

Smack in the Middle – Crises of the Working World and their Co-optation by the Right #4

CONNECT

(Not) a Marginal Phenomenon? Right-Wing Populism in Society and at Work

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 **journalist and author Peter Bierl**.

In 2025 right-wing populism is no longer merely a marginal social phenomenon. This is shown not only by the steady rise of the AfD, which in many nationwide polls is the strongest party. How did we get here?

Terminology: What Exactly Is Right-Wing Populism?

In order to talk about the spread of right-wing populism we first need a definition. Populism describes a political logic that pits “the people” – presented as good and on the right side – against an supposedly “evil elite”. This basic pattern differs depending on political orientation in terms of its interpretation. Right-wing populism ethnicises the notion of the people and links it to national identity; the elite is described as foreign or “alienated”.

These constructions open up space for conspiracy narratives and antisemitic images, for example when reference is made to “globalist elites”. The left-wing variant of populism, on the other hand, usually refers to a simplified portrayal of capitalism and economic elites.

There is also a practical reason why the term is used so frequently in the media: its use cannot be prohibited by law. Journalists can employ it without fearing a libel suit, whereas words such as “fascist” or “right-extremist” are more easily challenged in court. Consequently the AfD is today often labelled as “right-wing populist” – a label that previously was also applied to the NPD, although the NPD openly shows proximity to National Socialism. Only a judicial classification later made it legally possible to label the NPD as right-wing extremist.

Spreading and deeply rooted

The fact that right-wing populist positions resonate so strongly is not a new phenomenon. **Scientific studies** have been showing their prevalence in Germany for decades, as well as the fact that parts of the population have always held firmly to extreme right-wing worldviews. The

so-called “Mitte-Study”, which examines right-wing extremist attitudes in German society, found this to be true for 3 percent of the German population in its latest study. But even outside this extreme, many people hold racist views – for example, 30 % agree with the statement that refugees “systematically abuse the social welfare system”. More than half agree at least partially that Germany is “overrun by foreigners.” Also significant is a large gray area of people who do not clearly agree with misanthropic attitudes, but do not clearly reject them either. This applies to a solid 20% of those surveyed.

In addition, dehumanising ideas are **structurally** embedded in Germany. One example is the citizenship law that existed until 2000, which was based on *ius sanguinis* - i.e. descent rather than place of birth. Thus a grandchild of Turkish guest workers born in Germany was officially considered a foreigner. So-called “Russian Germans,” whose ancestors emigrated to Russia in the 18th and 19th centuries and who came to Germany in the 1980s, were instantly recognised as German citizens by law. This reflects the idea of ethno-nationalism: a German is someone who has “German blood,” not someone who lives here.

These deep-rooted attitudes are reflected in **everyday experiences**. Existing prejudices are currently fueled by public debates; racist remarks and right-wing populist discussions are also voiced by parties of the so-called centre parties, for instance members of the federal government. Those affected notice the consequences in very concrete terms, for example through derogatory comments at work or experiences of racism when looking for housing. The societal mood does not stop

at businesses either. Surveys show that workers are more likely to hold right-wing extremist views than the average population. And even among union members, there is a comparatively high proportion of AfD voters.

How Did the AfD Rise?

If right-wing populist attitudes are nothing new in Germany, why has the AfD been steadily gaining ground nationwide for the past ten years? Why is it particularly successful in translating social resentment into electoral success? The AfD is not the first anti-democratic party in the Federal Republic, but it is the first that has permanently established itself and entered every parliament. A plausible explanation is that it is less the party’s own peculiarities and more the societal developments of recent decades – which have sharpened social conditions – that fuel its success.

Economic uncertainty and fear of social decline

More and more people in Germany are struggling in their everyday lives. One reason is the world of work and the economy. Inflation and rising prices increase poverty. In many fields – especially social services and health care – work has become more intense and stressful; cases of (chronic) exhaustion and burnout are on the rise.

Many can barely make a living from their wages: 800 000 employees in Germany have to “top up” their earnings, i.e. receive social benefits in addition to their salary. Fifteen percent of workers are employed in low-wage sector.

On the other hand, public services are deteriorating. The quality of state infrastructure and public transport declines, daycare places are scarce, rural swimming

pools and youth clubs close, and the health care system is overburdened almost everywhere. In addition, demographic change is causing many people legitimate concern—who will take care of the elderly in an aging society, both financially and practically? The climate crisis aggravates many problems – e.g., agricultural crises and industrial transformation.

Consequently political challenges are enormous, and the failure of election promises (especially in multi-party coalitions that rely on compromise) is almost inevitable. This leads to massive disappointment and a general dissatisfaction with “the system”, which many people feel no longer works for them.

Broken Promise of Prosperity

But why does this help the right wing rise to power? One possible answer is as follows: prosperity and the prospect of upward mobility are the glue that holds democratic politics together. Historically, despite the prevalence of discriminatory attitudes, the majority of the population felt politically affiliated with the democratic mainstream parties—mainly because they experienced real social advancement. The post-World-War II decades brought widespread prosperity and the belief that hard work could secure a better life for one’s family. Prosperity thus acted as a democratic adhesive: although though right-wing resentments existed, they rarely translated into votes for anti-democratic parties. Due to the worsening social conditions described above, less and less of this social promise of prosperity remains.

The causes are structural: social inequality has intensified dramatically over the past 30 years. Today, the poorer half of Germans have hardly any wealth – together they account for just 3 percent of total wealth in Germany. In contrast, the tax burden on the richest has been declining in relative terms since the 1990s. This means that this group also contributes less to the financing

of public services. Not only has collective upward mobility stalled, but the distribution of wealth has shifted and now favours privileged classes even more.

Due to the deterioration of their living conditions, many people have turned away from government and politics in general in recent years. However, many lack knowledge about the underlying causes and thus a critical interpretation of social developments. This makes them susceptible to right-wing politics, which seeks scapegoats and deliberately addresses existing prejudices. Inhuman attitudes are therefore not new, but today they can be mobilized much more effectively for political purposes. This is precisely what has helped right-wing parties such as the AfD achieve their successes.

Challenges for wage dependents and their representatives

The rise of right-wing populism and, with it, the AfD poses a clear challenge not only for democrats but for all employees. For the AfD combines its right-wing populist ideology with neoliberal positions: it opposes established trade unions, its economic policies would exacerbate inequality, and social division would make it more difficult for employees to fight together for better working conditions. Solidarity is crucial, especially in these times, because future governments will continue to push for social cuts. As this text has shown, this also poses an acute threat to democracy.

What can employees – and especially their representatives (works councils, staff councils, unions) – do about it? Four central points:

1. Strengthen core objectives:

Trade unions and works/staff councils must keep focusing on their fundamental tasks – good working conditions, fair wages, and security for all wage earners.

2. Strong local organisation:

Trade unions should become more involved at the local level, highlighting specific problems and identifying their causes. In the past, they were closely linked to the working class in city and district associations. At the same time, internal organization must be empowering and encouraging rather than bureaucratic.

3. Promote political education:

Works meetings and other formats should be used to explain societal developments and political contexts. This gives employees a critical perspective that can expose right-wing interpretations. It also creates a basis for active participation in workplace transformation – for example in industry, where the transition to sustainable production must be ecologically sound and at the same time secure jobs.

4. Acts of courage in everyday life:

In the workplace, in clubs or within families, racist or dehumanising remarks must be confronted firmly and decisively.

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

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