

Police Reports on Strikebreaking and Workplace Conflict in Hamburg (1889)

Abstract

Towards the end of the Bismarckian era, labor relations deteriorated and workplace conflict escalated into a number of large-scale strikes. As the following excerpt from a report about strikebreaking at a Hamburg factory demonstrates, in this heated atmosphere the justice system tended to presume that most strikers were militant and often punished them with relatively harsh sentences.

Source

On the evening of September 14, with the words, “You deserve to be thrown into the Elbe [River],” the molder August Arnold Dahl supposedly attempted to coerce the molder Grüttner to stop his recently commenced work at the iron foundry on Steinwärder. Dahl maintains that he told Grüttner that, as a young person, he should be ashamed of himself first for accepting assistance for half a year from colleagues who had been forced out, and then signing on after all, even though many older colleagues, who were married and in some instances had many children, were still unemployed. Besides, Grüttner was apparently so drunk that evening that it seems unlikely that he could have even the slightest recollection of the exchange. The witness Grüttner insists under oath that Dahl did use these words. The prosecutor deems Dahl guilty of attempted coercion on account of the witnesses’ testimony and requests a sentence of two months imprisonment based on extenuating circumstances. The defense counsel, Dr. R. Gieschen, pleads for an acquittal, because there was certainly no attempted coercion. The court pronounces a verdict of guilty and sentences the accused to one month in prison.

Source: *Hamburger Echo*, Hamburg, no. 298, December 20, 1889; reprinted in Jens Flemming, Klaus Saul, and Peter-Christian Witt, eds., *Quellen zur Alltagsgeschichte der Deutschen 1871–1914*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1977, p. 125.

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