

Communist Newspaper Report on the Situation of Female Agricultural Laborers in Eastern Germany (July 4, 1931)

Abstract

This article, published in the July 1931 issue of the Saxon edition of *Arbeiterstimme*, the daily newspaper of the KPD, describes in detail the precarious working and living conditions of female agricultural laborers in eastern Germany, where agriculture was still dominated by large estates. The article calls on the female farm workers to join the KPD and to go on strike during the harvest for higher wages and better working conditions, citing some examples of successful agricultural strikes. Strikes as a means of enforcing economic and political demands played an enormously important role from the beginning of the Weimar Republic, and this also applied to the agricultural sector. While criticizing the German Agricultural Workers' Association (DLV), the free trade union of agricultural and forestry workers whose members mostly were Social Democrats, as inactive and “sozialfaschistisch,” the article claimed that only the KPD would represent the true interests of agricultural laborers. It also points out the need to include Polish female migrant workers, whose recruitment was requested by German landowners, in the political mobilization.

Source

Prepare for the Harvest Strike!

Women farm workers to the front!

Following the strike of the female agricultural workers on the Magdeburg estate of Körbelitz, which was carried out by the women workers who had been placed in agricultural work by the Magdeburg Welfare Office against the inhumane conditions on this estate, a new example of the increased will to fight is noticeable among the female agricultural workers: last week, a strike spontaneously broke out among the 35 women on the estate in Paupitzsch in the Delitzsch district, against the worsening exploitation methods of the estate owner. For three days, these women stood united in battle until the landowner was forced to accept their demands under pressure. The fact that these two strikes were led by the Revolutionary Trade Union Opposition is of decisive importance in the assessment of these two strikes. The women agricultural workers of the Körbelitz estate had already begun to form their own leadership, while in the second case all 35 women workers threw their German Agricultural Workers' Association (DLV) membership books into the corner and turned to the KPD when the requested representative of the DLV did not appear. This shows that the women agricultural workers have already recognized the role of the social-fascist trade union bureaucracy and see the KPD as the only force able to implement their demands. It is therefore important to take advantage of the upcoming harvest strikes to involve and organize the women agricultural workers, taking into account their special interests and demands.

Women farm workers are among the most exploited class of working women. Due to the Provisional Agricultural Labor Ordinance, most women agricultural workers are still forced to work on the farm for a few pfennigs an hour. In November 1929, for example, a woman working in the truck system in East Prussia received 18.33 pfennigs per hour, in Pomerania 26 pfennigs, in Mecklenburg 18 pfennigs, compared to the wages of the truck system workers (cash and commodities) of 31.82, 11.51 and 13.05 pfennigs. The wages of female free laborers at the same time were, compared to the wages of male free laborers:

male: female:

East Prussia 38,48 Pf. 35,48 Pf.

Pomerania 49,00 Pf. 26,00 Pf.

Mecklenburg 37,24 Pf. 25,65 Pf.

In the Free State of Thuringia, for example, fully-fledged young female workers received, in addition to food and housing

at the age of 14 years 13,15 Pf. total hourly wage

at the age of 15 years 14,65 Pf. total hourly wage

at the age of 16 17.65 Pf. total hourly wage

over 17 years of age 22,57 Pf. total hourly wage.

These wages were reduced by an average of 1 Pf. as a result of the Junkers' attacks on farm workers' wages. These examples may suffice to give you an idea of the miserable living conditions of female agricultural workers. Added to this is the hard work, which places the same demands on women as on men, and the long working hours, especially during the summer months. At the same time, a female farm worker still has to look after the household and the children.

Child poverty is particularly pronounced in agriculture. Not only are children neglected due to a lack of supervision, but agricultural workers' families are also forced to make their children work from a very early age due to insufficient wages. According to an official census, in 1925, no fewer than 400,000 children under the age of 14 were working in German agriculture.

The existing **laborers' housing system** leaves the farm workers' families completely at the mercy of the landowner. According to the farm labor regulations [VLO], these dwellings should be "in good condition." But the reality is different. They were housed in dilapidated shacks and miserable holes. According to the VLO, a farm worker's family home should consist of a living room, a bedroom and a kitchen. In April, our affiliated newspaper in western Saxony published a report stating that two families – one consisting of three people, the other expecting an addition to the family – had to live, sleep, and cook together in one room on the estate in Trautzschen. The accommodations of unmarried women farm workers present a similar picture.

Sacks in front of the windows are used as curtains, which are an unaffordable luxury at this hourly wage. It looks like this everywhere. With such living conditions and the hard work, it is no wonder that the **health of women farm workers and their children is extremely poor**. The report of a rural health insurance doctor from Silesia reads as follows:

"The health condition of women agricultural workers is generally much worse than that of men. They frequently suffer from uterine prolapses and other uterine problems, sagging wombs and general prolapses of the intestines, etc. Severe anemia is very common (butter and vegetables are a rare delicacy on a farm worker's table), as is tuberculosis, especially of the lungs, uterine disorders and general physical weakness in later life, caused by a large number of births. (I have quite a few patients who have given birth 8-16 times.)"

This sober report is a powerful indictment of the tremendous exploitation of female farm workers. Women farm workers are deprived of all maternity care, so that they have to give birth under the greatest privations, often without a doctor or midwife.

Unemployment, which has also become widespread in the countryside, has hit female agricultural workers hard. Of the 210,790 jobseekers in agriculture on March 31, 1931, 75,323 were unemployed female agricultural workers. According to the new emergency ordinance, they are almost completely excluded from unemployment benefits!

The German landowners requested 73,000 Polish migrant workers for the year 1931. The agreement expressly stipulates that 80-85 percent of these 73,000 Polish farm workers must be women! These Polish farm workers were at the mercy of the German landowners' harshest terror and wage pressure. Their situation is possibly even more dire than that of the German female farm workers. However, the time they spend here also presents a favorable opportunity to influence and educate them, and therefore it is particularly urgent to reach these social classes during the preparation and implementation of the harvest strikes.

For the **demands**:

Equal pay for equal work!

Against forced female labor!

Against child exploitation!

Protection for mother and child!

the women agricultural workers must be mobilized with the aim of including them in the strike front! The **slogan**:

No struggle committee without women farm workers!

must become the central slogan in the preparation and implementation of the harvest strikes. Only the complete involvement of all women agricultural workers in the harvest strikes will ensure a united front in the fight for the realization of the demands of the agricultural workers!

Source of original German text: *Arbeiterstimme*. Daily newspaper of the Communist Party of Germany, section of the Communist International, Saxony district, East Saxony circulation area, July 4, 1931.

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