

VI. The struggle for a new political order: the trade unions in the early years of the Weimar Republic

With the armistice concluded at Compiègne on 11 November 1918 the First World War came to an end. On 29 June the Versailles peace treaty was signed. The annexations of German territory, the loss of colonies, reparations, and above all the war guilt clause, holding Germany solely to blame for the war, gave bourgeois, nationalist circles in Germany every opportunity to condemn the “shameful *Diktat*” and to insult those who signed this “ignominious peace”. Death, suffering and misery – a total of 7.5 m dead and 20 m wounded – did not lead to the general proscription of war; rather, large sections of the German public believed that the defeat that so took them by surprise had been caused by their half-hearted homeland’s “stab in the back” of the “undefeated army at the front”, by the “November criminals”. In a double distortion of the facts, blame for the outcome of the war and the consequences of defeat were laid at the door of the revolution and the revolutionary government, headed by the Social Democrats. Yet the revolution was not the cause of the German defeat, nor did the Social Democrats and the Free Trade Unions “make” the revolution.

1. *The trade unions in the revolution of 1918–19*

The trades unions of all tendencies had been advocating social and political reform – ever more insistently, the longer the war dragged on. Reforms were to be their reward, as it were, for the union policy of observing a political truce throughout the war. But although the partial success of this policy resulted in a increase in membership in the second half of the war, it could not prevent a fast-growing mass protest movement from springing up alongside the unions. The experience of years of oppression and browbeating, along with the poverty, misery and injustice of wartime and fear of the consequences of imminent defeat, had noticeably radicalized large sections of the working class, resulting not only in the split within social democracy but also in the spread of “new” grassroots movements, which even penetrated deep into the army. The very size of the protest movement demonstrated that union policy did not satisfy the political needs of large numbers of workers.



Berlin on 9 November 1918: the barracks of the Ulan Guard are handed over to members of the Workers' and Soldiers' Council



Car of the Workers' and Soldiers' Council at the Brandenburg Gate

The tension suddenly exploded with the mutiny of the Kiel sailors. On 29–30 October 1918, the crews of the German High Seas Fleet refused to leave harbour for certain death and several hundred sailors were arrested for mutiny. Protest at this step grew into the revolution that reached all the big cities within a few days and brought about the fall of the monarchy.

Although the Majority Social Democrats and the Free Trade Unions – not to mention the other trade union organizations – had neither planned nor carried out the revolution, on the abdication of the Kaiser on 10 November 1918 power fell into the hands of the Social Democrats. The MSPD and the USPD, with three representatives each – Friederich Ebert, Philipp Scheidemann and Otto Landsberg; Hugo Haase, Wilhelm Dittmann and Emil Barth – formed the revolutionary government, called the Council of Popular Delegates (Rat der Volksbeauftragten).

The government was faced with insuperable problems; the ceasefire and demobilization, the conversion and stimulation of industrial and agricultural production, supplying the masses with work, food and fuel – these were the acute problems that large sections of the population were expecting the government to solve. The hopes of the masses behind the revolution were pitched even higher: the establishment of the republic should not only lead to a considerable improvement in the conditions of the working class but also to a fundamental reorganization of society.

True, in its appeal of 12 November 1918¹ the Council of Popular Delegates pledged itself to a “socialist” governmental programme; but all it announced was a number of individual measures such as the lifting of legal restrictions on workers’ organizations, the reform of the electoral law and improvements in social policy – especially the introduction of the eight-hour day. In addition, the government undertook to maintain “regulated production” and to “safeguard property against interference and to guarantee the freedom and safety of the individual”. This was the sort of compromise between the established powers and structures on the one hand and the notions of a new order on the other that characterized the policies of the Majority Social Democrats and the Free Trade Unions at the end of 1918. It is also true of the relations between the revolutionary government and the armed forces: after all, having been told by Wilhelm Groener by telephone on 10 November of the Supreme Command’s readiness to recognize the new government, Friedrich Ebert gave an assurance that the government would support the Supreme Command in maintaining order within the army. And it is also true of relations between the revolutionary government and business leaders, though future developments

1 Reichs-Gesetzblatt, 1918, p. 153

had already been shaped by the talks between the trade unions and employer representatives, which were virtually concluded when the “governmental programme” of 12 November 1918 was announced.

