

How Metalworkers c. 1910 Viewed Their Work (1912)

Abstract

These quotes from various metalworkers reveal the range of attitudes they held with regard to their work: from alienation to ambivalence and sometimes even pride. One also sees the influence of Marxist theories of production on the Socialist working class.

Source

Metalworkers organized in Social Democratic organizations in Berlin, Solingen, and Idar-Oberstein were asked in a survey in 1907–1911: “Do you enjoy your work or do you take no interest in it?” – What follows are some of the answers (the identification of the respondent is followed by his daily work hours and average weekly wage):

A twenty year-old locksmith; 10 hours, 20 marks: “The answer to this question varies. It is enjoyable when it is done and looks pleasing to me. I have no interest when I think of the purpose and use of my product in the function it now begins to assume.”

A twenty-one year-old machine fitter [*Maschinenschlosser*]; 9 hours, 36 marks: “I am interested in new jobs and complicated things. Mass-produced goods disgust me.”

A twenty-three year-old metalworker; 10 hours, 30 marks: “If I’m allowed to say the whole truth, it gives me no pleasure.”

A twenty-four year-old metalworker; 9 hours, 35 marks: “I can answer this question with a flat-out ‘no.’ The private capitalist production process has thoroughly quashed my interest in the work, since I receive only a fraction of the true value of my labor to which I am entitled by law in the form of wages.”

A twenty-five year-old stamper [*Stanzer*]; 9 hours, 31 marks: “I am like the machine, which is driven by power.”

A twenty-six year-old lathe-operator; 9 1/2 hours, 43 marks: “I suppose I am interested in the work only out of a desire to earn money.”

A twenty-seven year-old knife maker; 10 hours, 30 marks: “Yes, I am interested in it.”

A twenty-eight year-old metal polisher; 9 hours, 36 marks: “I don’t have any special interest in my work, but when it is done, especially figurines, I take pleasure in the way they look.”

A twenty-nine year-old moulder [*Former*]; 8 hours, 42 marks: “On the whole my work is interesting, and since I don’t have to exert myself too much, I perform it with or without pleasure, depending on what kind it is, but in either case I do my job.”

A thirty year-old iron turner [*Eisendreher*]; 10 hours, 30 marks: “No, I just do my work mechanically.”

A thirty-one year-old locksmith; 10 hours, 25 marks: “Necessity forces me to take an interest. If that were not the case, I would do something other than slaving away in the sooty and smoky factory hall amongst Polaks and other mentally retarded people. A feeling that a sane person would call pleasure is not something I can derive from my work.”

A thirty-two year-old tool-maker [*Werkzeugschlosser*]; 9 3/4 hours, 36 marks: "The work as such gives me a lot of pleasure. I even believe that I need it to keep my balance. But that is not the case when I have to continuously perform monotonous work. If that happens, the lack of enthusiasm can grow to the point of disgust. During times when I was entirely preoccupied with plans about a future state, the realization that my handiwork was socially unimportant caused me to think little of my work, which naturally also caused my interest in it to flag. Today, my gainful work has once again become the source of my livelihood, and I am ashamed if I feel a lack of interest."

A thirty-three year-old smith; 9 1/2 hours, 35 marks: "I have come to terms with work in so far as I know all cultural progress is based only on work, and that mine is just as valuable as any other."

A thirty-four year-old mechanic; 8 hours, 36 marks: "On the whole my work gives me pleasure. Of course, there are also jobs where the interest is not so great, because they demand little skill and thinking. In those cases you have to take consolation in the fact that this work has to be done, and that the next job will be better."

A thirty-five year-old iron turner; 8 hours, 40 marks: "My work gives me no pleasure, since I am always plagued by the thought that I am only being paid enough to keep up my physical energy. I am therefore a slave. Consequently, I lose interest in the work."

A thirty-six year-old lathe operator; 10 hours, 32 marks: "Yes, as long as I don't think about who I am working for and that my payment is merely compensation. I would like to work only for the general public."

A thirty-seven year-old metalworker; 9 1/2 hours, 27 marks: "If I want to support my family honestly, I have to take pleasure in work, because I get more done if I do."

A thirty-eight year-old scissors-grinder; 10 hours, 28 marks: "It isn't really very enjoyable, but at times one does have a certain pleasure in work if the factory owner treats you nicely."

A thirty-nine year-old lathe operator; 9 1/2 hours, 30 marks: "I am interested in the work, but it long ceased to be enjoyable if one has to watch how weak colleagues are harassed by inferior masters."

A forty year-old metal grinder; 9 1/2 hours, 30 marks: "My work gives me no pleasure, and every day is wasted and becomes a hellish torment to me."

A forty-one year-old engine fitter; 9 hours, 40 marks: "If I am treated properly I like to work and to do so with full interest. Since I hold to the principle that you will be treated in accordance with the resistance you put up, I have earned respect as a worker also in my current job."

A forty-two year-old metalworker; 11 hours, 25 marks: "Imagine that for twenty-four years already you have taken a coffee mill every morning and turned it at piece-work pace between 11 and 13 hours a day, then you may be able to grasp how much interest I have in my work."

A forty-three year-old lathe operator; 9 1/2 hours, 28 marks: "The piece-work system makes the work agonizing, and one loses interest through the monotonous sameness year after year."

A forty-four year-old file-cutter [*Feilhauer*]; 10 1/2 hours, 24 marks. "I am thoroughly sick and tired of it."

A forty-five year-old miller; 9 1/4 hours, 38 marks: "Only voluntary work would be enjoyable."

A forty-six year-old mould smith [*Modellschlosser*]; 9 1/2 hours, 36 marks: "I am always pleased if I succeed in finishing the jobs assigned to me, clean and fitting precisely, working from provided drawings."

I find a certain satisfaction in this and have the feeling that I am doing my part in preserving and beautifying the whole.”

A forty-seven year-old metalworker; 9 1/2 hours, 21 marks: “Oh, yes. But one should receive better treatment as a worker, and most bosses do not greet their workers in the morning and at noon when they enter the work room.”

A forty-eight year-old locksmith; 9 hours, 36 marks: “I have a lively interest in it because of its diversity. Monotonous work would be the most horrifying thing for me. I would do monotonous machine work only if you forced me to.”

Pleasure in gainful work was felt by:

Indication of primary motivations

No indication of reasons	If pay is good	Only if work is varied	Only if treatment is good	Because the work is complicated
27	87	142	7	44

No interest in their gainful work was felt by:

Indication of primary motivations

No indication of reasons	Because the profit belongs to the capitalist	Because the work is monotonous	Because they are too dependent	Because wages are too low	Because it is damaging to health.
102	211	302	164	183	65

Summary:

- a) Pleasure in their gainful employment predominated in: 307 = 17.0%
- b) Displeasure in their gainful employment predominated in: 1,027 = 56.9.
- c) Indifference was felt by: 308 = 17.1%
- d) The question was not answered by: 161 = 9.0%

Total: 1,803 = 100.0%

Source: Adolf Levenstein, *Die Arbeiterfrage mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der sozialpsychologischen Seite des modernen Großbetriebes und der psychophysischen Einwirkungen auf die Arbeiter*. Munich, 1912, pp. 68–75; reprinted in Gerhard A. Ritter and Jürgen Kocka, eds., *Deutsche Sozialgeschichte 1870–1914. Dokumente und Skizzen*. Munich: C.H. Beck, 1982, pp. 152–55.

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