8. Conclusion

"We must not shy away from what is happening"

In Germany, it is not only wage earners who tend to vote for right-wing populist parties, sometimes overwhelmingly; unionised workers have also contributed to their strong showing at the ballot box. It is already widely acknowledged that union members are not immune to right-wing extremist views and attitudes. The issue has been repeatedly discussed over the last two decades. One explanation often heard is that unions also "mirror what is going on in German society".

The nationwide success of Germany's far-right AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) party has shaken the country's political scene and significantly amplified the growing threat from the right. Their victory saw a modern right-wing party with a nationalist agenda fill the "representational gap" in the political landscape.[1] They managed to break through the repeatedly invoked firewall of anti-fascist sentiment rising from Germany's collective memory and determination to fight right-wing populist and right-wing extremist parties. The political maxim that there could not be a powerful right-wing populist political force to the right of the Christian Democrats no longer holds true. In the east German states, the AfD is a major party, one that is more powerful than the Left Party and the SPD; in Germany's 2017 parliamentary elections, the party won 27% of the vote in Saxony, making it the largest party in local government. It also came second in other east German states. This has bolstered the openly radical right wing of the party, which dominates the AfD's regional groupings in eastern Germany.

Voting for, being sympathetic to or even becoming a member of a right-wing populist organisation is no longer taboo. And companies are reporting that since the AfD entered state parliaments across the country, as well as the Bundestag, the New Right has effectively become "the new normal".

Against this backdrop, trade unions also need to urgently address the issue of whether previous assessments of what is causing this surge in right-wing populism and the strategic responses are adequate. Does the 'mirror image theory' still hold water or are there specific elements at play in places of work and trade unions that can explain why right-wing populist attitudes are also experiencing an uptick here? Furthermore, might there be an 'undercurrent' in the world of work that is crucial to explaining the social embeddedness and political momentum of right-wing populism?

These were the initial questions we set out to answer in our study. Our quest to find evidence of this undercurrent brought a number of issues to light that confirmed our suspicions that the workplace was becoming a breeding ground for right-wing populism. But the web of cause and effect is

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1 See Hajo Funke, 'Eine durch und durch radikale Partei', interview in the *Handelsblatt* newspaper on
1 December 2017.

complex. In spite of an economic upswing and rising employment figures, not only has social inequality increased: in companies and organisations we are seeing a worsening of the negative impacts of labour policy. Here we see all the right ingredients for growing dissatisfaction and the consolidation of "immense anger" (Illouz 2017), which is also expressed as a widening gulf between workers and the political 'establishment'.

Meanwhile, the arrival of hundreds of thousands of refugees in 2015 from 'outside Germany' acted as a 'catalyst'. On the one hand, it caused an already existing right-wing populist mindset to 'rise to the surface' (i.e. taboos were broken) and focus to be shifted onto who is to blame ('the others'). On the other hand, the rise of the AfD and their success at the ballot box (which served to 'normalise' their agenda) has seen another player enter the stage who serves as both a home to protest voters as well as being a party that offers a much-needed sense of belonging to the disappointed masses.

If our findings prove that there is specific potential for right-wing attitudes to take hold in places of work, unions will have to contend with challenging tasks – for which they and they alone are responsible – in the fight against national, anti-democratic and xenophobic views and activities. If what is at stake is not 'just' civil society's fight against racism but a 'draining' of the fertile ground that allows it to flourish in companies, these are challenges that are firmly within unions' own field of action concerning labour policy.

We summarise our findings below.

How right-wing populism manifests itself in places of work

Our investigation painted a nuanced picture of how right-wing populism manifests itself in places of work. Those interviewed reported a broad spectrum of tangible evidence of right-wing populism in the workplace, ranging from the cautious voicing of apprehensions and fears regarding refugees to explicitly xenophobic and racist statements at work or on social media. There were also reports of involvement in Germany's far-right AfD party and even mention of the party's infiltration through employee representatives.

A watershed moment: how an influx of refugees paved the way for greater tolerance of right-wing opinions

There is general talk of a "change in the overall climate" that took hold during the refugee crisis of 2015. Those who were already more drawn toward the right are now beginning to express their views more openly and vocally. Statements concerning refugees usually follow a simple line of argument: "Look what they are taking away from us". This xenophobic attitude expresses a form of everyday racism where the lines between provocative statements, which are not firmly entrenched

in right-wing prejudice, and verbal stigmatisation and marginalisation that subscribe to radical right-wing views become blurred.

