

# A Police Officer Reports on Workers in a Hamburg Tavern (1898–1909)

## Abstract

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The following documents present workers in their own social milieu at the turn of the century. The conversations reported by this Hamburg police officer testify to the tense relations between workers and state authorities, and they reflect the dilemmas of the German workers' movement. Authorities and industrialists remained hostile to attempts by workers to achieve concessions through organization, while workers saw well-disciplined labor unions as the only way to change working conditions. The polarization of these two political goals was the defining domestic political conflict in Wilhelmine Germany.

## Source

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I. October 31, 1898

From 9:45-10:45 a.m. a visit was made to the tavern Schweer, Rostocker Straße 9. About 14 workers were present; they sat at various tables, some playing cards, others talking. The conversation of a few workers concerned, among other things, the right of association [*Koalitionsrecht*], in that one worker said: "The government could save itself the attack it is willing to launch on the right of association, because under the laws today the courts already have so much leeway that there is really no need for new legal regulations to constrain the workers in the exercise of the rights given to them by the law. Just recently the court issued another decision, brought on by the joiners' strike on Südstraße, which demonstrates clearly enough that the court doesn't give a damn about the rights of the workers if it can strike a blow at Social Democracy. These sorts of decisions are not rare, because every strike has cases where workers who acted in good faith – that is, who struggled in accordance with the rights granted to them by the Commercial Code – were punished with long prison terms for doing so."

Another worker said: "Our laws are full of holes, because the judge has so many ways to sentence any accused person if he thinks it is appropriate. For example, the situation with the pickets during the joiners' strike was such that it was not possible for the judges to arrest the individuals in question on the basis of the Commercial Code; for that reason the judges got themselves an emergency paragraph from the Traffic Code [*Straßenordnung*], on the basis of which any person can be sentenced who fails to comply with the orders of police officers, even if he is within his rights ten times over. You can see from this case, for example, that anything is possible in our vaunted *Rechtsstaat* [state under the rule of law]. What one paragraph of the law permits, the other abolishes; and, in any case, where it is a matter of preventing the workers from their organizational work, everything possible is done to make this work difficult for them."

A third worker said: "Even though the government has the power to limit the organizational work of the workers through the laws already in existence, even harsher laws are being planned, whereby the worker who participates in a strike and directs careless comments at strike-breakers is supposed to land in jail. In England, even the courts see a strike breaker as a traitor and punish him. But here they want to protect those kinds of people, precisely to give the employer the chance to continue working undisturbed in spite of a strike, so he won't lose any of his capital."

Source: Graumann, October 31, 1898. Staatsarchiv der Freien und Hansestadt Hamburg (Call number: S

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2502-12).

## II. July 11, 1903

From 9:45 to 10:30 a.m., I visited the tavern Hacht, Brückenstraße No. 28, first floor. Seven workers were present, one of whom said the following: "The ruling classes are making every effort to curtail the legal rights of the workers and to turn their strikes into illegal undertakings. Above all, they seek to quash the right of association, so that, with the help of the police, they can make picketing pointless. But let the ruling classes do whatever they want, it will always be an impossibility to force people, once they have stopped working, to start working again. For that to happen, one would have to return to slavery. But given the size that Social Democracy has reached, that is not possible, nor would bourgeois society go along with it."

Another worker said: "The biggest enemies of the workers are not be found among the ruling classes, but among the workers themselves, and they are the strike breakers. No matter how much the ruling classes can rely on their power, meaning the military and the police, it becomes useless once the workers maintain good discipline; and under these circumstances the only threat of defeat they face is from strike-breaking. For the time being, strike-breaking is most dangerous to the workers and it needs to be fought against the most."

Another worker said: "One has to admit that strike-breaking is now the greatest threat to the workers, but solidarity has made incredible strides, especially recently. What used to be common practice, using foreigners as strike-breakers, has now become all but impossible, and the Italians, who used to move about as flying columns of strike-breakers, have been so enlightened by the tireless work of the organizations that they are now refusing to offer strike-breaking services. If the progress of the workers against strike-breaking continues for some time to come – which is definitely to be expected –, then strike-breaking needs to be feared less as an instrument of power of the ruling classes."

Source: Hinz, July 11, 1903. Staatsarchiv der Freien und Hansestadt Hamburg (Call number: S 3930).

## III. May 25, 1909

From 8:15 to 8:45 a.m., I visited the tavern Appelhoff, Schwabenstraße No. 54. During this time, six workers were present; they were talking about the difficulties that strikes create for employers as well as workers. One of them said: "Until now strikes have brought mostly disadvantages, namely for the employers as well as the workers. Let me just mention the current strike of the cement workers. The employers have to bring in workers from the outside, of course with all kinds of promises. Above all, they have to pay the strike-breakers the old wage; then they have to pay for lodging and food, which creates more expenses for them than if they had given the old workers the few extra pennies per day. For the strikers, the disadvantage arises from the fact that they have to fall back on the strike fund. But it does not pay the regular wage, which means that they slide ever more heavily into debt. And when the strike is over and they did in fact get a few pennies more, they face the increased payments into the strike fund and then the repayment of their debts, and thus after the strike they don't end up with any more than they had before."

Another worker said the following: "If there were no class hatred, there would be no strikes. But as long as this class hatred exists, strikes will also happen again and again, and it won't change until the working people have advanced to the point where they no longer have to bow to the capitalist exploiters."

Source: Szymanski, May 25, 1909. Staatsarchiv der Freien und Hansestadt Hamburg (Call number: S 3930).

## IV. March 7, 1903

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From 9:55-10:35 a.m. a visit was paid to tavern Ellerbroock, Hamburgerstraße 134. About 14 workers were present; they were talking at various tables. One worker said: "The tactics of the workers in the economic struggle must be recognized as exemplary even by people who are enemies of the unions, for it is a well-known fact that the strikes of organized workers are not carried out with the bitterness of those strikes in which workers are not organized and the unions have no influence on them. Of course, the employers are claiming the exact opposite, which is also entirely understandable, since they know full well that a well-organized union is able to force through its demands by way of a strike under any circumstances. What does harm many strikes is that the authorities, in an entirely unjust and irresponsible way, intervene on behalf of the employers and thus make the struggle more difficult and systematically prevent a settlement of the outstanding strike questions. Because of the intervention of the authorities in the economic struggle, it unfortunately also happens that bitterness takes hold from that moment on within the ranks of the organized workers, and then we see the kind of scenes that happened last year during the strike of the construction workers. Of course it is the strikers who are blamed for this, not the authorities, who caused it with their measures."

Another worker said: "Experience has taught us that wherever the authorities do not intervene during the economic struggle, the differences are settled much more calmly and quickly. This fact has been noted not only by the workers, but by important individuals, the industrial and factory inspectors. Just as in Germany, where everything that the organized workers do is a threat to the state, experts in other countries have only one opinion of the German union movement – namely, the very best. Unfortunately, it has to be said that the highly developed German working class could be a model to the world if the union movement were met with greater interest within its circles. No worker should be allowed to remain outside of the organization; then the living conditions of the German workers would be better. As far as the tactics of the workers in the economic struggle is concerned, the only thing one can say is that they do not spring from such dishonest motives as are found among the employer class, since it cares nothing for the workers, as is demonstrated already by the frequent disciplinary measures that are taken against workers."

Source: Graumann, March 7, 1903. Staatsarchiv der Freien und Hansestadt Hamburg (Call number: S 3930); all reports reprinted in Richard Evans, ed., *Kneipengespräche im Kaiserreich*. Reinbek: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 1989, pp. 234–35, 237–40.

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