



## German History in Documents and Images

Volume 5. Wilhelmine Germany and the First World War, 1890-1918  
Working-Class Life (1891)

This report by Paul Göhre (1864-1928) underscores the dependence of many industrial workers on their daily wage. It also describes the nature of industrial working conditions, as well as the exploitative relationship in which many workers found themselves. The rise of socialism in Germany stemmed in part from this predicament and the precariousness of wage-labor.

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[ . . . ] I myself, to begin here, received 20 pfennig wage per hour as a novice and manual worker [*Handarbeiter*], the usual beginning wage. In general, however, this wage was quickly raised by 1 to 2 pfennig upon request, especially for married workers. In my case, it amounted to 2.13 marks a day, with the exception of Monday and Sunday, when one hour fewer was worked; on those two days it was 1.93 marks, and for the entire week precisely 12.78 marks. Of that, nearly 2 marks always went to the health insurance contribution and to fines for tardiness and missed work, which meant that I rarely ended up with more than 11 marks in earnings for the week. The other manual workers earned 12 to 15 marks, on average probably 14 marks per week. Locksmiths earned 15 to 21, their engine-fitters 22 to 28, and drillers [*Bohrer*] 15 to 19 marks. By contrast, the pieceworkers got substantially more: planers as much as 25 on average, lathe operators from 20 to 30, stampers and drillers from 20 to 30, some even as much as 40 marks per week. The machinist at the large steam engine earned, according to his own account, 24 marks a week by working fourteen hours a day and regularly on Sunday morning. Among the engine-fitters, as with some masters [*Meister*], the income was significantly increased through so-called percentages for machines finished by them. The yearly income of the latter, I was told, supposedly averages 1,800 to 2,000 marks. Among the high earners are many young people with alleged minimum earnings of 100 marks per month. Some of this information, however, may be too low rather than too high. The wage was said to be higher still in a few other machine factories, but the work was also longer and more strenuous. However, I was, of course, not able to verify the accuracy of this information.

From all of this it becomes clear that one cannot talk of misery among this class of workers. Of all the workers in Saxony, they are, at any rate, among the classes that are best off and have the most spending power, even though one must always remember that the highest figures I have given apply only to a small percentage of the workers, that the average earnings are 80 marks a month, and that an hourly wage of 32 pfennig is already seen as very favorable.

The many who earned less than the sums I have indicated (like manual workers, in particular), and who also had large families, cares, and debts, but who were diligent and ambitious and took pride in themselves and their families, tried to raise their income somewhat. They searched in every possible way, in their scarce leisure hours and on Sunday, for an extra job outside the factory – sometimes it paid well and sometimes not, sometimes it was easy and pleasant, sometimes exhausting.

Supplemental income came from the work of women and sometimes, though not too frequently, from that of older children. It is impossible for me to speak in greater detail about this, all I can do is say that this women's work was of the most varied kind: tailoring, sewing for a shop, washing and scrubbing, peddling or hawking greens or other goods; it was probably not often that they went into factories, instead, socks were knitted at home on the knitting machine.

Moreover, the keeping of night-lodgers and lunch boarders, with all the work falling once again on the woman, was seen as a way of boosting the factory wage – which was hardly justified. For as far as I was able to observe, given the additional, heavy toil that this imposes on the women and the sacrifice of domestic comfort, leaving aside other, more serious harm (which is rather the exception), it rarely yields a pecuniary advantage.

### Living conditions

It is hard to call the rooms that the people tended to inhabit a family dwelling. Or can one really give that name to a room with two windows and a windowless closet next to it? Yet it is precisely this, and nothing more, that – if my observation was accurate – constituted the home of a very large part of our workers' families. That is why people down there also spoke only of rooms [*Stuben*]: "I want to rent a new room" and "What are you paying for your room?" were very common statements.

