
The Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) and its appeal to workers – with special reference to the Ruhr Region of Germany

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Abstract

Der vorliegende Aufsatz beurteilt, in welchem Ausmaß die AfD in der kurzen Geschichte seit ihrer Gründung 2013 Themen behandelt hat, die die deutsche Arbeiterklasse betreffen. Besondere Aufmerksamkeit widmet er den Mitgliedern, die unter Führung von Björn Höcke im „Flügel“ der Partei organisiert waren. Diese standen in den vergangenen Jahren an vorderster Front der Propagierung völkisch-sozialer Ideen. Der Text beschreibt verschiedene Versuche, rechte Gewerkschaften aufzubauen und rechte Listen für Betriebsratswahlen in deutschen Fabriken aufzustellen. Darüber hinaus untersucht er das Schicksal der AfD im Ruhrgebiet, einer archetypischen Arbeiterklassenregion in Deutschland.

I. Introduction

In 2020¹ the sociologist Klaus Dörre has provided a fascinating analysis of the attractiveness of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) for German workers. He argued that the party was on its way to becoming the new workers' party in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), as the traditional workers' party, the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) was no longer capable of successfully appealing to the working-class vote.² The AfD, Dörre argued, was not only successful among

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- 1 I am extremely grateful to Richard Gebhardt, Mark Haarfeldt, Rainer Röser, and Jan Schedler who have all provided useful suggestions in conversations and have given generously of their time in talking to me. Any remaining shortcomings of the article remain, of course, entirely my own.
 - 2 Cf. Klaus Dörre, In der Warteschlange. Arbeiter*innen und die radikale Rechte, Münster 2020.

those who suffered from increased poverty and precarity, but also among those often qualified workers who have been living in increased fear of falling down the social ladder. Skilled workers had been among the main beneficiaries of the “lift effect” of the German economic miracle after the Second World War. Well into the 1970s and 1980s they expected to move up the social ladder and increase their living standard. This changed dramatically from the 1980s onwards when workers began to feel increasingly as though they were the main victims of modernization.³ Ever larger numbers of them found that there is money if banks and major companies, who are allegedly indispensable for the system (“systemrelevant” in German) are in trouble, and that there is also money for the millions of refugees who have come into the country, especially after the Syrian refugee crisis of 2014/5, but also in the current Ukrainian refugee crisis of 2022. They also found that the public services are becoming worse: if they do not have private medical insurance, they are being treated as second-class citizens. Complaints about the public transport system are common place. In particular the road system with the prized motorways, but also the railway system, once famous for its punctuality, have been the object of constant complaints. In many of the big German cities rents are no longer affordable for working-class people. In this situation of fear of what the future might bring for workers, the AfD, Dörre argues, has been successful in appearing to give workers a voice in public. It appeals to workers insinuating that they are the only party that is not leaving them to their own devices.

In the national elections of 2021, the SPD still managed to obtain most working-class votes (26 percent), but it was followed already by the AfD with 21 percent of workers opting for it, whilst the Christian Democratic Party (CDU) was in third place with 20 percent of workers voting for it. The party The Left (Die Linke), which is to the left of the SPD, interestingly scored worst among workers, with just 5 percent voting for it (in comparison to 8 percent for the Greens and 9 percent for the Free Democrats [FDP]).⁴ Already in 2017 in the state elections of Berlin, the AfD scored well in the former working-class districts of Berlin like Lichtenberg with its high-rise rent blocks. Out of nowhere it got almost 20 percent of the vote in a district which had been a bulwark of Die Linke until then.⁵ Ahead of the 2017 national elections an AfD strategy paper, penned by the then Berlin head of the party, Georg Pazderski, explicitly mentioned workers among key target groups of the party.⁶ In the regional state elections of Brandenburg

3 Cf. Oliver Nachtwey, *Die Abstiegs-gesellschaft. Über das Aufbegehren in der regressiven Moderne*, Berlin 2016.

4 Cf. Wahlverhalten von Arbeiter:innen bei der Bundestagswahl. In: <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/1257093/umfrage/wahlverhalten-von-arbeiterinnen-bei-der-bundestagswahl/>; 17.1.2022.

5 Cf. Lea Frehse, Auf ein Eis mit Gesine. In: *Zeit.de*, 19.9.2017 (https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2017-09/berlin-lichtenberg-bundestagswahl-die-linke-afd?page=6&utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F; 22.4.2022).

6 Cf. AfD will im Wahlkampf gezielt provozieren. In: *Faz.de*, 19.12.2016 (<https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/bundestagswahl-2017-afd-will-im-wahlkampf-provozieren-14582830.html>; 22.4.2022).

in 2020, 44 percent of workers opted for the AfD. In the same year 39 percent of workers voted the same way in regional state elections in Thuringia. The AfD scored well among workers not only in the new Länder in the east. In Baden-Württemberg 30 percent of workers voted for the AfD in 2020.⁷

Are German workers then shifting their political loyalties to the right? In this article I would like, first of all, to assess to what extent the AfD has, in its short history since its foundation in 2013 been addressing issues that are of concern to the German working class. Secondly, I would like to link the discovery of the working class by sections of the AfD to its increasing move to the right. Here I want to pay special attention to members who used to organize themselves in the so-called “Flügel” (wing) of the party, under the leadership of Björn Höcke, the leader of the AfD parliamentary party in Thuringia. Under threat of surveillance by the secret service for its extremist views, the AfD called on the Flügel to dissolve itself in March 2020, and, indeed, there have been no more events explicitly under the banner of the Flügel since then, but former members have stayed in close contact and form an informal faction within the AfD. They have been in the forefront of promoting völkisch-social ideas over recent years. In the third section of this article I will review the various attempts to build right-wing trade unions and set up right-wing lists for works councils’ elections in the factories of Germany. In the final section I will examine in detail the fate of the AfD in one of the archetypal working-class regions of Germany, the Ruhr region. How did the appeal of the AfD fare in this part of Germany that has been undergoing major structural transformations over the past 60 years? In the conclusion the attractiveness of the AfD for workers will be assessed and I will ask what political measures will be necessary to prevent another form of national socialism being successful in Germany.

II. The rise of the AfD as main motor of right-wing populism in Germany since 2013

The platform on which the AfD was founded in 2013 was one of Euro-scepticism and economic liberalism. It was sceptical of the common currency, the Euro, and campaigned on behalf of a stronger foregrounding of German national interests in the European Union (EU).⁸ Several of its leading members came from the CDU and were disaffected by Angela Merkel’s policy of shifting the CDU more to the centre ground, thereby abandoning its more conservative right-wing policies. That such disaffection rang a chord among German voters was confirmed at the

7 Cf. Hans Monath, Die AfD macht die Unsichtbaren sichtbar. In: Der Tagesspiegel, 5.12.2020.

8 Cf. Alexander Häusler/Rainer Roeser, Zwischen Euro-Kritik und rechtem Populismus. Merkmale und Dynamik des Rechtsrucks in der AfD. In: Andreas Zick/Beate Küpper (eds.), Wut, Verachtung, Abwertung. Rechtspopulismus in Deutschland, Bonn 2015, pp. 124–145.

national elections of 2013 where the AfD only narrowly failed to enter the parliament due to the 5 percent hurdle in the German national electoral law. Subsequently the party managed to gain a lot of support when it positioned itself firmly against the immigration policies of the government, especially during the Syrian refugee crisis of 2014/5. Its anti-immigrant stance was often combined with anti-Islamic sentiments and xenophobia.⁹ At the same time both its Euroscepticism and its nationalism hardened. In the 2017 national elections the AfD became the third largest party in the parliament and after the two biggest parties, the CDU and the SPD, formed a coalition government it was the biggest opposition party in the Bundestag. Party membership increased from 17 687 in 2013 to 35 100 in 2019. In 2020 it dropped to 32 000.¹⁰ There are, however, indications that the AfD does not wish to become a members' party, as this would only heighten the already existing tensions around programs and positions. Instead, it can be described as a "movement party", i. e., a party that sees itself as being part of and giving voice to a broader oppositional movement in German society.¹¹

The party's history has been continuously accompanied by factional infighting, frequent leadership challenges and changes of its leading personnel. Many political observers have argued that it has undergone radicalization and has become right-wing extremist – at least in parts.¹² The synergies between the AfD and other right-wing extremist groups, such as Pegida, the Identitarian Movement and neo-fascists, have been under intense scrutiny not only by the Federal Intelligence Service but also by journalists and academics. In 2021 the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution put the party under surveillance for suspected right-wing extremism, but the courts intervened to give the AfD the benefit of the doubt in a key election year.¹³ Yet sections of the party remain under observation. This includes members of the Flügel. In its foundational statement, the Erfurt Declaration, the Flügel described its main purpose as that of "a resistance movement against the further erosion of German identity".¹⁴ Before it became a more informal network in 2020 it organized an annual meeting taking its name from the national memorial Kyffhäuser (remembering the first German emperor

9 Cf. Benno Hafenegger/Hannah Jestädt/Lisa-Maria Klose/Philine Lewek (eds.), *AFD in Parlamenten. Themen, Strategien, Akteure*, Frankfurt a. M. 2018.

