

The Sopade Report on the Mood among Workers (September 1938)

Abstract

Hitler understood that a general economic upswing—and the drop in unemployment that would follow—was the best means for securing the loyalty of the German people. To that end, as early as 1933, he provided for state financing of job-creation initiatives—e.g., the *Autobahnen*—by running a considerable budget deficit. Additionally, the government promoted the establishment and expansion of private companies through state credits, tax benefits, and the like. With the economy being guided increasingly closely as part of the preparation for war, the Nazi regime was able to list the virtual elimination of unemployment within a few years as a resounding success. One of the flip sides of the Nazi economic upswing, however, was the National Socialist “coordination” [*Gleichschaltung*] and control of the workers. While the government was celebrating May 1, 1933—“National Labor Day”—as a legal holiday for the first time, Robert Ley was preparing to dissolve and absorb the unions into the German Labor Front [*Deutsche Arbeitsfront*, or DAF], a process that would begin the very next day. Henceforth, this monolithic, NSDAP-affiliated organization would regulate relations between employers and employees, with the latter losing their right to strike and organize independently. The DAF’s numerous sub-organizations sought to completely incorporate the workforce into the structure of National Socialism. For example, the DAF office “Strength through Joy” [“Kraft durch Freude”] organized leisure-time and vacation activities for workers and their families. Many workers, however, were well aware that they were paying a high price for their employment under the Nazi regime—a point made clear by the Sopade Report of September 1938, which was commissioned by the exiled leadership of the SPD.

Source

Central Germany, September 1938: Among industrial workers there are many who do not give a damn about the successes of the Hitler system and have only scorn and contempt for the whole show. Others, however, say: “Well, there are a lot of things Adolf does not himself know about and which he does not want.” But one is never quite sure with them whether they mean it seriously or only want to protect their backs. Naturally, there are also many who have become unpolitical. In particular, a large number of the skilled workers who were unemployed for a long time are not enthusiastic Nazis. They often complain about the fact that they earn much less now than in say 1929 but, at the end of the day, they always say: “It’s all the same to us; at least we have work.” The further one goes down into the poorer sections the more opposition there is. But even now—although they know there is a labor shortage—they are all scared of losing their jobs. The years of unemployment have not been forgotten.

Those who are still Nazis in the plant are subdued. One has the feeling that many of them only stay in the Party to get an easier life. If discussions occur they usually give in or do not get involved. They make no use whatsoever of the jargon employed at their meetings. The facts speak clearly enough for themselves. The fact that one’s wages continually buy less and less and that the slave driving gets worse and worse every day cannot be denied by even the “oldest fighter.” The “old fighters,” in particular, have mostly had enough of the Third Reich. But it is still a different matter as far as white-collar employees are concerned. Among them those who have come up in the world through the Party make much of their decorations and titles.

The mood in the plants is one of depression. It’s true that even in the old days work was no fun and was regarded by many as a necessary evil. But in those days one had the feeling: if you don’t like something

you can get it off your chest frankly and in public. Perhaps something will be done about it; in any case it will be a relief. Now one goes into the plant with a heavy heart because one is always afraid of saying a word too many and landing oneself in a spot. There is a dark cloud over one's whole life. One even looks forward less to getting home than in the old days because there is no longer any relaxed comradeship with friends and neighbors. Before, one always used to meet like-minded people in the workers' sport and education associations, for a game of chess, or in the People's House. Now one leaves the factory, runs a few errands, goes home, reads the headlines in the paper, and goes to bed, and next morning the same monotonous cycle begins again. Those who have their "duty" to perform whether in the SS, SA, Party, or Welfare are even worse off. They have to slave away in the evenings as well and moan a lot, particularly if they have been doing heavy physical work during the day. Most of them would gladly give up their posts. But they lack the courage to do so.

Source of English translation: Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, eds., *Nazism, 1919–1945*, vol. 2: *State, Economy and Society 1933–1939*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000, pp. 179–80.

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