Here we are witnessing a major shift that is characteristic of right-wing populism: the social conflicts are no longer being fought on a vertical axis between 'those above' and 'those below' – between 'capital' and 'wage labour' if we follow Marxian class theory – but on a horizontal plane: 'us' vs 'them'. The right ingredients are in place for the idea of 'us', now emptied of its social connotations, to be given new meaning, one rooted in ideas of culture, nationhood and race.

Hateful communication on social media

Social media are being used to spread right-wing populist texts, images and opinions that are not visible in everyday company communications or which only appear on the fringes. Recent studies have shown that AfD supporters tend to obtain information from and communicate through social media.

Compared to all the other political parties, the AfD has by far the most number of followers on Facebook. One of the reasons why these channels are also being used in companies is because they enable workers to communicate with one another covertly and on a platform that is not publicly accessible.

Beneath the veneer of a seemingly peaceful corporate climate, this process is ushering changes, which, instead of allaying concerns, should be ringing alarm bells. And for the unions, the expansion of an apparently right-wing network within union structures signals a danger that urgently requires action – and not just in a handful of regional areas in eastern Germany.

Migrant firewall and migrant rights

Opinions are divided as to whether a higher percentage of employees with a migrant background acts to inhibit or encourage a rise in right-wing populism. Some of those we interviewed believed that a multiethnic workforce tends to be immune to right-wing populism and that there was a migrant 'firewall' that limited xenophobic and racist views among workers – at least in western German states. Indeed, our interviewees confirmed the firewall effect. Worker participation in company decisions – despite its limitations in terms of political power and democratic practicalities – is also extremely important for encouraging migrant involvement and recognition.

However, there has also been an increase in right-wing populist and right-wing extremist tendencies among migrants that is not connected to the 2015/16 refugee crisis. There have been reports of a re-ethnicization among various migrant groups that can lead to escalated conflicts as well as marginalisation and violent political divisions. This, in part, leads to support for German right-wing populist parties (we were given an example involving a group of Russian migrants) but it can also

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separately lead to cultural 'divisions' in migrant communities that range from national chauvinist attitudes to extreme right-wing views (we found evidence of this in the Turkish community).

Normalisation of the far right – socially acceptable racism?

When interviewees mentioned colleagues who had voted AfD, or intended to, they often added that they were only doing so out of protest. Some colleagues expressed understanding for these protest voters, who sometimes also vote for leftist parties.

However, there are also those who vote for the populist right because it aligns with their views. Such admissions are often accompanied by statements downplaying the movements: "AfD, Pegida, etc., aren't Nazis anymore". How far they sympathise and feel drawn to the movement thus remains unclear.

Since the AfD entered parliament, there has been a 'normalisation' in attitudes toward the party. This has an impact on internal disputes within companies. Although the party and its platform remain taboo and are frequently condemned, parts of the workforce are also urging their representatives to behave in an 'impartial' manner. Any condemnation is thus criticised as being undemocratic. This is justified, in part, by the fact that the AfD is a legitimate political party that complies fully with the legal framework. Colleagues support this position, even if they themselves do not share this opinion.

How unions are dealing with right-wing populism

How do unions react and what stance do they take in relation to the right-wing populism that is taking place 'on their patch'? Our interviews with full-time union officials and group discussions with IG Metall and ver.di's members and volunteers indicate various approaches are being implemented. These include more 'unambiguous positions', including exclusion from the 'democratic dialogue' in order to make the cultural-political schism caused by right-wing populism – especially in consideration of Germany's past – more obvious. Another option is more dialogue between parties in order to lay bare the New Right's policies and agenda. But where does populist resentment end and stoking hatred begin? This question makes it difficult to deal with AfD supporters within trade unions. While some of them are critical of the elite and hold nationalist views, some still continue to subscribe to neoliberal concepts, while some even go as far as to express extreme right-wing opinions. Here the lines are often blurred.

Right-wing protest and union involvement

Right-wing protest and union involvement are not mutually exclusive. It is sometimes the case that colleagues are just as likely to be heavily involved in their company's union activities as they are to take part in political activism in defence of right-wing extremist views.

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The paradox lies in the fact that actions to promote union interests also appeal to those with right-wing populist or right-wing extremist views. This defies the assumption that workers are only inclined to defend the interests of one group. Where right-wing populism or extremism is trying to make inroads in companies, and is not accompanied by anti-union sentiment, it becomes a problem that threatens the internal policies of the organisation.

