

Smack in the Middle – Crises of the Working World and their Co-optation by the Right #3

CONNECT

Strong together instead of isolated and powerless: transformation, solidarity, and industrial action against right-wing encroachment

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 [Kathy Ziegler \(journalist; ver.di North-Rhine-West district, Initiative Trade-Unionists for Climate Protection\)](#).

What drives far-right parties and movements are feelings such as anger, fear and frustration among their supporters and sympathisers. Therefore, crises and far-reaching changes in the world of work – which confront employees with existential problems and trigger negative emotions and worries – can become door-openers for right-wing politics. So do transformation, uncertainty, and crisis automatically drive people into the arms of the right? Fortunately, it's not that simple. This text shows why democratic structures in the workplace can be an

effective tool against right-wing co-optation – and tells the story of an impressive and inspiring labour dispute in the Italian automotive industry.

Transformation anxiety fuels the political right...

The biggest drivers of profound transformations in the world of work – not only in Germany – are the necessary shift away from fossil energy to cope with the climate crisis and the rapidly advancing digitalisation. “Transformation” is therefore no longer a temporary state of emergency, but has become a permanent requirement. The omnipresence of this issue, combined with very real changes in companies and regions, creates transformation anxiety for many employees – especially where closures, relocations or extensive restructurings are looming.

The term **transformation** describes a profound change in the world of work: on the one hand digitalisation and artificial intelligence, on the other hand adaptations to climate change, both influencing companies and job profiles. New work models are developing, further training becomes necessary. Some jobs disappear while new ones are created.

The understandable concerns of workers are deliberately seized upon by the political right. They offer apparently simple solutions that, however, do not address structural causes. Instead of identifying the real drivers

of transformation, they present scapegoats – groups blamed for developments they neither caused nor could influence. Frequently this goes hand-in-hand with a fundamental denial of the central challenges: for example, rejecting the scientifically proven climate crisis and insisting on “business as usual” when it comes to fossil fuels. People whose jobs are actually threatened feel temporarily validated. After all, not having to change anything conveys a (false) sense of security.

Empirical studies by the Hans-Böckler-Stiftung show that transformation anxiety can significantly shape political attitudes. When Germans fear losing their job, they on average become more sceptical of institutions and less satisfied with democracy – which makes them more likely to vote for far-right parties such as the AfD. What matters far more than the objective risk of job loss is the subjective perception of it. A striking feature of many AfD supporters, compared with voters of other parties, is the presence of particularly strong fears and concerns in various areas of life, which often do not correspond to their actual living conditions. Because right-wing parties, through their narratives and language, contribute to a climate of anxiety and insecurity, their voters quickly find themselves caught in a self-reinforcing negative narrative. In addition, the fear of change can be exacerbated when the term “transformation” already has negative connotations. This is the case, for example, in parts of eastern Germany, where the period after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of Germany in 1989/1990 was associated with job losses, pressure to adapt, and devaluation for many people.

Emotions are therefore crucial for political orientation. ***Powerlessness and shame, in particular, are feelings the political right exploits.*** Racist scapegoat stories may provide at most a brief respite, but offer no long-term solution: those who fear being left behind by advancing digitalization or who feel powerless in the face of possible job loss will not be able to shake these feelings simply by blaming others.

... as long as there are no answers based on solidarity!

Powerlessness is countered by self-efficacy and agency, i.e., opportunities to shape one's own situation and to participate in decision-making. In a capitalist world of work these possibilities usually do not exist unless workers demand and fight for them. Self-organisation of workers in the workplace and beyond has two positive effects: On the one hand, an organised workforce is better able to stand up for its rights and enjoys a stronger bargaining position when decisions about upcoming transformations are made. The success of this is illustrated in the example presented in the second part of the text.

On the other hand, there is a positive correlation between democratic structures in the workplace and democratic attitudes in general. This has been proven repeatedly by social science, e.g., in a study conducted by the WSI (Economic and Social Science Institute) in 2024 on co-determination in the workplace. (This includes both co-determination in the company itself, through works councils and staff councils, and trade union rights of co-determination through collective agreements.) Such structures not only lead to better working conditions across Europe but also to fewer anti-democratic attitudes, such as racist opinions. This is due to greater trust in democratic institutions. Through co-determination in the workplace, for example, people learn that it can pay off to stand up for collective concerns. This not only improves their own situation, but also creates self-efficacy and the feeling that they are not helplessly at the mercy of external conditions.