10 Cf. Wolfgang Schroeder/Bernhard Weßels (eds.), *Smarte Spalter. Die AfD zwischen Bewegung und Parlament*, Bonn 2019.

11 Cf. Ida Campe/Tim Mönch, *Das Experimentierfeld für den Aufstand*. In: *Der rechte Rand*, (Juli/August 2018) 173 (<https://www.der-rechte-rand.de/archive/3620/chemnitz-experimen-tierfeld-aufstand/>; 27.4.2022).

12 Cf. Hajo Funke, *Von Wutbürgern und Brandstiftern. AfD – Pegida – Gewaltnetze*, Berlin 2016.

13 Cf. *Gericht untersagt Beobachtung durch Verfassungsschutz*. In: *Faz.de*, 5.3.2021 (<https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/gericht-untersagt-beobachtung-der-afd-durch-verfassungsschutz-17229428.html>; 24.1.2022).

14 Cited after Henry Bernhardt, *Der Unterschied zwischen „Flügel“ und restlicher Partei*. In: *Deutschlandfunk.de*, 22.10.2019 (<https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/afd-der-unterschied-zwischen-fluegel-und-restlicher-partei-100.html>; 17.1.2022).

of the German Reich, Wilhelm) in Thuringia: the meetings became a byword for racism, Islamophobia, xenophobia, historical revisionism and nationalism.¹⁵ One of the leading members of the Flügel, Andreas Kalbitz, was expelled from the party for lying over his previous extreme right-wing past.

III. The pushing of völkisch-social ideas by the AfD

It was within the Flügel that a völkisch-social agenda surfaced most strongly and was pushed by sections of the party. Yet there are also others in the AfD, who promote this agenda. The most ambitious attempt to date was the suggestion made by René Springer, AfD member of the Bundestag, the national parliament, and long-term personal assistant of the long-time co-chair and one of the key leaders of the party, Alexander Gauland, in 2020 to introduce a “citizen’s wage” (Staatsbürgergeld) that would be paid out to all Germans in employment. The unemployed and non-German workers would be excluded, but he explicitly argued that it would benefit millions of low- and middle-income earners.¹⁶ In April 2021 Jürgen Pohl, AfD member of the national parliament, and Kurt Schreck, an advisor of the AfD on social policy, and a trade unionist with a Christian trade union federation outside of the main umbrella organization of the German trade unions, the Deutsche Gewerkschaftsbund (DGB), as well as a former works councilor, published a brochure on the social policies of the AfD which was also clearly directed towards workers and low- as well as medium-earning groups in German society. Although they, in principle, defended the right of workers to go on strike, they wanted to regulate strikes more and make it more difficult for trade unions to strike. Explicitly in favour of social partnership models, they failed to specify what they understood by these, instead pointing to Ludwig Erhard’s social market economy as a model and arguing that partnership between employers and workers served the interest of all best. It would not appear as though social partnership as a “conflict partnership” is part of their understanding of the conflict.¹⁷ In their paper, which is not prominently adver-

15 Hajo Funke, *Die Höcke-AfD. Vom gärgigen Haufen zur rechtsextremen Flügel-Partei. Eine Flugschrift*, Berlin 2020.

16 René Springer, *Entlastung, Gerechtigkeit, Soziale Sicherheit. Staatsbürgergeld: Vorschlag für ein modernes Steuer- und Sozialsystem*. In: Staatsbuergergeld.de, without date (<https://staatsbuergergeld.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Staatsbuergergeld.pdf>; 22.5.2022). The mainstream media reacted critically, pointing out that it was discriminatory against foreign workers and the unemployed. See, for example, Markus Balser, *AfD-Spitze will Grundeinkommen*. In: *Sz.de*, 2.11.2020 (<https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/afd-grundeinkommen-staatsbuergergeld-1.5102512>, 22.4.2022); Corinna Budras, *Die deutschtümelnde Wirtschaftspolitik der AfD*. In: *Faz.de*, 28.11.2020 (<https://www.faz.net/aktuell/wirtschaft/warum-das-staatsbuergergeld-der-afd-unsozial-ist-17074253.html>; 22.4.2022).

tised either on the internet or inside the party, the authors indirectly accuse the official trade unions of being class warriors rather than representatives of social partnership. The minimum wage is described as a temporary means to prevent poverty of hard working Germans, whilst the ultimate aim is the “prosperity wage” (“Wohlstandslohn”) which would guarantee a good life for all employees. A strong welfare state was described as a necessity but welfare fraud should be harshly penalized. Once again we find here ethnocentric and xenophobic sentiments: “Solidarity as ethical principle of living together and as an element of providing identity within society can, according to experience, only function within one cultural circle.”¹⁸

Whilst there are, then, attempts by the AfD to formulate a social vision, this is mixed with nationalism and xenophobia. Nevertheless, any such agenda has so far met with considerable resistance from the more market-liberal mainstream of the party. Ever since 2013 the party programmes have consistently championed neoliberal ideas, including demands for further deregulation of the economy and a less interventionist state in terms of economic and social policies. Within the parliamentary party of the AfD market liberals criticized the minimum wage and called for an end to collective wage bargaining. There have also been prominent calls from the AfD to end the existence of educational holidays for employees, i.e., to scrap the *Bildungszeitgesetz*.¹⁹ The electoral programme of the AfD before the national elections of 2021 stated clearly that the state should reduce its responsibilities to those of outer and inner security, justice, foreign policy and fiscal administration. It called for the “flexibilization” of German labour law, a euphemism for undermining the protection that labour law affords German workers. The economy, it states, should be freed from burdens, especially taxes.²⁰ Whilst there have occasionally been demands to protect small and medium-sized businesses and adopt protectionism, these ideas never received a majority within the party.

17 One of the most renowned experts in the German system of co-determination, Walter Müller-Jentsch, famously defined social partnership as “conflict partnership” in which workers and employers have interests that are not necessarily the same, which is why the system of industrial relations needs structures and institutions in which the different interests can be negotiated. See Walter Müller-Jentsch (ed.), *Konfliktpartnerschaft. Akteure und Institutionen der industriellen Beziehungen*, München 1991.

18 Jürgen Pohl/Kurt Schreck, *Sozialpolitische Impulse. Arbeit, Leben und Wohnen – Blau gedacht*, p. 9. I am grateful to Mark Haarfeldt for sending me this paper.

19 Beate Müller-Gemmeke, *Die AfD und die Arbeitswelt*. In: Heinrich-Boell Stiftung Baden-Württemberg, 11.11.2020 (https://www.boell-bw.de/de/2020/11/11/die-afd-und-die-arbeitswelt#_ftn22; 14.1.2022).

20 Wahlprogramm der AfD zur Bundestagswahl 2021 (<https://www.afd.de/wahlprogramm/>; 24.1.2022). For a more detailed analysis see Stephan Pühringer/Karl. M. Beyer/Dominik Kronberger, *Soziale Rhetorik, neoliberale Praxis – eine Analyse der Wirtschafts- und Sozialpolitik der AfD*, Frankfurt a. M. 2021, as well as Helmut Kellershohn, *Vorüberlegungen. Zu einem Projekt über die Haltung der neuen Rechten zu Fragen der Wirtschafts- und Sozialpolitik*. In: DISS-Journal, Sonderausgabe 4 (2021), pp. 4–7.

