

Miners Petition to the King of Prussia for Relief from Intolerable Working Conditions in Essen (June 29, 1867)

Abstract

The law concerning “the supervision of mining and the relations between mine and steel workers by mining authorities” of 1860 was followed by Prussia’s General Mining Law [*Allgemeines Berggesetz für die preußische Staaten*] of 1865. Both laws gave mine operators greater autonomy vis-à-vis the state and helped remove pre-modern barriers to the development of a vibrant mining industry. At the same time, however, these laws also entailed numerous disadvantages for miners, who were left more susceptible to wage fluctuations, the whims of profit-oriented owners, and sickness, disability, and death. In this petition from 1867, miners in Essen—part of the industrializing Ruhr district—complain about their working conditions. They address their complaint to the king, but this does not prevent their employers from rejecting the petition out of hand. Not long after, Essen miners went on strike—a new form of collective protest that led German employers to speak of strikes as a “cholera” afflicting German industry.

Source

Essen, June 29, 1867 [...]

Your Most Serene Highness, Supreme King!

Your Most Gracious King and Lord!

Spurred by ever-greater hardship, the humbly undersigned miners from the district of Essen dare approach Your Majesty’s throne to humbly present the following for Your most gracious consideration:

Since the passage of the law of May 20, 1860, concerning “the supervision of mining and the relations between mine and steel workers by mining authorities” [...], mine owners and miners have been able to conclude contracts on the basis of free and mutual agreement, and the Royal Mining Authority has no longer participated in the hiring and firing of miners, nor in the determination and payment of shift and piecework wages, with the result being that *the determination of working hours and wages by employers’ cooperatives* (i.e. the capitalists) *takes place entirely at their will*. Since that time, they *have imposed such an excessive extension of working hours* that this work—which was already unhealthy enough to begin with—now leaves many miners unfit for further labor by age 30 to 35; additionally, the entrepreneurs have set our *wage so low* that we can barely purchase the most dire necessities. The employers view us merely as machines without any will and as instruments whose capacity for work they can exploit to their utmost advantage; Your Majesty will gather from the following particulars just how little the determination of working hours involves “free agreement.”

In the past, when we worked above and beyond the eight-hour shift, sometimes even pulling a double shift, it was on a volunteer basis and in exceptional cases involving an interruption to operations, such as a breakdown of hauling lines, a tearing of brake cables, etc. Now, however, this sort of thing has become mandatory, and anyone who does not care to submit to this longer work time is dismissed from the mine and, if possible, given such a reference that he will not be able to find work at another mine. For instance, last year at the Bonifazius Mine, a placard posted in the pit house by the mine manager informed miners of the following: “From now on, work hours are extended to 4 p.m.; anyone not wishing to comply with

this regulation will be dismissed.” And since we know that the situation is exactly the same in other mines, this threat forces us to extend our shift until 4 p.m. until we are no longer capable of doing so. Since most miners already enter the mine at 5 a.m., that amounts to an eleven-hour workday. Whoever leaves work earlier, i.e., steps into the pithead baths earlier, faces punishment. As a result, a ten- to eleven-hour shift has been introduced at most mines. Additionally, it usually takes another two hours to transport workers. No matter how encouraging it may be when the mines report brisk sales of their products, our bodies cannot possibly endure such long shifts. [...] It is with good reason that the local Board of Inquiry on Recruitment for the Royal Military Service has noticed that overwhelming numbers of miners are unfit for military service. Nothing else can be expected when young people have to work all day in underground spaces, in bad weather and damp areas; when they work in mines where transportation involves a pulley system and must endure cold drafts in sweat-dampened mining attire for hours until they are raised into the light of day at the end of each shift. The chest in particular becomes prematurely constricted from excessive work in the mine. But if this overexertion affects the health of these people in such a way that they can no longer work in the mines by age 35 or perform as well as the younger people who have not yet sacrificed their strength, and if the miners’ physician usually gives them the medical reference “still fit for light iron and steel work,” then they are not entitled to a disability pension from the miners’ health insurance and pension fund. If such light mining work is not available, if they are forced to look for suitable work with private employers, then they lose their rights as members of the miners’ guild completely, and the most pitiable fortune awaits them in their premature old age. Indeed, the enterprises are so ruthless that during intermittent periods of weaker sales, they do not (or at least seldom) dismiss the younger or recently hired workers, who are much better able to find work elsewhere, but almost always the older miners, namely those who have served for years, often in defiance of death, sacrificing their energy for the benefit of their employers. [...]

Although we are exposed to so many accidents—how many lives have been lost during the dangerous ride in and out of the shaft alone?—we have been deprived of a beautiful and cherished custom according to which the mine supervisor used to lead the miners in prayer before the group set off in the morning. Now, instead of carrying a prayer book, many of the officers come into the pithead baths swearing coarsely and drive the miners into the shaft a quarter of an hour before operations start. Even though the morning prayer made the shift ten minutes shorter, it was still irresponsible to eliminate it in almost every mine.

With all that, piecework wages are set so low that we generally live in dire circumstances despite our all-out efforts. Currently, the middling worker, such as constitutes the majority, is able to earn an average of 17 to 18 thalers a month, if he applies himself diligently and works an eleven-hour shift. Only those doing the most lucrative work manage 30 thalers or more a month; the lower workers, however, only nine to ten thalers. [...] For a family of four [...], 20 thalers and 25 silbergroschen^[1] are necessary to cover basic monthly expenses, and this does not even include lighting, heating, clothing, footwear, household utensils, school fees, and taxes (15 thalers a year). On average, however, a worker does not make more than 15 to 16 thalers a month.

At present, for all intents and purposes, we have no actual protection against the aforementioned abuses, partly because the Chief Royal Mining Office is located in Dortmund, and partly because the miners lack the resources necessary to make their grievances heard clearly and forcefully.

Even if the law of May 20, 1860, which was passed by the state parliament elected on the basis of the three-class franchise, grants employers the right to extend shifts and lower wages at will, the general Prussian laws nevertheless prevent them from taking advantage of that right in a way that inevitably ruins workers both physically and mentally.

NOTES

[1] A Prussian silver coin worth 12 pfennigs—trans.

Source: Klaus Tenfelde and Helmuth Trischler, eds., *Bis vor die Stufen des Throns. Bittschriften und Beschwerden von Bergleuten im Zeitalter der Industrialisierung*. Munich: C. H. Beck, 1986, pp. 187–90; reprinted in Wolfgang Piereth, ed., *Das 19. Jahrhundert. Ein Lesebuch zur deutschen Geschichte 1815–1918*. 2nd edition. Munich: C. H. Beck, 1997, pp. 316–19.

Translation: Erwin Fink

Recommended Citation: Miners Petition to the King of Prussia for Relief from Intolerable Working Conditions in Essen (June 29, 1867), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/forging-an-empire-bismarckian-germany-1866-1890/ghdi:document-1753>> [May 18, 2024].