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Only the realization that the war could no longer be won, and the consequent fears (exacerbated by the unrest) that it might lead to social revolution, prompted the employers to announce that they were willing to engage in lasting co-operation with the trade unions. The decisive factor in reaching this decision, according to Jakob Wilhelm Reichert, the leader of the Association of German Iron and Steel Manufacturers, was concern to “save manufacturers from socialization and nationalization, affecting all industries, and from approaching revolution”.²

But the trade unions also saw their policies, and probably their very existence threatened by the radicalization of much of the working class. In addition, many trade unionists believed, according to Adolf Cohen of the German Engineering Workers’ Union (DMV) at the trade union congress of June 1920, that the unions could “not solve the economic problems on their own, without the entrepreneurs”.³

Against this background the willingness to co-operate, sealed by agreement on 15 November 1918, is explicable.⁴ Paragraph 1 of this agreement laid down that “the trade unions are recognized as the appointed representatives of the workers”; paragraph 2, anticipating the constitution, guaranteed workers the right of association. The recognition of collective agreements (paragraph 6), the establishment of bipartite employment exchanges (paragraph 5) and workers’ committees in companies with more than 50 employees (paragraph 7) tended to confirm the unions’ assumption that with the November agreement democratization of the economy had come a good deal closer. Furthermore, in paragraph 3 the employers undertook not to support, directly or indirectly, “sweetheart unions”, works associations committed to industrial peace. But this point, along with paragraph 9, reducing the working day to eight hours with guaranteed retention of wages, was soon to give rise to the first disputes. This may well have been largely because the quid pro quo for the employers’ concessions was – taking into account the political possibilities of the day

2 Jakob Wilhelm Reichert, *Entstehung, Bedeutung und Ziel der „Arbeitsgemeinschaft“* (Berlin, 1919), p. 6

3 Quot. Helga Grebing, *op. cit.* p. 177

4 Published in *Correspondenzblatt* No. 47 of 23. 11. 1918, p. 425 f.

– a comprehensive though tacit renunciation by the unions of any property reforms, and thus of economic power.

In accordance with union policy, which was aimed at power-sharing, not the seizure of power, it was agreed under paragraph 10 of the November accord to set up a bipartite central committee with an underlying structure organized on occupational lines to handle the implementation of the arrangements agreed in November, oversee demobilization, ensure the continuation of economic activity and guarantee the livelihood of the workers, particularly war invalids. Pursuant to this paragraph, the “Central Association of the Industrial and Commercial Employers and Employees of Germany” (Zentralarbeitsgemeinschaft der industriellen und gewerblichen Arbeitgeber und Arbeitnehmer Deutschlands – ZAG) was set up. From the outset its work suffered as a result of the inequality in the real powers of the interest groups represented.

The Free Trade Unions nevertheless greeted the establishment of the ZAG as a “trade union victory of uncommon magnitude”.⁵ The Hirsch-Duncker associations and Christian unions also celebrated the November agreement and the ZAG as confirmation of their long-standing principles and hence a step in the right direction – towards co-operation in trust and partnership by both sides involved in production, capital and labour. “Democracy came to the big companies of Germany” was the effusive verdict of the Christian trade unions.⁶

Of course, not all trade unionists shared this optimism. There was considerable opposition to the policy of collaboration, particularly in the German Engineering Workers’ Union, which left the ZAG at the end of October 1919. The other Free Trade Unions were also soon forced to recognize that the desired co-operation with the employers through the ZAG was foundering on the inequality of the parties’ real power and that, in addition, it was being deprived of its role by the economic and political powers of other bodies, from the parliaments to the temporary National Economic Council (Reichswirtschaftsrat).

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The employers rapidly consolidated their position. The National Federation of German Industry (Reichsverband der Deutschen Industrie –

5 Die Vereinbarung mit den Unternehmerverbänden, in *Correspondenzblatt* No. 47 of 23. 11. 1918, p. 425

6 Vereinbarung zwischen Arbeitgeber- und Arbeitnehmerverbänden, in *Zentralblatt* No. 25 of 2. 12. 1918, p. 202 f.; this quot. p. 202

RDI) was set up on 12 April 1919 and before long some 70–80 per cent of German companies belonged to its affiliated associations. On the workers' side, however, it was apparent even during the months of the revolution that there were almost irreconcilable differences of political position. Concerted action was hampered by the three-way split in the trade union movement, and even more by the conflicts within the socialist camp – the split into the MSPD, the USPD and (since 1 January 1919) the KPD (Communist Party).

First of all, there was disagreement over the role of the councils that had spontaneously sprung up as a new form of labour organization in the army and the factories. These workers' and soldiers' councils were at first frequently entrusted with the exercise of state power. They ensured order and managed supplies, liaising between the administration and the population and seeing themselves generally more as a supervisory body than as a replacement for the "old" rulers.

