

Working conditions worsen in Germany

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10 September 2016

Working conditions in Germany have worsened substantially in the past few years. Stress and pressure on the job are on the increase, according to a report of the Federal Employment Ministry headed by Andrea Nahles (Social Democratic Party, SPD) published in response to a petition from the Left Party.

Just under a quarter of employees regularly work past 6 pm. The number of people who work in the evening has grown from five to 8.8 million, and the number of night workers (working between 11 pm and 6 am) has grown from 2.4 to 3.3 million. As the total number of employees has also increased, the overall percentages have remained approximately the same, however.

However, in the case of weekend work, the situation is different. Not only the absolute number, but also the percentage of workers who work on the weekend has grown substantially. In 1995, six million employees, or 18.8 percent of workers, regularly worked on the weekend and on holidays. In 2015, this number had increased to 8.8 million or one quarter (24.7 percent) of employees. Women accounted for 4.7 million weekend workers, compared to 4.2 million men.

The number of shift workers has also increased from 3.8 million in 1995 to 5.6 million in 2015, and the number of women engaged in shift work doubled, from 1.3 to 2.5 million.

The number of workers who work longer than is required by their contracts has also risen substantially. Twenty years ago, 1.3 million, or 4.2 percent of a total of 32 million employees, worked more than 48 hours per week. Last year this number was 1.7 million, or 4.8 percent of a total of approximately 36 million employees.

These statistics are based on data provided by the Federal Labour Office's Institute for Work and Career Research (IAB) and the Federal Statistical Office's micro census. The German Trade Union Association (DGB) regularly provides its own numbers in a survey for its "DGB Good Work Index." These differ from the numbers of the federal government, as they also take into account on-call hours.

According to the DGB numbers, 60 percent of all workers regularly work longer than required by their labour contracts. Almost every fourth employee works more than 45 hours per week and every sixth employee works more than 48 hours. About 70 percent of those who work more than 45 hours feel "rushed or under time pressure at work." A third of these workers say their overtime is often unpaid.

The IAB counted 997 million paid and 816 million unpaid overtime hours last year, coming to a total of 1.8 billion. This corresponds to 860,000 full-time positions.

However, while the number of overtime hours is on the rise, full-time work is on the decline. While some workers are forced to work more and more, millions can find nothing but part-time jobs that do not provide them with an adequate income.

These statistics show that social reforms the working class fought for in the 1950s and 1960s—the eight-hour day, the five-day work week, paid overtime, weekend bonuses, paid sick leave, etc.—have already been destroyed. Young men and women who are entering the job market today, if they can find a job at all, are encountering conditions that prevailed under early capitalism.

The unions, which once fought for the 35-hour week and for Saturdays off under the slogan "On Saturday, Father belongs to me," are now leading the way in dismantling these earlier achievements.

The "Agenda 2010" of the red-green (SPD and Green Party) federal government under Gerhard Schröder, who opened the floodgates to low-wage work and social cuts, would not have been possible without the energetic support of the unions. Peter Hartz, after whom the Hartz laws are named, embodied in his person the merging of the SPD, unions and capital. He was a member of the SPD, of the IG Metall union and the Volkswagen board of management all at once.

The dismantling of social achievements is by no means completed, however. Business groups have long demanded not only a de facto, but also a legal dissolution

of the eight-hour day.

“The labour law must be quickly adapted to changes in the working world and in society,” the head of the employer association Südwestmetall, Stefan Wolf, said recently. He opposed the eight-hour day and the legally required eleven-hour break between two working days. “An up-to-date labour law would, for example, define the maximum working time in a week, which the workers could then distribute individually throughout the week in agreement with the employer,” Wolf suggested.

Federal Labour Minister Andrea Nahles (SPD) supports the flexible working conditions demanded by the corporations. In June, she spoke with the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in favour of relaxing laws regulating working time, indicating that she would prefer these issues to be regulated by wage and company agreements rather than by law.

This would allow employers to lengthen working times and launch savage social attacks against the workers, but it would benefit the union functionaries and works councils. They would receive positions and perks in exchange for their help in carrying out new attacks on working conditions. They would police the workers and work to strangle opposition to the attacks. This is why the unions are urging Labour Minister Nahles to anchor their own role in the relaxation of working hours in legislation.

Another consequence of the increase in flexible working times is growing poverty among retirees, as contributions to retirement and social security are sinking in consequence.

The effects of this situation are already being felt. Currently, according to the Labour Ministry, just under six percent of 65 year olds have a “mini-job.” That comes to almost a million people, or 22 percent more than in 2010. The number of those over 75 who have mini-jobs has risen 57 percent since 2010.



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