Open right-wing criticism and a 'cartel of silence'

There are reports of individual activists who openly admit to being part of the AfD and who strongly criticise company policies, as well as works councils and trade unions. Within the company itself – notably at works assemblies and staff meetings – two forms of confrontation with right-wing populism can be observed. On the one hand, right-wing populism is not shown as being 'neoliberalism in disguise', an accusation based on certain parts of the right-wing populist agenda: instead, it is presented as the ruthless advocate of 'everyday people' in the organisation. Right-wing populism presents itself as a voice of radical criticism that pursues a policy of escalation while the works council is attacked for being part of the company 'establishment', thus tarring it with the capitalist brush. On the other hand, there are reports of a notable polarisation when union secretaries address the conflict with the New Right at works meetings and their concerns are dismissed. This can take the shape of either verbal criticism or silence. A 'cartel of silence' that withholds its approval is just as problematic for active engagement in company politics as open criticism. Every union official will think twice about whether they should confront grassroots resistance and how they can do so without isolating themselves.

What should be done about members who leave?

There are cases where members choose to leave a union due to its decision to support refugees and to campaign against the right. There have been cases involving individuals and entire groups (see, for example, Passau).

Sometimes the union's clear opposition to xenophobic and anti-democratic views is not shared by parts of the workforce. This is partly due to a call for unions to concentrate on their 'core' tasks of dealing with issues arising in companies and to keep their political involvement 'in check'. Here the focus is not on right-wing criticism of the union but on the growing, unresolved issues in working environments that drive the rolling back of political efforts – even with regard to disputes with the New Right – and push for a stronger emphasis on the boundaries of a union's political mandate. These positions can, however, be susceptible to influence from the far right and take on a resentful, at times openly xenophobic, dimension.

These departures have an impact on how unions deal with the right: is it still suitable for workers to participate in anti-AfD demonstrations with union banners? Should refugees and the AfD be on the agenda at works assemblies? The fear of losing members makes union organisations more cautious in how they treat right-wing populists, not only in eastern Germany.

Right-wing works councils and candidate lists

There are fears that the works council elections will be used to establish right-wing organisations and representational structures – not necessarily nationwide but in several companies and in specific regions in which right-wing populist groups have stronger political support.

A number of the union secretaries we interviewed expressed concern that representatives of the New Right would not only appear on union candidate lists but would create their own lists. Take, for example, the right-wing 'Zentrum Automobil', which already had four representatives on the works council of the Daimler factory in the Untertürkheim district of Stuttgart when, in 2018, they used the works council elections to expand to some of the company's other factories. A local newspaper wrote: 'Enemy No. 1? The IG Metall union. Their "left-wing reign" must come to an end'.[2]

The findings of our survey indicate that the New Right can also have an impact when it comes to electing employee representatives.

It should, however, be noted that, according to our interviewees, so far only a few union members, shop stewards and works councils have openly expressed support for the AfD. At present, places of work are not an established platform for the AfD, and actions such as AIDA ('Alternative Employee Representation') or AVA ('Alternative Trade Union') are not seen as key party initiatives. There are also hurdles within companies and organisations that restrict the activities of the right, including personnel, employee representatives and management who take their obligations under the works constitution seriously and will not hesitate to terminate employment agreements if required.

Nevertheless, in the run-up to the 2018 works council elections, a new networking platform appeared, whose 'mission' was to help elect representatives of the New Right to works councils. There is reason to fear that at least sections of the AfD have discovered the opportunities they have to make inroads into businesses and that their mobilisation efforts will, in some places, doubtlessly lead to success. This risk increases the more the New Right seizes upon social concerns in general and thus addresses issues facing employees, therefore tapping into a much larger pool of protest that evidence indicates exists.