Yet the party's economic policies always took a back seat in comparison to its pronounced nationalism which took a variety of different forms: Euroscepticism, including calls for a "Dexit", xenophobia, including calls to build a fence around Germany's external borders, anti-immigration stances, anti-refugee positions, and demands for greater national sovereignty. These are issues that unite all factions of the party and can be described as its smallest common denominator, which is why observers of the AfD have described the ideological core of the party as "völkisch-authoritarian populism".²¹ Arguably, these positions also played a much larger role in the self-understanding of those identifying with the AfD than issues of social policy and welfare.²² If we examine, for example, the enquiries of the parliamentary party of the AfD in the parliament of Baden-Württemberg, we see that they overwhelmingly referred to questions of migration, law and order, and left-wing extremism. By contrast, interest in welfare, social questions and labour are much less pronounced.²³ Party programmes of the AfD do not show great substance when it comes to social and labour policies.²⁴

But, from the strong nationalist and xenophobic appeal of the AfD there is a bridge to völkisch-social ideas. The social has to be restricted to Germans and is linked to the strengthening of Germandom.²⁵ According to the AfD, the identity of nation and Volk are under threat by the European Union, multi-culturalism and immigration. Germanness, according to Gauland, is biologically inherited not acquired: "Identity, the national ideas, culture cannot be changed. It is innate to us and it is something that we all need to live."²⁶ German workers, AfD politicians have reiterated, need to be protected against the undermining of the welfare state by migrants. Only German workers are part of the Volksgemeinschaft that the AfD seeks to build. Class issues are reinterpreted as national ones: regaining national sovereignty will allow an effective countering of globalization seen as a threat to national development. The social question becomes a national question. Redistribution from top to bottom becomes redistribution from the outside to the inside. The AfD does not like to talk about class which is a concept that divides the Volksgemeinschaft. They prefer to talk about the "small people" ("kleine Leute") which they define as part of an ethnically and

21 Cf. Alexander Häusler, *Völkisch-autoritärer Populismus. Der Rechtsruck in Deutschland und die AfD*, Hamburg 2018.

22 Cf. Eva Walther/Simon D. Iseman (eds.), *Die AfD psychologisch betrachtet*, Wiesbaden 2019.

23 Cf. Beate Müller-Gemmecke, *Die AfD und die Arbeitswelt*. In: Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 11.11.2020 (<https://www.boell-bw.de/de/2020/11/11/die-afd-und-die-arbeitswelt>; 30.4.2022).

24 Cf. Alexander Häusler/Reiner Roeser, *Die AfD vor der Bundestagswahl 2021*, Berlin 2021.

25 Cf. Michael Wildt, *Volk, Volksgemeinschaft, AfD*, Hamburg 2017.

26 Alexander Gauland, Speech on the 2. Kyffhäuser meeting, 4.6.2016 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=__WO_N9d3Cw; 27.4.2022).

culturally homogenous German people.²⁷ Höcke in particular is associated with such “völkisch-social populism”.²⁸ At a meeting of AfD luminaries and new right representatives in Leipzig in November 2017, the editor-in-chief of the right-wing journal “Compact”, Jürgen Elsässer, supported attempts to woo workers for the AfD: “We will open a new front for the national and social liberation of the people. All wheels come to a halt when my blue arm moves into action.” Blue, of course, is the colour of the AfD and Elsässer here cites and changes a famous line from a workers’ poem by Georg Herwegh from 1863, which he wrote as official song of the General German Workers Association (Allgemeiner Deutscher Arbeiterverein, ADAV), a pre-cursor of the SPD. At the same meeting, Elsässer also made clear who was not included in these völkisch-social ambitions: “The migrants of recent years are rags [Lumpenpack]; they are parasites who want to turn on our women.”²⁹ Among right-wing thinkers, like Elsässer, nationalist and völkisch ideas merge with a critique of capitalism and (US) imperialism that builds on ideas of the interwar “conservative revolution” and a range of new right thinkers, including Alain de Benoist. The publicist Götz Kubitschek and right-wing intellectuals such as Benedikt Kaiser and Marc Jongen have been busy in trying to argue that left-wing critiques of capitalism, e.g. by Antonio Gramsci and Chantal Mouffe, can be merged with traditional right-wing ideas around nationalism and ethnocentrism.³⁰ This intellectual milieu is influencing sections of the AfD and contributing to a search for ways in which the party can appeal to working-class voters.

- 27 Cf. Robert Misik, *Die falschen Freunde der einfachen Leute*, Berlin 2019. See also Roland Pichler, *Die AfD will als Partei der kleinen Leute punkten*. Interview mit Alexander Gauland. In: *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, 25.4.2016 (<https://www.stuttgarter-zeitung.de/inhalt.interview-mit-afd-bundesvize-gauland-die-afd-will-als-partei-der-kleinen-leute-punkten.f915c96e-4687-4f28-9b5c-596fbc15cf2b.html>; 27.4.2022).
- 28 Cf. Kai Budler, *Völkischer Sozialpopulismus*. In: *der rechte rand*, (2018) 171 (<https://www.der-rechte-rand.de/archive/3560/alarm-afd/>; 14.1.2022). See also Andreas Speit, *Neurechte werben um Arbeiter*innen*. In: *taz*, 22.3.2018.
- 29 All quotations cited in Rafael Binkowski/Sven Ullenbruch, *Wie Nationalisten Daimler unterwandern wollen*. In: *Stuttgarter-zeitung.de*, 1.12.2017 (<https://www.stuttgarter-zeitung.de/inhalt.afd-und-die-rechte-gewerkschaft-wenn-dein-blauer-arm-es-will.59cfac1b-bcf2-4909-9a0d-bd48a6c47e44.html>; 24.1.2022).
- 30 Cf. Richard Gebhardt, *Querfront? Zur Kapitalismuskritik und Diskurspiraterie der Neuen Rechten*. In: *Das Argument*, (2017) 323, pp. 347–362. See also the special issue 4 (2021) of the DISS-Journal entitled “Neue Rechte und AfD” which provides a range of intriguing analyses of the new right and its links to the AfD, including how they shape their thinking in social and economic matters. Furthermore, see Andrea Becker/Simon Eberhardt/Helmut Kellershohn, *Zwischen Neoliberalismus und völkischem Antikapitalismus. Sozial- und wirtschaftspolitische Konzepte und Debatten innerhalb der AfD und Neuen Rechten*, Münster 2019. The AfD politician Björn Höcke has coined the expression “solidaristic patriotism” in which he combines nationalism with ethnocentric forms of solidarity for Germans only. And Germans are routinely understood as a cultural and biological community into which one is born rather than one understood in terms of citizenship. The intellectual foundations for such a solidaristic patriotism are provided by Benedikt Kaiser, *Solidarischer Patriotismus. Die soziale Frage von rechts*, Schnellroda 2020.

IV. The AfD, right-wing trade unions and works council elections

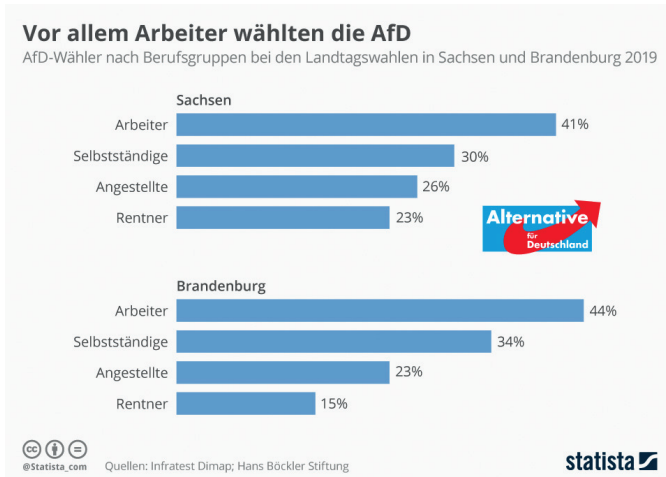
Combining the issue of social inequality with racism has arguably contributed to the rise in support for the AfD among working-class voters:



Map of the federal states of the FRG, showing where the AfD is the strongest political party in the parliaments of the respective federal states (2016–2021).

The biggest success to date for the AfD among workers came at the regional state elections of Saxony in 2019, where 40 percent of workers made their cross on the ballot paper next to the AfD.

In the national elections of 2021 the poster campaign of the AfD was organized under the general slogan: “Germany, but normal” (“Deutschland, aber normal”). Under this heading a variety of different issues were addressed. The message is specifically geared towards workers in this way: “Normal is one wage which is sufficient for living”.



AfD voters divided by occupational groups in the federal elections of Saxony and Brandenburg in 2019.

