union congress in 2019; IG Metall 2019b). Of the eight DGB trade unions, only EVG has passed a resolution on the incompatibility with AfD members (Schroeder et al. 2020: 30). IG Metall takes a separate approach. While it categorically rules out cooperation with the AfD (IG Metall 2019a: 77) and establishes that AfD mandate holders or actors, as well as individuals who do not uphold the IG Metall principles and, for example, spread racist inflammatory speech, cannot concurrently hold positions at IG Metall as officials or works council members (IG Metall 2019a: 77). AfD and IG Metall memberships are not mutually exclusive (IG Metall 2019a: 94), the lack of incompatibility is, above all, grounded in a lack of legal certainty (IG Metall 2019b). However, for many IG Metall activists, the questionable legality is not the only reason for there not to be an incompatibility resolution. Next to the clear commitment to socio-democratic principles and the necessity of clearly opposing discrimination, inflammatory hate speech, and right-wing extremism, there is a great desire for a willingness to engage in dialogue, as exemplified by the third element: "Clear boundaries, open doors".

DEALING WITH MEMBERS WITH AN AFFINITY TO THE RIGHT: "CLEAR STANCE, OPEN DOORS".

The prominent, oft-held position, "clear stance and open doors" [*Klare Kante und offene Tür*] was formulated by IG Metall board member Hans-Jürgen Urban in 2018 at an *#unteilbar* alliance rally. In line with Hoffman's slogan, in his speech, Urban demanded from IG Metall both "clear boundaries" against all racist messages, "ideologists, organisers, and figureheads of right-wing movements" as well as an "open door" for all "those pushed into the margins of society, who are threatened by social marginalisation, and who see their life history devalued and betrayed" – this on the condition of simultaneously "fighting against reactionary action and for solidarity-based solutions to social problems (IG Metall 2018).

"Open doors" (1): Company and Social Policy

According to advocates of the open doors policy, it is precisely because trade unions reach people in their everyday lives and their direct environment, in con-

trast to many other political organisations, that they have a democratic-political duty to counter right-wing populism. According to a ver.di employee, trade unions still enjoy a relatively high level of trust due to their access to the workplace and their potential to be assertive in concrete workplace disputes, collective bargaining, and the fight for workplace improvements. This can also be used in the fight against right-wing extremism and right-wing populism. This “credit of trust” (Brinkmann et al. 2020: 140) and the relatively high satisfaction with trade unions, according to a qualitative and quantitative study from the IG Metall-Bezirk Mitte (Central District), is, above all, grounded in the successful resolution of disputes in the workplace (Brinkmann et al. 2020: 139): “Trade unions appear to offer something that, in society generally, appears to be eroding: A form of assertiveness and thus control over one’s own reality, at least within the field of work, as well as a feeling of not being completely powerless in the face of a new development” (Brinkmann et al. 2020: 147). In company work and in collective organising, trade unions offer opportunities for positive identity formation, the experience of cohesion and relationship building between employees both with and without a migration background, for example. This means trade unions play a key role in dealing with social crisis processes and can counter racist, exclusionary, and misanthropic interpretations and policies with solidarity-based, democratic and equality-based perspectives on social developments and offer political demands. Those who feel politically powerless, unrepresented, and are worried about their social status are thus susceptible to what the right-wing political sphere is offering; at the same time, the workplace and the trade union offer these people the opportunity for self-determination (Brinkmann et al. 2020: 153). The “open door policy” thus is also embodied by increased socio-political work in the trade union (Detje/Sauer 2018: 207); an aggressive, confrontational orientation; the development of counter-measures against the de-securitisation, fragmentation, and precarisation of the world of work; and the communication of political power through industrial policy initiatives, policies on pay and wages, and advocacy for a higher “citizen’s income”, and a socially just climate policy, for example (IGM 2019a: 78).