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2 Stuttgarter Zeitung, *Rechte wollen Einfluss im Betriebsrat ausbauen*, 27 January 2018, accessed on 9 November 2018: https://www.stuttgarter-zeitung.de/inhalt.daimler-neonazis-wollen-einfluss-im-betriebsrat-ausbauen.9f907699-829f-4ff1-84d4-d71e109a5004.html

Employment conditions creating fertile ground for right-wing extremism

In comparison to previous studies we have conducted, conditions facing employees have worsened. Continuous pressure and permanent insecurity concerning their jobs, income and employment conditions that arise from the constant restructuring of company processes – splitting up teams, outsourcing work, competition between sites, cost reduction measures, increased pressure to improve performance – lead to a heightened sense of being in a 'permanent state of crisis', which is subjectively processed as a fear of social exclusion and anxiety about the future, a loss of control as well as a feeling devalued and not recognised. The feeling that one's own efforts are no longer being acknowledged, that one is not being commensurately remunerated and the lack of appreciation for an individual's efforts have, in comparison to previous studies, taken on a new dimension. This is compounded by the fact that resources made available to tackle such problems have either been further eroded or only undergone a partial revitalisation. There are numerous reasons why the social situation at work has disintegrated to such an extent.

Fear of job loss

In spite of supposedly glowing labour market figures, beneath the surface fears over job security are still simmering. This is due to constant restructuring in companies, ranging from the upcoming structural changes in the automotive and automotive supply industries to new business models being implemented by banks, telecommunication and logistics companies. These are just some of the fields that we considered in our research. Another decisive factor is the fact that for those teetering on the edge, what awaits below is terrifying, especially since the German government implemented its Hartz-IV welfare reforms: social safety nets have been rolled back, qualifications written off and compensation entitlements withdrawn. Insecurity on the job market ties in with social insecurity, creating an explosive political mix and a search for someone to blame.

Permanent reorganisation – uncertainty and upheaval

The constant changes taking place to corporate organisational structures are leading to a permanent state of upheaval among the workforce, which can be a source of anxiety and uncertainty. In a world dominated by digitalisation, 'agility' has become *the* buzzword. Everything needs to be made more 'agile', i.e. quicker, more autonomous, flexible and adaptable to short-term change. The current and expected digitalisation processes can overwhelm employees, especially older members of the workforce: they feel they cannot keep up, like they are being left behind. The social consequences of the digital future are unknown, not only in terms of the impact it will have on jobs and operations, but also in terms of how it will affect unions' abilities to pursue their interests (e.g. if there is an expansion of 'cloud working').

Precarisation

This permanent reorganisation also entails the flexibilization of employment relationships, e.g. through the introduction of contract work, temporary contracts, on-call work, bogus self-employment, service contracts and 'modern' forms of crowd and cloud working. Although right-wing populism is not the direct result of this form of precarisation, it does play a significant role within the wider social picture, notably when flexible employment relationships are combined with low wages and interrupted career paths.

Current labour market figures show record levels of those currently subject to social insurance contributions and conceal the high percentage of workers in deregulated employment. The discussion concerning wage levels that arose from our survey showed that not only those on low wages were having problems meeting their basic needs; even highly qualified 'normal' wage earners were struggling to reach an adequate standard of living and, above all, ensure guaranteed prospects for the future.

Performance pressure

Most descriptions of the current situation facing workers are characterised by, and focus heavily on, an increasing pressure to perform and the impact this is having on employees' health. This was mentioned consistently – across all sectors and businesses – and this is in itself a key finding. When examining the causes of this growing pressure, one factor frequently mentioned was constantly falling staff numbers in relation to the quantity of work. An impact on workers' health is almost inevitable. In systems that are geared toward performance management, unobtainable goals are the core driver of rising performance pressure. Such systems are mainly found in the services sector (banking, telecommunications, logistics) and are either focused on a team or the individual. They are also often linked to complex performance assessment systems (e.g. monitoring, documenting, controlling). In each case, these are overseen by a specific balance between market-orientated and hierarchical performance management models. In production plants, growing performance pressure is usually caused by workers being threatened (e.g. with relocation) and by technical, organisational changes.

Increased performance pressure has shown itself to be a typical signum of a worsening situation in a company, both in terms of employment conditions and stress. The effects of this growing pressure not only include risks to employees' health, they also reinforce political attitudes that have grown resigned to fighting such developments. Works councils and trade unions' inability to develop effective countermeasures only amplifies this general attitude.

How employment conditions are subjectively dealt with

During our interviews, we wanted to ascertain how interviewees' colleagues dealt with the issues outlined above. Do they offer observations about how it might be possible to resist the prevailing conditions in the company, or are they increasingly showing signs of resignation? We came to the realisation that respondents' colleagues were predominantly affected by fears of social exclusion and anxiety about the future as well as a sense of losing control and experiences of not being valued. These concerns generate feelings of powerlessness but also anger. Opportunities for solidarity, which would make it easier for workers to process these negative feelings and which are a necessary step to forming a resistance movement, fade as performance intensity grows.