Addressing social issues is combined with a range of other issues that are also appealing to German workers, e.g. cultural homogeneity (along the lines of “Germany for the Germans”, a popular slogan of the populist right already in the 1980s), and economic sovereignty that needs to be regained from the EU. These issues are appealing to those who feel that they are losing out in globalization processes.³¹ Efforts on behalf of the AfD to address workers as core constituency include the foundation of trade unions and the support for right-wing lists in works council elections. Already in 2014, the Interest Group of Employees in the AfD (Interessengemeinschaft [IG] der Arbeitnehmer in der AfD, AidA) was founded. It denounced the DGB as an organization “securing their own well-paid jobs whilst failing to represent workers” (“Pöstchenbeschaffungsinstitute mit Alibivertretungsfunktion”).³² Trade union members, AidA argued, should leave their traditional trade union organization and move over to them, “because the new red is blue”.³³

In a programmatic working paper from April 2016 AidA positioned itself in the tradition of Ludwig Erhard’s social market economy. Among its concrete demands was an increase of unemployment benefits to two years if the employee had been in employment for twenty years or more and to three years if the

31 Cf. Knut Bergmann/Matthias Diermeier/Judith Niehues, Ein komplexes Gebilde. Eine sozioökonomische Analyse des Ergebnisses der AfD bei der Bundestagswahl 2017. In: Zeitschrift für Parlamentsfragen, 2 (2018), pp. 243–264.

32 Christian Waldheim, AidA-Arbeitnehmer in der AfD. Offener Brief an Ver.di wegen anti-AfD-Faltblatt. In: AfD-Kompakt, 8.4.2017 (<https://afdkompakt.de/2017/04/08/aida-arbeitnehmer-in-der-afd-offener-brief-an-ver-di-wegen-anti-afd-faltblatt/>; 20.1.2022).

33 Cf. *ibid.*; 3.8.2022.

employee was over the age of 55. Its chairman, Christian Waldheim, director of his own financial consulting company, in a lecture on “Economy and the Social” delivered to the Fürth AfD in November 2016, admitted that the SPD had in the past been able to improve the situation for workers, but today they were, according to Waldheim, no longer the “representatives of the small people” (“Vertreter der kleinen Leute”). He attacked in particular the increase in temporary workers (Leiharbeit) whilst at the same time defending temporary work as a principle that makes sense under exceptional circumstances but should not become the rule. He also criticized the increase in fixed-term contracts which did not give long-term perspectives to employees. He called on employers to show more social responsibility. He also attacked the SPD’s unemployment benefit reforms (Hartz reforms), and argued that the trade unions have lost members because they no longer are seen as representing workers.³⁴

Despite such rhetorical attempts to occupy the streets and demonstrate a public presence, the AfD has failed to date to make significant headway in forming trade unions. Calls on its supporters to attend a May Day rally in Hamburg in 2016 mobilized only around 100 supporters. In 2017 the AfD had to cancel its planned demonstration altogether for fear it might be hopelessly outnumbered by counter-demonstrators.³⁵ The traditional trade unions, IG Metall, Ver.di, IGBCE and others, ran major campaigns to point out that right-wing trade unions could not represent working-class interests.³⁶ At the company level AidA promoted an ideology of “company community” (“Betriebsgemeinschaft”), where the workers would fare best if they followed the company management.³⁷ In a recent assessment of the AfD in the Landtag of NRW, Richard Gebhardt, who has been observing the AfD closely for many years, concludes: “Topics like co-determination do not find any resonance inside the party.”³⁸ Michael Vasiliades, chairman of the IGBCE, formulated it clearly: “The AfD is not

34 Cf. Christian Waldheim, *Wirtschaft und Soziales* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H11UetTNBU8>; 22.1.2022).

35 Cf. Oliver Cruzcampo, *Demo in Hamburg. AfD träumt von 2 000 Teilnehmern*. In: *Endstation Rechts*, 16.3.2017 (<https://www.endstation-rechts.de/news/demo-in-hamburg-afd-traeumt-von-2000-teilnehmern.html>; 20.1.2022).

36 Cf. Jörg Köhlinger/Michael Ebenau, *Zum Umgang der IG Metall mit der AfD. Ein Arbeitspapier der Bezirksleitung Mitte*, 2018 (https://www.igmetall-bezirk-mitte.de/fileadmin/user/Gesellschaftspolitik/Aktiv_gegen_Rechts/2019/Arbeitspapier_AfD.pdf; 20.1.2022).

37 See the special issue *Angriffe auf Gewerkschaften und Betriebsräte von rechts* of the journal *der rechte rand*, 29 (2018) 171 (<https://www.der-rechte-rand.de/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/derrechterand-Magazin-171.pdf>; 22.4.2022). On the historical antecedents of the concept of “Betriebsgemeinschaft” under National Socialism see Sascha Howind, *Kraft durch Freude und die Illusion eines besseren Lebens. Sozialpropaganda im Dritten Reich*, PhD thesis, University of Hannover 2011 (<https://www.repo.uni-hannover.de/bitstream/handle/123456789/7704/682040843.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>; 22.4.2022).

38 Richard Gebhardt, *Warum die AfD keine Alternative ist*, DGB Nordrhein-Westfalen (<https://nrw.dgb.de/archiv/++co++c3a3fc3c-ae9f-11ec-94d8-001a4a160123>; 22.4.2022).

for employees.”³⁹ In their analysis of the social populism of the AfD, the DGB pointed out that the social reforms demanded by trade unions close to the AfD tended to be racist and were based on a völkisch understanding of the social that amounted to a mere election strategy without much substance in terms of actual social reforms that would benefit working-class voters.⁴⁰ The strong stance of the trade unions combined with the inability of AidA to rally significant support and gain a strong membership ultimately led to its dissolution in 2019.

AidA was not the only attempt to form a trade union close to the AfD. In 2015 the Alternative Association of Employees (Alternative Vereinigung der Arbeitnehmer, AVA) was founded in North-Rhine Westphalia. Its chairman Uwe Witt used to be a member of IG Metall when he worked at the Thyssen company and before he became head of personnel at a medium-sized company and later self-employed. For a while he was the speaker of the parliamentary party of the AfD on questions of work and social matters in the Bundestag. In January 2022 he left the AfD to join the small Centre Party. Like AidA, AVA was also combining social demands with xenophobia and racism. In its “Thesis on Labour and Social Policy” (“Thesenpapier zur Arbeits- und Sozialpolitik”) from 2016 AVA demanded that migrants and the long-term unemployed should receive less social benefits or even none at all. Instead a “work service” was to be introduced for these groups so that they earned their social benefits. Migrants, the paper alleged, were plundering the German social system.⁴¹

A third attempt to form a right-wing trade union was undertaken in Thuringia on 1 May 2017, when the Alternative Association of the Employees of Middle Germany (Alternativer Arbeitnehmerverband Mitteldeutschlands, ALARM) was founded in Erfurt. On its foundation date, the May Day rally of 2017, it managed to mobilize 1 200 attendees. Amongst its demands were a “citizens’ pension” for Germans only that would avoid pensioners sinking into poverty, and a prosperity wage to replace the minimum wage.⁴²

An AfD member of the national parliament, Jürgen Pohl, who was speaker of the parliamentary party on employee questions, a member of the parliament’s committee on work and social matters, and a close confidant of Höcke, whose electoral bureau he headed for a long time, positioned ALARM as standing against “the old parties” (Altparteien, a standard derogatory phrase of the AfD for the established parties) and the traditional trade unions. The latter, he alleged, were betraying German workers by doing nothing against an increasing

39 Cf. Die AfD ist nichts für Arbeitnehmer. Interview mit Michael Vasiliades. In: Hannoversche Allgemeine Zeitung, 30.9.2017 (<https://www.haz.de/Nachrichten/Wirtschaft/Deutschland-Welt/Die-AfD-ist-nichts-fuer-Arbeitnehmer>; 20.1.2022).

40 Cf. Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund, Der Sozialpopulismus der AfD. Eine „Arbeiterpartei für Deutsche“?, Juli 2019 (<https://frankfurt-am-main.verdi.de/themen/nachricht/en/++co++da27144e-f0fb-11e9-9fea-52540066e5a9>; 20.1.2022).