Thus, on the one hand there is a learning effect: similar to the workplace, it is also possible to successfully fight for one's goals and convictions in a political democracy. On the other hand, the resulting sense of self-efficacy counteracts feelings of powerlessness and shame – thereby depriving the political right of fertile ground for exploiting real problems. **Those who**

advocate for self-organization and co-determination in the workplace are therefore also promoting a kind of “immunisation” against rising far-right extremism.

A real-world utopia at a former automotive supplier plant in Florence

The positive potential of this approach is clearly illustrated by the struggle of employees at the former automotive supplier GKN near the Italian city of Florence. From a protest against their dismissal emerged a visionary project that aims to rebuild the supposedly economically untenable plant from the ground up: democratically organised, socio-ecologically oriented, focused on the common good, and in the form of a cooperative owned by the workers themselves. How did this happen?

After the site was taken over by an investment fund in 2018, the employees grew alert. When the new owners announced a plan to shift 30% of production to Spain, the workers responded with collective resistance – a strike that successfully stopped the move. Even then it became clear: collective action is crucial.

The workforce began to strengthen its internal structure. More and more workers were appointed as trusted representatives and thus actively involved in collective self-organisation and the mobilisation of new colleagues. They formed a collective that was well prepared for what lay ahead. This paid off when, on 9 July 2021, over 400 colleagues received termination notices. That very night the workers occupied the factory and opened a permanent works meeting – which is still ongoing today (as of December 2025). Day and night, the collective defends the plant with a strike picket in order to keep their jobs and ultimately carry out a sustainable transformation of the business. The motivation was clear: Fiat's switch to electric

drives allegedly made the production of drive shafts redundant. In addition to the existential threat, many workers felt their self-esteem diminished; security and future prospects were jeopardised. As described earlier, such threats often open the door to right-wing interpretations and increasing fragmentation, i.e., isolation and individual withdrawal. The experience at GKN, however, confirms that collective self-empowerment is an effective antidote.

Initially, the workers were able to fight off their dismissals in court. But they did not stop there; they began to develop a positive, resilient vision for the future. This involved searching for socio-ecological alternatives.

After extensive discussion within the collective, they set the goal to develop an ecologically sustainable, commons-oriented production. Instead of drive shafts for cars, they aim to produce

solar modules and cargo bikes. Production of cargo bikes has already started in a small rented workshop. To realise the idea, the employees sought to build power through alliances with civil society, for example with the climate movement. As a result, a diverse and growing alliance of various actors developed, whose core principle is “Mutualismo”: active solidarity expressed through close exchange and mutual support (e.g., during strikes) that benefits all sides.

Despite multiple setbacks – lack of political support, suspended salary payments, eviction threats – the factory collective has stuck to its goal. When salaries stopped, they organised successful crowdfunding campaigns. They also founded the cooperative ex-GKN for Future to advance the conversion and the continuation of the plant. The worker's cooperative, in which the staff hold share rights in the company, will then run the factory; additional civil-society groups become shareholders as well. This commitment opens up new avenues, not only

“Insorgiamo” – in English: “Let us rise” – is the collective's motto. It deliberately echoes a slogan used by the Italian partisans who liberated Florence from Nazi occupation in World War II. Their aim is to fight for a good life for everyone and to resist injustice.

for their own company: on the collective's initiative the regional government of Tuscany passed a law allowing insolvent or closure-threatened companies to be transferred to employee cooperatives for reconstruction and modernisation.

Whether this vision will become reality remains uncertain. Many former employees were forced to abandon their fight and look for new jobs, particularly due to the cessation of wage payments. Today, the collective counts just under 100 active former employees. They are threatened with eviction from the factory premises, which could be ordered at any moment. Despite the uncertain outcome, ex-GKN for Future has demonstrated something important: how much power a collective can build up when it takes matters into its own hands. How crucial solidarity among workers and social alliances is. And what power an initially utopian yet positive vision of the future can develop—even with very real successes. A member of the collective sums it up best:

“Fatigue and anger are part of our reality, but we can carry these feelings together. The struggle is exhausting, yet it is also a form of liberation therapy.”

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