Recent attempts to be a solidarity-oriented, social alternative can be seen in the broad alliances of trade unions, welfare organisations, as well as political organisations including BUND, Greenpeace, AT-TAC, and Campact under the slogans “True justice – solidarity through the crisis!” and “Autumn of solidarity. Create social security – accelerate the energy transition”, pushing for a socially just energy and

sustainable management of the current energy crisis. The concrete demands of which include rapid relief through an energy flat rate alongside economic aid for companies and public services (public utilities, seniors’ care facilities, childcare, and more). This aid should be linked to criteria such as job security and wage agreements, an eviction moratorium, a levy on corporations’ excess profits, a wealth tax for the super-rich, and a higher inheritance tax (DGB 2022). This cooperation is grounded in a “clear, uncompromisable commitment to democracy and diversity and solidarity with the people of Ukraine” (DGB 2022: 2) and thus excludes right-wing actors who are engaged on this topic from participating in the alliances.

“Open doors” (2): Education and outreach work

An important strategy for the fight against right-wing populism is education and outreach work to raise awareness. Trade unions have expanded their work in this field since the recent right-wing populist successes, offering a variety of educational events and seminars at various levels.

For staff at IG Metall, seminars provide an opportunity for people to exchange experiences of dealing with right-wing members and rosters. For workplace representatives and committee members in Baden-Württemberg, awareness-raising about *Zentrum* is an integral part of their seminars. The education officers interviewed also report on ad hoc training and counseling for committees that have been weakened and undermined by a racist incident, for example. In one instance, officers received a “call for help” from a large company where a works council meeting had to end early after an anti-asylum remark and strong criticism from many participants that the meeting facilitator’s response was a “restriction of freedom of expression”. In the context of providing advice among colleagues, the ad hoc training developed specifically for the company aimed to provide opportunities for reflection on the incident, how the company handled it, and to look for ways for the committee to be functional again in the future.

Argumentation training should empower workplace representatives to be able to speak up against group-focused enmity and hate speech. This kind of training is based on, for example, the book *Demagogen entzaubern* [Demystifying Demagogues] by Willi Mernyi and Michael Niedermair (2010).

In addition to training in the argumentation against the anti-human positions and strategies of the right,

importance is also attached to making the positions of IG Metall known and thus strengthening the bond between the activists and the organisation. IG Metall positions, and that which makes it a union of collaborative solidarity, are, according to an interview respondent who has worked in the union education for many years, no longer known to many functionaries. One outcome of this observation is the development of the new seminar programme “What we’re fighting for”, which focuses on the values and programme of IG Metall. An important trade union education task is to convey interpretations of social developments and the economy; this has the potential to counter conspiracy theories and the ethnicisation of social issues.

Socio-politically focused seminars are offered alongside “specialised seminars” for works councillors, which offer opportunities to address group-based enmity and measures to employ against it by using case studies from company practice, such as the topic of social Darwinism as it relates to people with disabilities or reduced performance in the company, or racism when it comes to unequal treatment of immigrant applicants during a job interview.

INTERNAL ORGANISATIONAL MEASURES

In addition to the creation of a working group consisting of IG Metall board members from all spheres of responsibility, the strategies for countering right-wing extremism and right-wing populism also include internal organisational development and further training, especially related to migration and diversity. For example, an anti-discrimination office was recently created at IG Metall.

SUMMARY AND REFLECTION

Following Schroeder et al. (2020: 40–42), the trade union reaction to the rise in right-wing populism and right-wing extremism can be described as an exploratory movement between *confrontation*, *demarcation*, and *exclusion*. Within the framework of internal organisational working groups, informational presentations, seminars, and handout dissemination, trade unions confront right-wing populism and explore their possibilities for action. By expressing its own practices and values in seminars, presentations, and workplace and socio-political work, the union can clearly demarcate itself from the right and, when necessary, criticise it without continuously working against it. In practice, exclusion is the last resort.