41 Cf. <http://www.ava-bund.de/thesenpapier/>; 20.1.2022.

42 Cf. <https://pohlposition-afd.de/alarm/>; 3.8.2022.

social divide, impoverishment and the misuse of the welfare state by millions of migrants.⁴³

There have also been attempts to form unions that are close to the AfD in specific branches of employment. The Interessengemeinschaft Alternative öffentlicher Dienst (Alternative Public Service, AöD) was founded in 2015, with the supporters of many AfD members in NRW, as it says on the AöD's website. It clearly associates itself politically with the AfD whilst presenting itself as interest group for public servants seeking to stop cuts in personnel, improve technological advances and improve holiday and Christmas extra payments for public servants. On its website it denounces migrants allegedly pushing into the public service and kindles fears of organized crime syndicates undermining the state.⁴⁴

The Services Trade Union Air Traffic Security (Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft Luft Verkehr Sicherheit, DGLVS) was founded in 2018 and seeks to represent workers at Germany's airports. It also argues on its website that the old unions no longer represent employees and that trade unionism should not be based on assumptions of class war but that it should be service oriented and independent of politics.⁴⁵ Robert Buck, former member of the SPD and of Ver.di and thereafter for a time national chairman of AidA, who resurfaced in the context of the foundation of the DGLVS, argued that the key aims of the latter was higher wages, making jobs in airport security a recognized trained profession, more full-time employment, less part-time contracts, and a company pension scheme.⁴⁶ However, the labour court ruled in April 2018 that DGLVS cannot be classed as a trade union and that it did not have the right to put up its own lists for works council elections. Ver.di celebrated this as a success arguing that the union consisted of a few AfD supporters and a website but had no organizing capacity and was a mere fig leaf for the AfD.⁴⁷ There is no sign that the DGLVS has rallied significant support since then.

There have been no official membership figures published for any of the right-wing trade union organizations, but the number of "likes" on their webpages has been negligible pointing to a rather limited public role for these unions.⁴⁸ Even inside the AfD, the unions like ALARM or AidA have played no major role in the party's debates about social welfare, pensions or work-related matters. The unions united in the DGB have been extremely watchful of any attempts of the

43 Cf. <https://pohlposition-afd.de/alarm/>; 14.1.2022.

44 Cf. <https://wessoly.lima-city.de/>; 24.1.2022.

45 Cf. <https://dglvs.org/neue-dienstleistungsgewerkschaft-geht-an-den-start/>; 21.1.2022.

46 Cf. Robert Buck, Was wirklich umgesetzt werden muß! (<https://dglvs.org/was-wirklich-umgesetzt-werden-muss/>; 21.1.2022).

47 Cf. https://www.service-verdi.de/sites/default/files/pdf/2018-04-25_DGLVS%20final.pdf; 21.1.2022.

48 Cf. Maurizio Cavaliere, Rechtspopulismus als aktuelle gesellschaftliche und betriebliche Herausforderung, IG Metall Vorstand, Büro Grundsatzfragen und Gesellschaftspolitik, Frankfurt a. M. 2017 (unveröffentlichtes Manuskript).

political right to become active in trade unionism and on the shopfloor. Occasionally AfD and ALARM representatives managed to mingle at official trade union protests, for example when IG Metall organized a march of silence in protest of the closure of a Siemens factory in Erfurt in November 2017. On its website it subsequently presented the protest as an ALARM protest, which it clearly was not. IG Metall and other DGB unions are careful to demarcate themselves rigorously from the right.⁴⁹

And yet, a study that examined attitudes of trade unionists and officials from the DGB, Ver.di, and IG Metall concluded that right-wing populist views were present among them and trade-unionized core workers in major industrial plants in the FRG.⁵⁰ Even if attempts by the AfD to form trade unions have been unsuccessful to date, the potential for such unions – given these attitudes among trade-unionized workers – is worrying and points in the direction of the need for more educational efforts among workers, including trade unionists. At the local level, especially in the new Länder in the east, where the AfD has many working-class supporters, trade unionists have been finding it difficult to speak up against the AfD in front of workers who solidly support right-wing populism. Yet, overwhelmingly, so far at least, they have been holding the line refusing to sit on the same discussion forums with representatives of the AfD.⁵¹

In 2018 the Daimler factory in Stuttgart-Untertürkheim in South-West Germany witnessed an attempt by activists close to the AfD to challenge the IG Metall in works council elections. The biggest list in the elections was still put forward by IG Metall but the second-biggest was that of “Zentrum Automobil” (ZA), which attacked IG Metall works councilors as being too close to the company management. After 2010 the “Zentrum” had already been represented on the works council with 4 (out of 45) members, mostly far right wing employees also active with the AfD, Pegida or other right-wing groups.⁵² The “Zentrum” whose origins predate the AfD had been founded in 2009 by Oliver Hilburger, who had

49 Cf. Budler, *Völkischer Sozialpopulismus*.

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

51 Susanne Kailitz, *Pegida, AfD und Co: eine Vertrauenskrise*. In: *Mitbestimmung*, 9 (2016) (<https://www.boeckler.de/de/magazin-mitbestimmung-2744-pegida-afd-und-co-eine-vertrauenskrise-6087.htm>; 22.4.2022).

52 Uschi Götz, *Betriebsratswahl bei Daimler. Arbeitnehmervertreter von rechts*. In: *Dlf-Magazin*, 1.3.2018 (<https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/betriebsratswahl-bei-daimler-arbeitnehmervertreter-von-100.html>; 14.1.2022). More recently there has been a huge rupture between Zentrum Automobil and the AfD with the AfD even announcing that it would exclude from the party any known members of the Zentrum. For details and for a very helpful analysis of attempts by far right-wing groups to contest the works council elections in 2022, see the special issue entitled “Sozial geht nie mit Rechtsradikalen” of the journal *der rechte rand* 194 (2022) with contributions from Mark Haarfeldt, Tim Ackermann, Richard Gebhardt, Annelie Buntentbach, Thomas Fischer, and others.

previously been a works councilor at the Daimler factory on behalf of the Christian Trade Union Metal (Christliche Gewerkschaft Metall, CGM). He had also been a musician with the right-wing rock band “Noie Werte” and an honorary judge at the labour court in Stuttgart. He had to leave the latter position after the state labour court of Baden-Württemberg ruled that his extreme right-wing music disqualified him as a works councilor. The ZA also had direct links to the Identitarian Movement (Identitäre Bewegung) through Simon Kaupert, who is still producing advertising films for the ZA.⁵³

Right-wing works councilors who successfully set up their own lists have also been in existence in a variety of other car company factories, including the Daimler factory in Rastatt, the Opel factory in Rüsselsheim and the BMW factory in Leipzig. The Interest Group Occupation and Family (Interessengemeinschaft Beruf und Familie) is similar to the “Zentrum”, only that it is active in BMW and Porsche factories in Leipzig. A platform for networking the far right entitled “One Percent” (“Ein Prozent”), initiated by Götz Kubitschek (“Sezession”, Antaios-Verlag), Jürgen Elsässer (“Compact-Magazin”) und Philipp Stein from the Identitarian Movement, started a campaign in 2017 entitled “Patriots Protect Jobs: Become a Works Councilor”.⁵⁴ It encouraged right-wing workers to set up lists for the 2018 works council elections in order to compete with the official trade union lists. They were successful in some big car factories and in the states of Saxony and Baden-Württemberg. However, the overall lack of success has to do with the inability of the right to form lists in most companies. Where they did come forward with lists, they also were successful in gaining representation on the works councils.⁵⁵ This indicates once again that significant sections of the working class are vulnerable to the promotion of völkisch-social ideas.

Attempts to move the appeal of right-wing populists onto the shopfloor and win over workers to the right also included a networking initiative in 2018 that united the campaign “One Percent” with “Zentrum Automobil” and the right-wing journal “Compact”. This, however, also failed to have a significant impact. The factories remain a difficult terrain for right-wing populism, especially where the mechanisms of co-determination and social partnership are intact. Here the works councils, often in alliance with the management, have been holding major campaigns to alert workers of the dangers of right-wing populists. The works councilors and trade union activists in the factories have been following a strategy which, on the one hand, speaks up clearly against racism, xenophobia and nationalism but on the other hand they also listen carefully to the concerns of

⁵³ I am grateful to Mark Haarfeldt who provided me with this information.

⁵⁴ Cf. <https://www.einprozent.de/blog/soziales/patrioten-schuetzen-arbeitsplaetze-werdebetriebsrat/2191>; 25.1.2021.