A regime of uncertainty stokes fears of social exclusion and anxiety about the future

When we speak of a worsening of problems that exist within companies and organisations, we do not only mean jobs being put at risk, precarisation and increased performance pressure; while these factors are taking place, the system of laws governing how the company is run is slowly unravelling. Capitalism is a performance-driven system based on a promise: if you perform your job well and effectively, and have gained the necessary qualifications, you will be rewarded with guaranteed (relative) wealth and security – and if everything goes to plan, there will also be an opportunity to climb the ladder. This has, in effect, formed the basis of the 'social partnership' policies pursued by the Republic of Germany. Now what we are observing is that these promises of security are being trampled by a regime of uncertainty. In our view, this scenario is giving rise to a perfect storm in places of work that fosters right-wing populist interpretations of the situation. Even if workers still believe that they can somehow cope in the current climate, concerns about the future are constantly growing.

This not only applies in areas where individuals face precarity but also increasingly in fields where workers largely enjoy secure employment. The regime of uncertainty is making its presence felt – and, for some, this is the issue that truly gets under their skin – though the retraction of recognition for employees: they work hard, give it their all and are punished with contempt. Colleagues report that all that matters are the "numbers": the person and their labour have been written off.

Limited ability to shape one's employment trajectory

Increasingly, employees are unable to see work as a means to an end. They are qualified, value their own professionalism and that of their colleagues, and are also keen to perform their job well. Company restructuring processes are not seen as negative *per se*; they can also be considered a challenge. But whether this actually turns out to be the case depends largely on how the changes are

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perceived, i.e. are they felt to be transparent and manageable? And do workers feel they are able to choose their own career path within the company regime?

However, increasingly concerns and doubts are being raised regarding this issue. Companies rely on internal processes that place unmanageable demands on the workforce as well as targets based on performance and formal training that push employees to their limits. Not only is there a lack of time and insufficient material resources, immaterial resources, such as recognition and appreciation, are becoming scarce and absent from processes that are increasingly market based. This may result in the gap that separates workers from the corporate regime, i.e. the underlying conditions that determine the interests of the company and its employees, growing even wider. As a result, feelings of disappointment and a loss of control can be even further exacerbated.

A lack of recognition and an erosion of solidarity

Experiencing downward social mobility, or anticipating such an event, and anxiety about the future do not necessarily foster right-wing sentiment. It always depends on how individuals come to terms with their experiences of employment. Here the resources available to help them overcome stresses and mitigate risks are of particular importance.

According to the statements given by our interviewees, it is not just recognition and appreciation that are becoming less important but solidarity as a resource in itself. Two developments can be observed here that can be described as a 'cultural shift': on the one hand, there is the abstract primacy of 'profitability' and 'efficiency' that is ascertained through calculations and which is gradually eclipsing the quality of work and the worker. On the other, there are indirect forms of control in which 'the market' supersedes hierarchical communication. However, the market is not a modus for generating recognition, neither is it a means to providing space and time in which solidarity can be created.

A lack of recognition is perceived as a put-down. This form of degradation is thus felt all the more keenly the harder one works to meet one's own and the company's demands in spite of a challenging and arduous corporate regime.[3] An erosion of solidarity lays the groundwork upon which a perceived or real competitive pressure can be effectively deployed against the workforce. As a result, it becomes increasingly harder to create an effective counterforce to the unreasonable demands of the market by workers joining forces.

Eastern Germany heavily affected by a loss of control

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3 'Dignity' is another category crucial for affording workers legitimacy. See Kratzer et al. (2015), 98 et seqq.

Our research clearly shows that employment conditions are creating a high level of insecurity, be it through the possibility of job loss, new challenges to overcoming technological and IT-based changes, corporate restructuring (including as a result of globalisation, e.g. outsourcing, redefining supply chains) or fundamental changes to the sector, e.g. as currently being experienced by colleagues in the automotive industry. These insecurities are perceived as a loss of control driven by a number of different factors: the devaluing of qualifications and experience-based knowledge, the acceleration of streamlining processes – the impacts of which remain unclear – and new forms of company management. Even if employees master the tasks their jobs entail today, this is by no means a given for the years to come. Above all else, the projections for these various upheavals unanimously point to an accumulation of challenges that will be harder and harder to overcome. The feeling of no longer having 'one's destiny in one's own hands' is starting to become prevalent.