Trade unions pursue a combination of workplace strategies, educational work, collective bargaining policy, and social policy. Their focus is not solely on raising awareness about the character and strategies of the right; it extends to encouraging and empowering its own representatives to stand up to right-wing actors, promoting core union values and principles, expanding workplace presence, promoting widespread participation and member involvement, and establishing a stronger socio-political orientation, for example, vis-à-vis the present energy crisis. Moreover, trade unions attempt to address the causes of susceptibility to right-wing ideologies, interest in the AfD, and to provide social security by making concrete socio-political demands and participating in political decisions within the social partnership framework. Their credibility stems from the success of their collective bargaining work and workplace actions. If the union is perceived as an assertive, confrontational political actor that enables political agency, self-efficacy, and solidarity in collective identity in a social context, this can then also be a starting point for work against right-wing populism. Last but not least, recent representative studies show that workplace experiences of co-determination, solidarity, and participation promote pro-democratic attitudes (Kiess/Schmidt 2020; Hövermann et al. 2021).

The experiences and strategies outlined in this report come with a number of associated fields of conflict and difficulties, which are touched upon briefly in this conclusion.

Highly institutionalised trade union structure vs. responsive, company-specific response strategy

The hesitation of higher-ups at IG Metall to make a clear statement on how to handle right-wing works council lists, beyond the “Clear boundaries, open doors” policy, and the uncertainty among both shop stewards and company functionaries about how to react given the lagging response, points to the difficulties inherent in an established and highly institutionalised trade union structure like that of IG Metall. In an organisation of this size, developing an overall strategy against the right that comes from and is implemented by all organisational units is a lengthy process. This stands in the way of a rapid, company-specific response strategy, which is necessary in the case of companies with a ZA presence. In this context, the Association for the Preservation of Democracy should act quickly, “detached from the committee rhythm and [union] apparatus logics”, so as to make an effective contribution (Kim et al. 2022: 82–83).

Closeness to social partnership vs. presentation of clearly opposing interests and a socio-political opposition

The works councils' social partnership involvement in company-related decisions and the participation of the DGB in corporatist political arrangements have an ambiguous effect. On the one hand, it enables co-determination and (political) influence, while on the other, it has the potential to promote the perception that works councils and trade unions are "in cahoots" with management or government rather than being a true representative of the workers. The latter makes it easier for right-wing actors to weaponise anti-establishment rhetoric against the unions. Works councils and trade unions perform a balancing act, using their influence at the company and political level while also being a recognisably confrontational, conflict-oriented oppositional force against management and capital interests. This is the only way that they can compete with the right-wing criticisms of the system.

Shortage of resources and staff

Trade unions are faced with shortages of both resources and staff to varying degrees. In areas such as retail, mobile care for the elderly, and even smaller food service establishments, for example, where only a few workers are union members, it is not possible to provide high-quality support and trade union work in all contexts. This makes early detection and implementation of counter-measures for right-wing populism in the company difficult. DGB-wide monitoring, which tracks the activities of right-wing actors and proactively alerts the unions in the confederation, is a potential remedy.

Resources for responding to right-wing extremism are limited and sought-after due to the simultaneous presence of a multitude of challenges, including the need to recruit new members and coping with the transformation. Work fighting the right and promoting social policy, despite the widespread awareness of the importance of this work among union officials, still has to compete with other spheres of action for resources. In the field of education, for example, this is reflected in the fact that only a few seminar days are set aside for socio-political topics.

"No Compromises" vs. a focus on the members

The internal debate about how to best offensively confront right-wing populism in the workplace and among union members revolves around a fundamen-

tal dilemma: As membership organisations, trade unions draw their influence from the sheer size of their membership. Thus, they risk losing their strength if members leave because of the union's opposition to AfD, Querdenken, racism, and so on. In regions where membership levels are already low and right-wing ideologies dominate, this can be especially dangerous (Bose 2018: 234–235; Dörre et al. 2018; Bose/Schmidt 2023 (forthcoming)). Local contexts require tailored responses. Trade unions would not have access at all to some companies in eastern parts of Germany if right-wing-aligned workers were excluded from membership (Bose 2018: 234–235). Nevertheless, the trade union values of solidarity, self-determination, democracy, and equality cannot be negotiable.

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IMPRINT

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53175 Bonn | Germany
Email: info@fes.de

Issuing department:
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Design/Typesetting: [pertext](http://pertext.de), Berlin | www.pertext.de

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