

Smack in the Middle – Crises of the Working World and their Co-optation by the Right #2

CONNECT

Good work – Bad work? Devaluation of everyone who does not work “normally”

In autumn 2025, as part of the project “Connect – Diversity through Participation” at the DGB-Educational Institute of Thuringia e.V., an online lecture series was held. The lectures were transcribed and published in several languages. This text summarizes the talk by **Fabienne Décieux (University of Innsbruck)**.

Which kind of work is considered “normal” in society and why? What does this reveal about our ideas of performance and justice? And does all of this contribute to the spread of discrimination and right-wing positions?

Performance society as “normality”

Those who perform more should be rewarded for it and receive more—this idea is considered “normal.” Most people in Germany think our society is built that way and should stay that way. Yet many notice that their own efforts and achievements are not recognised accordingly. How can this be reconciled, and where does the rigid belief in the performance principle come from?

The performance society (also called “meritocracy”) traces back to the bourgeois revolutions of the 19th century and the establishment of equal rights and individual freedoms. It replaced the aristocracy and was originally seen as an achievement: the “good life” was no longer the exclusive preserve of the nobility but, in theory, could also be attained through social upward mobility. That is the promise of the performance principle. The principle of civil equality still holds today, but it clashes in practice with capitalism—a system based on inequality. Consequently, the performance principle is an illusion: it does not apply to property, for example, since wealth can be inherited and does not have to be earned individually. Nor does it reward individual performance for everyone. Many forms of effort are not recognised by society as “real work”. This mainly affects activities traditionally labelled “female”, such as household work or care work (e.g., for children and the elderly). These attributions and evaluations can change and are contested in society. An example of such an image shift is the today-highly regarded and often well-paid IT sector. In the past, it was mainly women who developed new software and earned comparatively little. Only when the sector gained importance did the share of male

employees, as well as its status and salaries, rise. The example shows that performance is not objective but a social assessment shaped by power relations and social structures.

“Normal” work – what was it once, what is it now?

What is still called a “standard (or normal) employment relationship” emerged in the decades after World War II, during the era of “Fordism”.

Social upward mobility occurred collectively through regular real-wage increases secured by strong trade unions, and individually through medium-term promotions within firms.

Fordism (named after automobile pioneer Henry Ford) featured clear social structures: in a heterosexual nuclear family the man was the sole breadwinner, typically working 40 hours per week as a permanent employee in an industrial plant.

This basic model was framed by a “caring welfare state” that guaranteed stable social security in case of unemployment. In Fordism, the key performers were the domestic, male working- and middle-class. The unpaid work of housewives, who were pushed into that role by the system, was largely overlooked or underestimated. The contributions of migrant “guest workers” were also less appreciated by society, less secure economically and offered fewer advancement opportunities.

By the 1990s, however, the previous combination of “normal employment relationship”, nuclear family and welfare state began to erode. The ‘standard employment relationship’ continued to exist, but many other forms of employment emerged alongside it (even for the group

that had previously been financially secure): more part-time work, more temporary positions, multiple jobs at the same time, and new models such as temporary agency work. Consequently, work and income became more insecure and flexible. The welfare state also changed: benefits were increasingly tied to employment and came with more obligations. Politicians and media warned that an overly generous safety net would become a “social hammock” for those who do not want to contribute and preferred to relax instead. The performance principle thus turned into a constant demand for people to be available and active. At the same time, state spending was expected to generate economic returns. Social policy acquired an “investment” character. One example is the expansion of early childcare, primarily aimed at attracting more women to the labour market.

Heightened performance demands, less security

The success story of the former “key performers” – mainly men in secure full-time jobs – did not continue. Real wages stagnated, the family income no longer sufficed, and responsibilities in families and firms shifted. Some therefore speak of a “downward mobility society”. However, this picture is only partly accurate. Certain groups that were previously disadvantaged, for example women, have experienced limited upward mobility. Although many work under precarious conditions, there are now opportunities for advancement and possibilities for freer lifestyles that did not exist in the past.

Despite all these changes, the performance principle persists, albeit in a new form. Performance is increasingly measured by quantifiable results and efficiency. Moreover, many state-regulated sectors have been privatised, for instance the health-care system. Competition therefore spreads to ever more areas of life. In this

idealised scenario, individuals continuously optimise themselves to increase their usefulness, ignoring care obligations. In reality, this leads to the devaluation of many activities that cannot be easily measured, such as nursing, education or other care work. At the same time, the state withdraws from fields like elderly care. Problems are thus individualised – responsibility lies with the individual.

This particularly affects women. They are more likely to work part-time or in other precarious forms of employment, as they are more likely than men to have to juggle both paid and unpaid work.

Overall, performance demands have risen over the past 30 years while security has declined. The boundaries between “normal work”, that promises stability, and precarious work at the perceived margin of society have shifted, and many people feel this insecurity.

Wounded expectations of justice?

To understand what the developments described above mean for people, it helps to look at their subjective expectations of social justice. Such expectations always relate the individual’s life situation to societal reality. People judge justice by how they compare themselves to their surroundings and what they consider fair.

Fundamentally, these claims still rest heavily on the performance principle: one’s own ability and the actual contribution should be recognised and rewarded. Little has changed here. Research, however, shows that expectations shift with societal developments. Since the 2008 financial crisis and the strict austerity measures in Greece, which have impoverished the lower

classes in particular, many people in Germany and Austria feel that their previous expectations were “too high” and that they should actually be satisfied with their current situation. They now compare their situation more downwards and adjust their expectations accordingly – even though their basic belief in the performance principle still contains an upward-mobility promise. The result is a sense of tension: many find it harder to express frustration about their personal economic stagnation or even regression. Yet they experience it, as real wages rarely rise and public infrastructure in many regions deteriorates.

This is reinforced by the general economisation of life. More and more areas are organised according to market logics rather than social principles. In health care, for example, it is considered normal that staff “needs to work harder” so that hospitals do not run deficits. Whether basic public and social services such as health and care should be privatised and guided by economic principles at all is not debated in neoliberal logic. This “normality” acts like a force of nature that supposedly cannot be questioned. At the same time, scientific evidence shows a growing identification with the market and its logic, even among employees. Many are proud of Germany’s status as an “export world champion”. Consequently – despite wounded expectations – there is a kind of voluntary submission to the new guidelines of society.

Political implications

The hard-to-express vulnerability and powerlessness of many people in the face of a strongly economically-driven “normality” often leads to diffuse anger. This anger should actually be directed at the neoliberal structures described above, but because of their apparent normality, these structures seem overwhelming and immutable. Yet anger needs a target: this creates greater susceptibility to right-wing interpretations that offer simple enemy stereotypes and

identify apparent culprits. This particularly affects migrants and other groups with little power in society, but also the established political parties. At the same time, many (including younger) people, driven by economic and geopolitical insecurity, develop a desire for clear, traditional structures, such as a return to conservative gender roles.

In society, fear of decline rises even among those without personal experience of it. Even without actual material losses, many people have experienced violations of their expectations of justice that have accumulated over time. They feel they have to run faster and faster to avoid sliding down a “backwards-moving escalator”. This frustration increasingly manifests as general dissatisfaction with “the system” or “politics”. At the same time, many continue to operate within the logic of that system – for example, by demanding the exclusion of certain groups from a scarce welfare state rather than questioning the scarcity itself.

These developments help right-wing and fascist politics attract more and more frustrated supporters. To counteract this, we must change what justice and performance mean to us. Precarious work and high performance requirements are not laws of nature, even if they are considered “normal” today.

Do you want to learn more about how debates in the workplace and society are shaped by right-wing interpretations?

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