⁵⁵ On right-wing activities on the shopfloor, see generally Wolfgang Schroeder/Samuel Greef/Jennifer Ten Elsen/Lukas Heller, Rechtspopulistische Aktivitäten in betrieblichen Kontexten und gewerkschaftliche Reaktionen. In: WSI-Mitteilungen, 72 (2019) 3, pp. 185–192.

their colleagues regarding job security, pay and working conditions.⁵⁶ Beyond the factory gates the trade unions have also undertaken a variety of different initiatives to counter racism and right-wing thinking. Thus, for example, they have supported the alliance “Stand up against the Right!” (“Aufstehen gegen Rechts!”) and the association “Don’t Touch My Mate – for Equal Opportunities and against Xenophobia and Racism” (“Mach meinen Kumpel nicht an – für Gleichbehandlung und gegen Fremdenfeindlichkeit und Rassismus e. V.”). They organize a wide variety of training seminars to counter right-wing rhetoric and propaganda. Together with others IG Metall launched the initiative: “Respect! No Place for Racism!” (“Respekt! Kein Platz für Rassismus!”). Various trade unions have adopted resolutions which make it impossible for members of right-wing organisations to join the union.⁵⁷

Nevertheless, workers remain a potential recruiting ground for the far right. Some studies have argued that pessimism about the future and the feeling of being powerless to change things are among the two most important reasons for workers voting for right-wing populists.⁵⁸ In the regional state elections of Baden-Württemberg in 2016 15.7 percent of trade union members voted AfD, which was admittedly only slightly more than the population as a whole (15.1 %).⁵⁹ Already a study commissioned by the IG Metall’s Otto Brenner Foundation, published in summary form in 2007 came to the conclusion that ordinary trade union members are very vulnerable to the overtures by right-wing populists.⁶⁰ Yet there are also studies that stress that xenophobia and the feeling of being culturally under threat have been far more important for right-wing mobilization than being threatened with economic and social decline.⁶¹

V. The Ruhr Region and the AfD

When it comes to archetypal working-class regions of Germany, few score as highly as the Ruhr region in the very west of the country. Its lead industries, coal and steel, were at the heart of German industrialization during the last third of

56 Cf. Sophie Bose, „Klare Kante“ gegen rechts? Befunde einer qualitativen Untersuchung zum Umgang der Gewerkschaften mit dem Rechtspopulismus. In: Karina Becker/Klaus Dörre/Peter Reif-Spirek (eds.), *Arbeiterbewegung von rechts? Ungleichheit – Verteilungskämpfe – populistische Revolte*, Frankfurt a. M. 2018, pp. 227–241.

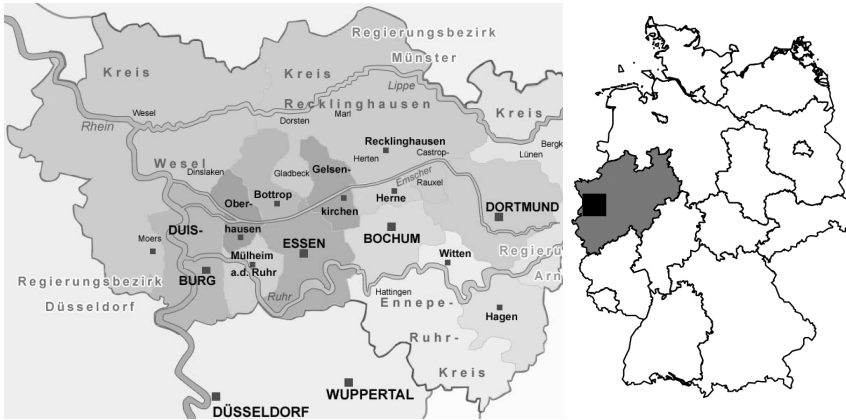
57 Cf. Schroeder/Greef/Ten Elsen/Heller, *Rechtspopulistische Aktivitäten*.

58 Cf. Knut Bergmann/Matthias Diermeier/Judith Niehues, *Die AfD: eine Partei der sich ausgeliefert fühlenden Durchschnittsverdiener*. In: *Zeitschrift für Parlamentsfragen*, 1 (2017), pp. 57–75.

59 Cited after Müller-Gemmeke, *Die AfD und die Arbeitswelt*.

60 Cf. Bodo Zeuner/Jochen Gerster/Michael Fichter/Joachim Kries/Richard Gerster, *Gewerkschaften und Rechtsextremismus*, Münster 2007.

61 Cf. Holger Lengfeld/Clara Dilger, *Kulturelle und ökonomische Bedrohung. Eine Analyse der Ursachen der Parteidentifikation mit der „Alternative für Deutschland“ mit dem sozio-ökonomischen Panel 2016*. In: *Zeitschrift für Soziologie*, 3 (2018), pp. 181–199.



The Ruhr area, in the very west of Germany, with the administrative borders of the Regionalverband Ruhr and its many cities and towns, merging into each other and forming a large metropolitan area. Sources: map Ruhr area: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ruhr_area-administration.png; map Germany: HAIT Digilab.

the 19th century, and again, both after the First and the Second World Wars, the Ruhr provided the foundations for the economic recovery of Germany. The “Ruhri”, as stereotypical occupant of the Ruhr region, is working-class, typically a miner or steelworker.⁶² Apart from the male bias of the figure of the “Ruhri”, it is also one that incorporates a sense of ethnic diversity. Diverse waves of labour migration have brought Polish-speaking workers in the late 19th and early 20th century to the Ruhr. In the 1960s and 1970s, Turkish, Italian, Spanish, Greek and Yugoslav so-called “guest workers” followed suit. The idea of a melting pot where different ethnic identities lived together relatively harmoniously is, of course, at one level a fiction ignoring the many tensions that always existed around the issue of cultural and ethnic diversity. But at another level the region is very used to migration and there is evidence that it handles ethnic and cultural diversity better than other parts of Germany.⁶³

Against this background we can ask how the AfD has been faring in this proletarian region of Germany that has been undergoing significant processes of structural adjustment to the deindustrialization of its two lead industries. The last coal mine was closed in 2018 and steel has been shrinking ever more. These structural adjustment processes have in some respects increased the notion of rising social inequality and a fear that the social infrastructure of the region is vanishing.⁶⁴

62 Cf. Achim Prosek, *Sympathieträger der Region. Erinnerungsort Ruhri*. In: Stefan Berger/Ulrich Borsdorf/Ludger Claßen/Heinrich Theodor Grütter/Dieter Nellen (eds.), *Zeit-Räume Ruhr. Erinnerungsorte des Ruhrgebiets*, Essen 2019, pp. 279–295.

63 Cf. Dietmar Osses, *Das Ruhrgebiet als Schule der Nation? Erinnerungsort Migration*. In: Berger/Borsdorf/Claßen/Grütter/Nellen (eds.), *Zeit-Räume Ruhr*, pp. 204–219.

64 Cf. Michael Farrenkopf/Stefan Goch/Manfred Rasch/Hans-Werner Wehling (eds.), *Die Stadt der Städte. Das Ruhrgebiet und seine Umbrüche*, Essen 2018.

Politically, the Ruhr region became a bulwark of the SPD after the Second World War.⁶⁵ During the years of structural change, it managed to associate itself with looking after the well-being of the ordinary worker and assuring that their interests would not be ignored. As the Ruhr region was also a key laboratory for co-determination and social partnership in Germany after 1945 and represented the Rhenish-capitalist system in its purest form, trade unionists, together with the political and economic elites of the region, managed economic issues in a tripartite fashion that tended to be consensual. However, from the 2000s onwards the solid support for the SPD in the Ruhr began to crumble. The reasons for this are complex and a string of scandals associated with long-term power and its misuse was certainly among them.⁶⁶ In this volatile political situation, the AfD has managed to gain some spectacular electoral successes in the Ruhr, especially in its northern parts, where social problems are most acute.