Here we are also seeing evidence of a worsening situation in many structurally weak regions in Germany's eastern Bundesländer, where a vast number of problems are cropping up at once. Issues are felt more acutely here, be it due to the elevated threat of job loss or the fact that a lack of collective bargaining coverage in many companies has led to even poorer working conditions. Anxiety about the future and a lack of prospects have manifested themselves in a unique way in eastern Germany. Here the post-reunification period was marked by deindustrialisation, mass unemployment and mass migration: entire regions saw their populations decline. This went hand in hand with the widespread discrediting of people's achievements as their qualifications and professional experience became almost worthless. Further deregulation of the labour market and the vast expansion of precarious employment added further fuel to the fire. Among respondents from the former East German states, we observed a subjectively perceived notion of a loss of self-worth that took on a unique dimension. This is compounded by the fact that they did not feel adequately supported by politicians and complained that their issues were met with indifference. These experiences and fears of downward social mobility have helped grow support for the Pegida movement and the AfD.

Disappointment with politicians – a catalyst for right-wing populism

On the whole, those surveyed during our research were both critical of and opposed to the current political leaders, but there were also indications of a sense of resignation. Employees feel that nobody is interested in their concerns. In many instances, this gives rise to anger directed toward political representatives. This 'representational gap', which could also be deemed a political failure, acts as a catalyst for right-wing populism.

The lack of representation for workers' interests at the political level

A growing number of those surveyed feel their interests are no longer represented by the established parties. The political interventions of recent decades are predominantly considered to have been to the detriment of wage earners and their families. The political establishment is accused of ignoring the concerns of workers with regard to their employment and social issues. Many employees have given up hope that the state will offer any solutions or regulatory interventions. After three decades of neoconservative and neoliberal reforms, the establishment is no longer simply seen as an expropriated institution alienated from the electorate, but as one that is often considered hostile: as a state for 'the others' and not for the Germans. The disappointment in social democracy is felt very acutely: the movement, which has long claimed to champion workers' rights, is seen to have completely abdicated its responsibility. The Social Democratic Party's (SPD) policies, most notably the Agenda 2010 social reform package, which were not designed to benefit workers, and the 'ruling elite' in general are seen to be at least partly responsible for the rise of Pegida and the AfD.

Although the Left Party has a clear pro-social policy agenda that attracts wage earners, the party is still rarely perceived as being a real alternative. They have now been usurped by the AfD as the party of protest. Their failings in this regard have yet to be examined.

Insecurity that extends to general living standards

The uncertainty felt by workers not only arises from a lack of or inadequate regulation at company level but also from a lack of political intervention in people's lives away from the workplace. Here the areas often listed are healthcare provision, housing and education, services that have been cut back as a result of the government's austerity policy. Our interviewees also mentioned that certain sections of the workforce were making a connection between the government's loss of control and the influx of refugees into the country, usually with nationalist connotations: "Don't forget about the people here"; "They're being given the handouts and we're left to suffer".

Alongside healthcare provision, another core concern is whether or not workers will have access to an adequate income in retirement (i.e. a pension). Here too respondents stated that anxious colleagues were making a connection between insufficient pension pots and the current refugee policy.

From frustration with politics to anti-establishment sentiment

The fury generated by the 'inflexible' conditions on the labour market and the uncertainty (including about everyday living conditions) is leading to mistrust in the existing structures of democratic decision-making and its institutions. This gives rise to anti-establishment sentiment, which is expressed as a battle between 'us down here' – the simple, hard-working citizens – and 'the ones up

there': the elite, the politicians, the media (*Lügenpresse*) or simply 'the system'. The autonomy of the political class was an issue for many of our respondents: "They do what they like anyway." There is a sense that politicians lead their own lives, which those "at the bottom" no longer have any control over. The disappointment with politicians and/or the establishment is based on the assessment that politicians are no longer performing their duty of intervening in social imbalances. There is also the reservation that politicians are being influenced by special interest groups: they are nothing more than pawns in the hands of powerful corporate interests. Chancellor Merkel and her colleagues may have rescued the banks and opened the borders for refugees, but they have done nothing for 'everyday Germans'.

