

# Hilde Walter, “The Misery of the ‘New *Mittelstand*’” (1929)

## Abstract

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Hilde Walter (1895-1976) was a social worker until 1918. After World War I she became a journalist in Berlin. In this article published in *Die Weltbühne* she describes the social circumstances of salaried employees and civil servants, whose numbers rose steadily in the Weimar Republic. In doing so, she sheds light on the discrepancy between the politically idealized view of these employees as “the new middle class” and their harsh economic reality.

## Source

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### The Misery of the ‘New *Mittelstand*’

According to the occupational census of 1925, the number of employed persons increased by 28.5 percent since the year 1907. It grew twice as fast as the population, which in the same period increased by only 13.5 percent. The social and economic causes for this shift are known, but it is important to determine which occupations were most intensively involved in the absolute and relative increase in the employed population. For its congress in the fall of last year, the Allgemeine freie Angestelltenbund (AFA) published two books that are of extraordinary significance for these questions: an historical handbook on economic, social, and labor-union policy, *Die Angestelltenbewegung [Employees Movement] 1925–1928*, and a brochure with a plenitude of interesting data, *Die Angestellten in der Wirtschaft [The Employees in the Economy]*.

Without the complicated specialized counts by the AFA, the occupational census processed by the state statistical office would not have allowed us to determine the social stratification of employed persons with sufficient precision because the state statisticians combine white-collar employees and civil servants. The AFA with official help and consent, undertook to separate out the white-collar employees so the data published in the two books can be regarded the best material currently available on these questions. Obviously the main contingent of employed persons is made up of blue-collar workers. If one includes domestic workers, then according to the census of 1927 workers comprise 49.2 percent of employed persons, that is, approximately half, while white-collar employees (excluding civil servants) represent only 11.2 percent of the employed population. These ratios refer, as indicated, to the employed population as a whole and therefore include entrepreneurs, the self-employed, and the family members who assist the latter. The picture changes sharply if one looks at the distribution solely among the occupations of persons employed by others. In 1925 workers, including those employed at home and those occupied in domestic services, comprised 76 percent, the white-collar workers, excluding those in supervisory positions, 17 percent, and civil servants, excluding those in supervisory positions, 7 percent of the employed population. The social stratification of employed persons was also determined for the census years 1892, 1895, 1907, and 1925, and the number of white-collar employees and civil servants constantly increased at the expense of the self-employed and the assisting family members, as well as blue-collar and domestic workers. Just in the period from 1907 to 1925 the number of white-collar employees (excluding civil servants) more than doubled, while concurrently the number of blue-collar workers increased by only 22 percent. The cause of this increase of white-collar employees is not only the entry of previously non-working elements into the labor force, whose first jobs are frequently white-collar; it is also the structural transformations of the economy itself, of certain forms of rationalization, and of the typical increase in the apparatus of distribution in all regions which has prompted this development. Trade unionists often term this “a very significant social reshuffling of the proletariat,” while bourgeois parties of all shades are especially fond of proclaiming the rise of “the new middle class”

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[*Mittelstand*]. Unfortunately the apostles of the new middle class are not able to deliver to the bearers of this enticing title even a fraction of the economic basis that was previously the essential characteristic of the old middle class, which was statistically very considerable and has now largely disappeared.

An illustration of the social structure of the German people (then 54 million) presented by Gustav Schmoller in 1897 to the eighth Evangelical Social Congress in Leipzig now has the effect of an ancient fairy tale:

Aristocracy and wealthy:	0.25 million families
Upper middle class:	2.75 million families
Lower middle class:	3.75 million families
Wage Workers:	5.25 million families

At that time the most important characteristic of the lower middle class was a fundamentally secured existence, a combination of capital owned and income from work. The question of education or culture arose only as a secondary or tertiary factor and played scarcely any role in the delimitation downward, in distinction to the unsecured life of those who earn wages exclusively. How differently the living conditions of the new middle class, which is being courted from both sides, appear today! There is hardly any reliable documentation of the white-collar workers' true income situation because there are no statistics on salaries actually paid. Other sources, however, offer clues: of the subscribers to the national insurance plan for white-collar employees, two-thirds of those insured paid premiums in income categories under 200 marks. The Institut für Konjunkturforschung [Economic Research Institute] calculated the average salaried income of white-collar employees at 159.50 marks in January 1927 and 170.96 marks in June 1927. Since the calculated average includes higher income levels as well, one can imagine that a large number of salaried employees have to get by on much less than the average wage. Of these amounts, 18.70 marks in January went for taxes and social security, 20.40 marks in June. In Berlin and other cities most people have to allow a further 10 marks per month for transportation. There remains then as an average income (still including the highest figures) 130.80 and 140.50 marks per month respectively! It is probably unnecessary to compare the purchasing power of these sums with that of 1913 to verify the dreariness of such an income level. Shrewd old capitalists are fond of telling us about the extraordinary improvement in the situation of white-collar employees thanks to the eight-hour day; in so doing they forget to mention that the enormous intensification and mechanization of white-collar work results in a doubling of the energy output required, and that no one likes to hire employees over forty years old any longer, with the possible exception of expressly confidential positions. The needs of the white-collar employees who have lost their jobs far exceed the capacities of unemployment provisions. In April 1928 official publications counted a total of 183,371 white-collar workers seeking employment; of those approximately 62,000 received insurance payments and approximately 31,500 received emergency provisions; therefore 90,000 unemployed white-collar workers were without unemployment support and, in the best of cases, received small payments from social welfare for the poor. Those receiving emergency support, that is, one-third of all those supported, had already been unemployed for over six months, and therefore in many cases drew only about one-third of their salaries for over half a year.

Thus appear the living conditions of a social stratum, which in the wishful dreams of bourgeois ideologues is destined to be the embodiment of small capitalist enterprises. It should be assumed that to those immediately involved the clear similarity of their own position with that of the proletariat would make them think and that the model of the organized worker would have to inspire imitation. Obviously this comparison has not yet taken hold among the majority of white-collar employees, for out of a total of 3,500,000 only 1,300,000 are members of professional associations of any sort; the overwhelming majority lives without relying on an organization that could represent their interests.

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