The dwellings that consisted of a room and two such closets, falsely referred to by the people as "alcoves," or even of two heatable rooms and one alcove, already seemed so much better, roomier, and cozier. But they, too, often lacked a kitchen, as the rooms always did, though all the dwellings I have mentioned regularly included a so-called attic room, that is, a cramped wooden partition under the roof, each of which was equipped with a small hatch.

Most of the houses built in the urban style, especially the modern ones, had a number of each of the apartment categories I have described. But they had nothing but these – and in oppressive uniformity. Larger dwellings were not to be found at all in such workers' apartment blocks. For the few who asked for them, there were specially constructed houses in between the apartment blocks, and also a few villas or villa-like garden houses.

The rents for these apartments were high compared to both their value and to the income of most workers, though probably lower than the rent for comparable places in the city.

But the sad thing about the living arrangements of these people was something else, something already so often lamented: the disparity between the cramped rooms and the number of those inhabiting them. The dwellings I have just described are probably sufficient for young, newly married people with one or two children for reasonably healthful, contented living. But where another one, two, three, or more children appear, and where people are even forced to take in strangers in exchange for room and board for the sake of a better livelihood, conditions are created that are easy to imagine but difficult to describe. And this was, needless to say, the rule. The vast majority of families had a gaggle of children, night-lodgers, and tenants.

Most of these evils, and the greatest of all, came, at any rate, from the deplorable practice of providing sleeping places and lodging. This is the ruin of the German worker's family. But in the vast majority of cases this is an economic necessity. The small material benefit it yields is a longed-for supplement to the household funds of the worker's wife. No one should believe that the workers would bother with such strangers simply for fun. On the contrary, it was often my

experience that anyone who is able to keeps these people at arm's length and out of the house. But those who do it always prefer to take young men rather than young girls.

#### Unemployment

If I may finally say a few words about the experiences I had looking for work. In brief, they are as follows. At that time, it was still much easier for skilled tradesmen, like locksmiths and lathe operators, to find work in factories and small workshops than it was for manual workers, weavers, and machine operators. In search of work, most were curtly turned away already by factory porters. In the few cases where we were able to ask the manager directly, we were treated in a friendly and polite manner, and also given good advice in one instance, though in this case it was, needless to say, useless. The job announcements we sought refuge in also did not meet our needs. These were the ones in inns and newspapers. [ . . . ] At any rate, I can say from personal experience how unspeakably depressing it is to have to wander without success from factory to factory, from workshop to workshop, offering one's strength again and again, with pleading words, and always without success. Involuntary joblessness, even when hunger is not yet pounding on the door with its iron fist, is the most terrible fate that can befall a healthy, hard-working man who provides for his family, and it is all the more bitter the more earnest, deep, and full of character he is. [ . . . ]

#### Work rules

[ . . . ] In the first place, it says the following, verbatim: "The right to hire workers rests solely with the management or its designees. By accepting the work, every worker submits to the stipulations of the work rules, a copy of which is handed to him when he begins, and receipt of which he has to acknowledge by personally entering his name into a book that is displayed in the office." At the end it says, also verbatim: "Changes and additions to the same will be announced by management through posted notices and always take effect immediately."

Even to the naïve, this drives home in no uncertain terms the entire character of these work rules – and that of nearly all existing work rules, as well. They are unmistakably the product of the factory management, tailored to the sole aspect of their unilateral interests. They are house rules which the owner decrees solely according to his will, and to which everyone must conform as long as he is a member of the house. The workers have no effective protest against such work rules other than leaving the collective for which they are the law. In all cases of importance, their existence and validity explains the utter and silent dependence of all workers; they are the expression of an absolutist system, the exact opposite of economic freedom, which is after all supposed to be the dominant law today in the economic life of nations; they are a new and momentous cause of the lack of independence and the immature character of today's factory worker. [ . . . ]

Source: Paul Göhre, *Drei Monate als Fabrikarbeiter und Handwerksbursche* [*Three Months as a Factory Worker and Journeyman*]. Leipzig, 1891.

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