Widening of the political field: the AfD as home to and voice of the disaffected

The creation of the AfD and the rise of the Pegida movement in autumn 2014 completely upended Germany's political landscape. Anger and dissatisfaction found an external platform and a home, and this momentum was only amplified by the refugee crisis of autumn 2015. In companies too, refugees were identified as scapegoats for workers' own social concerns and anxieties; at the political level, the AfD became their voice. Our interviewees report that it was "straightforward" for the AfD to become the mouthpiece of these disaffected and furious colleagues: "Whether they are staunch supporters or just protest votes is anyone's guess".

There is not necessarily a link between powerlessness or political impotence and acutely precarious employment and living conditions. For a certain section of the workforce – when confronted with high levels of uncertainty about their future prospects for social and individual upwards mobility – the main issue was their feeling of being disadvantaged. The blame for their sense of alienation is laid firmly at the feet of the established political system. The social gap is widening, employment pressure growing, incomes stagnating and people's everyday lives are punctuated by a lack, e.g. of adequate housing, schooling and healthcare. And now these same workers are expected to share the already overstretched services with refugees: "The fact is there is less for a German like me than there is for someone who comes here with that kind of background." The influx of refugees and its implications are being reframed as a split, with the self-involved elite betraying 'the people'.

Unions with a vital mandate

The earthquakes that have shaken the labour market, and whose tremors have been felt all the way up to the political class, are experienced as a loss of control and anxiety about the future. Old company rules and regulations are being dissolved and made void, and the new world emerging – one shaped by flexibility and agility – does not appear to be bringing forth a new framework to

replace what has been lost. In particular, there are four key developments that evoke a sense of an almost anomic state:

a)   The parallel development of growing pressure to perform and decreasing security is causing an erosion of capitalism's promise of meritocracy-based social mobility and wealth; here right-wing populism offers new promises of security and order.

b)   When one's ability to shape one's career trajectory by obtaining qualifications and performing well is called into question, promises of individualisation – that is, the social utopia of neoliberal capitalism – become precarious; here right-wing populism offers a countermovement promising a new collective identity.

c)   The 2015/16 influx of refugees effectively reflects the social anxieties felt at the heart of German society; refugees highlight people's own sense of vulnerability regarding their social standing and the fragility of acquired wealth. Given the 'nightmarish' image of 'Islamism', they also serve as figures onto which people can project their pent-up anger.

d)   Core countervailing resources such as solidarity and democracy are eroded in a market-based labour market driven by high returns; fragmentation and social division affect life at and away from work; in the middle classes, this is expressed as a fear of downward social mobility, for those at the bottom of the ladder, the main worry is survival; however, in places where resistance is weakened, the right-wing populist movement does not necessarily have to be strong in order to gain ground.

The worsening of conditions on the labour market is just one of many factors that are creating the perfect conditions for right-wing populism to flourish; the weakening of political, civil society and union-driven resistance – the latter being key for company's internal processes – is the other. Right-wing populism amplifies these phenomena by attacking union representatives as being part of the 'establishment'. Here the weakening of employee interests and unions – be it at the labour policy or wage policy level – is sometimes framed as being intentional: business is being made with opponents and 'ordinary people' are paying the price.

Herein lies a fundamental problem for unions: the regulation of how the workforce is sold and used is harder within a capitalist context given the unions' limited power, which means that simply preventing a worsening of the situation is already celebrated as a 'success' whereas problem solving – and with it the minimalization of a loss of control and anxieties about the future – transcends the limits of the system.

If right-wing populism is also a "movement against the unreasonable demands of the market [...] driven by wage earners and met with overwhelming support by workers and the unemployed" – as suggested by Klaus Dörre – then dealing with right-wing populism must lead to a more in-depth examination of the impossible demands of the market. Here trade unions are stretched on two

fronts: trying to boost their organisational strength and their political mandate, while simultaneously pushing for a redesign of labour policy that tackles the deficits of current reform policy. This is the only way unions can be given the power to protect wage earners of all stripes – employees, the unemployed, those in precarious jobs and skilled workers, migrants, et cetera – and thus act as an antidote to the right's promises of security that are based on feelings of anger and resentment. This implies bringing class solidarity into people's lives and fighting stigmatisation, devaluation, racism and exclusion.

Dieter Sauer / Ursula Stöger / Joachim Bischoff / Richard Detje / Bernhard Müller Rechtspopulismus und Gewerkschaften. Eine arbeitsweltliche Spurensuche. Hamburg 2018.