In Gelsenkirchen, where the SPD was the strongest political party by far in every election in the FRG since 1949, the AfD scored 17 percent at the national elections in 2017 – its best-ever result anywhere in the old Länder of the FRG. In some districts of the city, like Schalke East, it was even higher at 18.8 percent. 13 of the best electoral districts for the AfD in NRW came from the Ruhr region. In several of them the AfD got between 15 and 17 percent of the vote. Even if the vote at the 2021 national elections dropped to 12.8 percent for Gelsenkirchen as a whole, the city remains a stronghold of the AfD in the west. In the Ruhr region as a whole 8.5 percent voted for the AfD who managed to mobilize sections of the population that had not voted before – more than any other party. Still, all directly elected members of parliament in the Ruhr came from the SPD, with one exception: the affluent south of Essen, where the CDU was successful.⁶⁷ The 2021 national elections also showed that when the SPD is putting social and welfare policies at the heart of its appeal, it is able to win back voters from the AfD: 420 000 AfD voters in 2017 voted for the SPD in 2021.⁶⁸

Nevertheless, the Ruhr region remains an area in the old Federal Republic, where the AfD is doing well. In the local elections of 2020, where the AfD scored on average only 5 percent in NRW, in Gelsenkirchen they reached 13 percent of the vote. In the regional state elections of NRW 15 of the best electoral districts of the AfD were located in the Ruhr region. In Hagen and Duisburg, the figures

65 Cf. Bernd Faulenbach/Günter Högl/Karsten Rudolph (eds.), *Vom Außenposten zur Hochburg der Sozialdemokratie: der SPD-Bezirk westliches Westfalen, 1893–1993*, Essen 1993.

66 Cf. Stefan Laurin, *Beten Sie für uns! Der Untergang der SPD (im Ruhrgebiet und anderswo)*, Bottrop 2020.

67 Cf. <https://www.rvr.ruhr/daten-digitales/regionalstatistik/weitere-themen/wahlen/>; 22.4.2022.

68 Cf. Alexander Häusler/Rainer Roeser, *Entwicklung und politische Verortung der AfD im Bund und in Nordrhein-Westfalen. Einblicke und Bewertungen im Vorfeld der Landtagswahl in NRW 2022*, Forena Diskussionspapier, 14.2.2022 (https://www.forena.de/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/FORENA_Diskussionspapier_1_2022.pdf; 22.4.2022).

for the AfD were also over 10 percent, more than twice the regional average. Pollsters tell us that in the Ruhr region most voters of the AfD come from white German male voters who either are in a socially precarious position or fear they might end up in just such a position in the near future.⁶⁹ Yet some analysts have disagreed, arguing that there is little conclusive evidence that those most negatively affected by deindustrialization and globalization have moved their political affiliation to the AfD.⁷⁰

How does the party position itself in Gelsenkirchen and the Ruhr more generally, and why do voters here feel the need to support the AfD? Regarding the party, one of its slogans with which it attempts to win over voters in the Ruhr is: “For a region with German traditions” (“Für eine Region mit deutschen Traditionen”).⁷¹ The AfD’s anti-migrant position is very clearly foregrounded here. They know that they did very well in 2017 when 44 percent of voters said that concerns over migration were uppermost on their minds when voting. In 2021, when their share of the vote fell, only 11 percent said that migration was the most important electoral topic for them.⁷²

Before the regional state elections of NRW in 2017, national media attention was focused on a spectacular move of a long-standing local SPD city councilor in Essen and trade union works councilor in the mining industry, a member of the IGBCE, Guido Reil, who left his union and party to join the AfD.⁷³ A poster campaign in the Ruhr region subsequently featured Reil in miners’ garb with the slogan: “At the heart a socialist. Therefore AfD” (“Im Herzen Sozi. Deshalb AfD”). For a party with a strongly neoliberal program and an impeccable anti-socialist stance, this was extraordinary, but it signaled a further attempt of the AfD to position itself, at least in working-class regions, as a clear alternative to traditional working-class parties like the SPD. Yet there are also many indications that Reil is somewhat of a solitary figure in the AfD. The more market-radical leadership of the party remains opposed to over-emphasizing the social. Calls for taxing the rich, increasing public expenditure and increasing the minimum wage do not find a majority inside the party. The “market conformist” populism of the AfD picks up themes like the minimum wage and “social policy as a form of national

69 Cf. Sabine am Orde, Geprägt von internen Querelen. In: taz.de, 14.9.2020 (<https://taz.de/Forscher-ueber-NRW-Wahlergebnis-der-AfD/!5713956&s=gepr%C3%A4gt+von+intern+querelen/; 18.5.2022>).

70 Cf. Bergmann/Diermeier/Niehues, Ein komplexes Gebilde, p. 245.

71 This slogan is depicted on the website of the parliamentary party of the AfD in the Ruhr parliament (<http://afd-fraktion.ruhr/; 24.1.2022>).

72 Cf. Gelsenkirchen und die AfD. Wahlergebnis von 2017 wiederholt sich nicht. In: WDR Nachrichten, 26.9.2021 (<https://www1.wdr.de/nachrichten/ruhrgebiet/bundes-tagswahl-gelsenkirchen-afd-100.html; 14.1.2022>).

73 Cf. Moritz Küpper, AfD bedroht Ruhr-SPD. Revolte im Revier. In: Deutschlandfunk, 15.11.2016 (<https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/afd-bedroht-ruhr-spd-revolte-im-revier-100.html; 26.1.2022>).

identity politics”.⁷⁴ It is capable of some rhetorical fireworks surrounding demands for more social welfare (for Germans), but the economic liberalism of the mainstream of the party is still preventing the social from becoming a meaningful part of the official stance of the AfD.⁷⁵ Furthermore, it is hardly the case that many active trade unionists and Social Democrats have moved to the AfD since Reil left in 2017. In fact, ever since Reil became a Member of the European Parliament, his Facebook page concentrates very much on his work in Brussels and hardly ever talks about the Ruhr or Essen.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, following the regional elections in NRW in 2017, ALARM published a poster featuring the headgear of a mine with some of the spectacular AfD successes in the Ruhr region and concluding that “workers trust the AfD”.⁷⁷

Whilst the AfD has been capable of scoring some remarkable electoral successes in the Ruhr, its allied trade unions have been completely unsuccessful in mobilizing right-wing lists for works council elections in the Ruhr. Reil wanted to found a right-wing trade union but had to admit failure in the face of strong trade union resistance in a region where the unions continue to have one of its strongholds.⁷⁸

In the national elections of 2017, the AfD campaigned with the slogan: “I am a part of it [the AfD], because the SPD no longer represents the interests of the ordinary people.” (“Ich bin dabei, weil die SPD die Interessen der kleinen Leute nicht mehr vertritt.”) Indeed, many of those who felt attracted to the AfD thought that politics and political elites were increasingly far removed from the everyday world of ordinary people.⁷⁹ AfD voters have an above average fear of criminals, burglars, drug dealers and organized criminal clans. They feel insecure and at the mercy of forces they cannot control. In particular, they fear that the state no longer has the power to enforce its authority vis-à-vis a range of particular interests. In the national elections of 2017 many voters in the Ruhr said that they had opted for the AfD because they had been “disappointed by the other parties”.⁸⁰

74 Richard Gebhardt, Marktkonformer Populismus. Anmerkungen zum wirtschafts- und sozialpolitischen Kurs der AfD, manuscript of an article that will be published in DISS-Journal in 2022. I am grateful to Richard Gebhardt for providing me with access to the article before publication.

75 Cf. Christoph Butterwege, Sozialpolitik – die Achillesferse der AfD. In: Neue Gesellschaft/Frankfurter Hefte, 3 (2020), pp. 30–34.

76 See also his web page: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/197488/GUIDO_REIL/home; 12.4.2022.

77 Cf. the entry from 15.7.2021 (<https://m.facebook.com/wirschlagenALARM/photos/a.409576006075528/416035828762879/?type=3&source=48>; 3.8.2022).

78 See the interview with Reil on youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fmrTB5e8r5Q>; 14.7.22. I am grateful to Mark Haarfeldt for alerting me to this interview. Haarfeldt has been following the attempts of the AfD to build trade unions and participate in works council elections closely. He works for the DGB Bildungswerk Bund and is responsible for all aspects of history and memory.

79 Cf. Johannes Hilje, Rückkehr zu den politisch Verlassenen. Gespräche in rechtspopulistischen Hochburgen in Deutschland und Frankreich, Berlin 2018, p. 24.

80 Infratest dimap, Bundestagswahl 2017 (<http://wahl.tagesschau.de/wahlen/2017-09-24-BT-DE>; 12.4.2022); see also Karl-Rudolf Korte/Jan Dinter, Bürger, Medien und Politik im Ruhrgebiet. Einstellungen – Erwartungen – Erklärungsmuster, Wiesbaden 2019.

In 2020 Reinhard Schneider, a television and radio broadcaster, spent nearly two years with members of a local AfD party in the Ruhr region, in Gladbeck in the district of Recklinghausen, for a radio feature that was aired by Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR) in 2020. It was entitled “Interior views of a party: an AfD local constituency in the Ruhr region” (“Innenansichten einer Partei: ein AfD-Kreisverband im Ruhrgebiet”)⁸¹ He did not pretend to have sympathies for the AfD and left the party workers in no doubt that his own preferences were on the centre left, somewhere between the SPD and the Greens.⁸² He gained entry into the AfD circles through an acquaintance he made during one of his earlier TV and radio features on a high-rise building and its inhabitants in Recklinghausen.⁸³ The caretaker in the high-rise, Norbert, with whom Schneider had stayed in touch, told him one day that he had joined the AfD. Interested in why a “helpful and sympathetic” guy like Norbert felt attracted to the AfD, Schneider embarked on his mission to understand what brought people like Norbert to put their hope in the AfD.

Several AfD members that we meet in the radio feature emphasize that they are not fascists or extreme right-wing radicals. One of them even outrightly rejects ideas associated with the völkisch wing around Höcke. Several of them feel more attracted to the idea of former party chairman Jörg Meuthen, the professor of economics, more on the market liberal side of the party, who left the party in late January 2022 feeling that it had drifted too far to the right.⁸⁴ Virtually all the AfD supporters we meet in the radio feature are men and their language betrays a strong gender bias. As one of them states, the AfD is not extreme right-wing but “it has the balls to say what everyone actually thinks”. What we do find, however, are xenophobic views. Norbert argues that migrants and refugees are taking the German state for a ride. As a result the state can no longer provide for its citizens. “How it is at present is a disaster” (“Der Ist-Zustand hier in Deutschland ist eine Katastrophe”), one of the AfD supporters says in the feature. Low pensions, impoverishment, bridges and schools that fall apart, a hopelessly outdated infrastructure – these are among the things that will, according to the AfD activists in the feature, bring the state to its knees. After the state has collapsed, they argue, it will be the hour of the AfD.

Michael is a trained chemical worker and IT expert who worked shifts to fulfill his dream of his own home. He is now highly indebted to the banks and in fear

81 Reinhard Schneider, *Innenansichten einer Partei*. In: Hörspiel und Feature, 22.5.2021 (<https://www.hoerspielundfeature.de/ein-afd-kreisverband-im-ruhrgebiet-innenansichten-einer-100.html>; 26.1.2022). Reinhard Schneider was kind enough to send me the radio feature and a transcript, for which I have to thank him.

82 Schneider confirmed this in an interview on his radio feature. See: <https://dokka.de/a/innenansichten-einer-partei-ein-afd-kreisverband-im-ruhrgebiet>; 26.1.2022.

83 Cf. Reinhard Schneider, *Neun Stockwerke Deutschland – ein Hochhaus in Gladbeck*, WDR/RBB, 2010 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=570bJgRW8SQ>; 26.1.2022).

84 Cf. Jörg Meuthen verlässt die AfD. In: *Faz.de*, 28.1.2022 (<https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/langjaehriger-afd-vorsitzender-joerg-meuthen-verlaesst-die-partei-17761403.html>; 12.4.2022).

of the future. He accuses Angela Merkel of wanting deliberately to mix ethnic groups and cultures so as to undermine Germany's cultural and ethnic identity. Thorsten, who also owns his own home, deplores the "miserable refugee policy" of the government for which Germans like him will have to pay. He fears for his small daughter who he feels will be at the mercy of Arab men who are "chronically underf***ed". What is perhaps most striking about the radio feature is that such racism and xenophobia is uttered by men with whom the listener can have a lot of empathy: they are hard-working, have a sense of humour, are direct and straight in their utterings and, to put it simply, "ok blokes", but with some very dangerous views. On the campaign trail in Gladbeck it is mainly older retired men who support their views.

Among AfD supporters, there is a strong sense that things are not getting better for people like them. They stress that they feel like second-class citizens in their own country. We meet one person who was an SPD member and left the SPD over the Hartz reforms under the Schröder government in 1999. After first supporting Die Linke he found his way to the AfD. Another interviewee, an active member of the Junge Alternative, the youth organization of the AfD, argues that it is absolutely paramount to end the "dictates of the EU". Marko, a former rock musician and paramedic is convinced that the voters feel "betrayed and sold down the line" by the traditional parties. Where the radio feature is so successful is in bringing across how the AfD in the Ruhr region thrives on a mixture of economic and social insecurity, xenophobia and disappointment in the state. This affects not hard-boiled neo-fascists with bomber jackets and combat boots, who are completely absent from the feature, but neighbours that many of us, who live in the Ruhr region of Germany, will find in their immediate surroundings.

VI. Conclusion

Has the AfD, as Dörre suggests, the potential of becoming the new working-class party in Germany? It has certainly been successful in appealing to the working-class electorate, as a whole range of regional and national elections have shown. A völkisch-social wing of the party around Höcke have been most vociferous in trying to appeal to the working class, mixing nationalism, ethno-centrism and social policy. Gauland's centrist conservatism has at times supported the völkisch-social agenda by appealing to the "einfachen Leute" (the small people). Avoiding the language of class has been characteristic of the AfD, as that language is associated with the political left and as it was already de-emphasized, even by the centre left, in the old Federal Republic from the 1950s onwards. After all, the language of class was widely associated then with Communist East Germany, the ideological enemy in the Cold War.

However, the party finds it difficult to speak with one voice on questions of social policy, welfare and trade unionism. The party's origins are neoliberal and market-radical, and there are many in the party, including in the party leadership

(e.g. now co-president Alice Weidel) who adhere to these positions. Increased state expenditure, more social welfare, better protection of workers – they are all demands anathema to this section of the party. Hence, the AfD has found it difficult to find common ground regarding social policy. Its pronouncements on this and related matters are often vague and stop short of concrete proposals that would benefit workers. Whilst being in favour of the minimum wage only as a stopgap measure, the party has never officially said how high that minimum wage should be. Welfare measures are generally seen as being for ethnic Germans only and the party has concentrated more on highlighting welfare fraud than promoting concrete proposal for a strengthening of the welfare state. And those proposals that did come from individuals within the party either did not become official party policy or were not even widely discussed within the party. Thus, the notion of “solidaristic patriotism” discussed above does not seem to find a majority inside the AfD which continues to find its lowest common denominator in Euroscepticism, anti-immigrant agendas, xenophobia, nationalism, and historical revisionism.

The resistance of the market-radical mainstream of the party towards forms of a völkisch-social policy also meant that various attempts of circles close to the AfD to form trade unions have so far been unsuccessful. The watchfulness of the DGB and its affiliated unions contributed to the failure of right-wing unions to establish themselves. Hence it is no surprise that the AfD has been attacking the mainstream union movement as corrupt class warriors instead of promoting the idea of a harmonious partnership between employers and workers. Various right-wing groups have been successful, especially in the automobile industry located in the new Länder and the southwest of Germany, to enter works councils, but a more concerted effort to promote the setting up of right-wing works councilors has failed so far. Nevertheless, as several studies have shown, workers, including trade unionized workers, are highly vulnerable to right-wing populist overtures. This can also be observed in the electoral successes of the AfD in the northern parts of the Ruhr area, one of Germany’s most archetypal proletarian regions. Against the backdrop of structural social change and the declining fortunes of the once-dominant SPD in the Ruhr, the AfD has been capable of building up some of its most impressive strongholds in places like Gelsenkirchen, sometimes described as “the poorest city in Germany”.⁸⁵ White workers, including relatively affluent ones, are here supporting the AfD out of a disappointment in the other parties and a fear of social decline in the future. Nevertheless, in a region where trade unionization is still high and the traditions of co-determination are strong, the right has been completely unsuccessful in gaining representation in works councils.

⁸⁵ See the report of WDR entitled “Die ärmste Stadt Deutschlands” (<https://www.ardmediathek.de/video/planet-wissen/die-aermste-stadt-deutschlands/wdr/Y3JpZDovL3dkci5kZS9CZWl0cmFnLTc3NDYxMzNhLWY0YTktNGU5MC05YjU1LWU5YTU4ZGRhYmM4OQ;/;28.4.2022>).

Overall, despite the absence of a clear-cut commitment of the AfD to a programme that would be capable of appealing to workers' interests, they have scored some spectacular successes among the working-class electorate in Germany underlining how vulnerable this milieu is to right-wing populist overtures.