The local and regional leaders of the Free Trade Unions also took leading positions on the workers' and soldiers' councils in many places. At the Berlin congress of councils in mid-December 1918, for example, 87 of the 289 MSPD delegates (30 per cent) were full-time trade union officials. But the vast majority of the councils were formed without union representation. Neither the Christian trade unions, who sought to transform the councils into citizens' committees, nor the Free Trade Unions made any secret of their dislike of the councils. The councils were regarded as being in competition with the workers' committees, which had been set up under the Auxiliary Service Law or pursuant to the decree of 23 December 1918. The Free Trade Unions also disliked the fact that the councils born of the revolution were not content with worker participation in company and social matters, but also demanded political co-determination. So in accordance with their basic decision in favour of a parliamentary republic, the unions rejected any claim by the councils to political absolutism.

In the councils themselves this view enjoyed a broad majority, since the delegates at the congress of workers' and soldiers' councils that met in Berlin from 16 to 19 December 1918 decided to participate in the elections for the national assembly by about 400 votes to 50. Thus, to a certain extent they were relinquishing the political mandate given to them by the revolution. Certainly, the delegates at the council congress, like the supporters of the MSPD and the USPD in general, probably expected the elections to result in a clear socialist majority. All the greater was the shock, then, on 19 January 1919 when the votes had been counted: the MSPD and USPD failed to win an absolute majority, even taken together. But co-operation between the two was almost unthinkable anyway, as the

USPD representatives had already walked out of the Council of Popular Delegates in December 1918, after Ebert had sought the old army's help during the mutiny of the marine division in Berlin on 24 December 1918. Gustav Noske and Rudolf Wissell – both MSPD – took over the posts of the USPD. It was Noske who subsequently used the Freikorps to crush the January revolt of 10–11 January 1919. The disturbances instigated by radical council supporters in early 1919, for instance in the Ruhr district, Bremen, Central Germany and Munich, were also put down by military force.

To the radical concept of councils the Free Trade Unions opposed – after a long debate – their own plan for workers' councils (probably also intended as a compromise) at their executive conference of 25 April 1919. Paragraph 9 of the “Guidelines for the future activity of the trade unions” stated that after primary elections workers' councils organized according to occupation should be set up in each local area; the social, economic and local political tasks of the trade union “cartel” would be transferred to them. Under paragraph 10, the workers' councils were to form chambers of commerce together with employer representatives at regional and then national level, to propose and scrutinize draft legislation and to participate in socialization. What concerned the unions most is evident from the fact that these “guidelines” were completed by highly detailed “Regulations governing the tasks of the works councils”.⁷

Both of these policy statements were submitted to the first congress of the Free Trade Unions to be held after the war, from 30 June to 5 July 1919 in Nuremberg. The internal union opposition presented its own draft proposal on the councils, introduced by Richard Müller: without even mentioning the unions, he outlined a model for council organization based on region and trade, headed by a Central Council and the National Economic Council. But the line advocated by Theodor Leipart and Adolf Cohen, in accordance with the decisions of the executive conference of 25 April, carried the day by 407 votes to 192.⁸ This paved the way for the Works Councils Law (*Betriebsrätegesetz*); even the planning for it was based on the assumption that there would be no overthrow of the property system leading to a shift in economic power. This was entirely in keeping with trade union policy on the socialization issue.

⁷ Reprinted in Klaus Schönhoven (1985) *op. cit.* pp. 751–54

⁸ See *Protokoll der Verhandlungen des 10. Kongresses der Gewerkschaften Deutschlands, abgehalten zu Nürnberg vom 30. Juni bis 5. Juli 1919* (Berlin, undated), p. 426 ff.

On 12 November 1918 the Council of People's Delegates had announced that it wished to carry out the "socialist programme". On 18 November it decided "that those industries which in terms of their development are ripe for socialization shall be socialized immediately". Whether this announcement really would be put into effect was open to doubt, especially as not even the Free Trade Unions – let alone the Hirsch-Duncker associations and the Christian unions – were convinced of the correctness or importance of socialization. Indeed, on 10 December 1918, Carl Legien, the chairman of the General Commission, had stated, "Socialization of an economy shaken and disorganized by wartime is not possible."⁹

The first socialization commission started work before the end of the year. The demand for socialization was emphasized by a large number of strikes – particularly in the Ruhr – as well as by the delegates to the council congress in Berlin. The government sought to relieve some of the pressure on it by making verbal concessions. On 1 March 1919 placards went up proclaiming, "Socialization is on the march". But the Coal Industry Law passed on 23 March 1919 failed to live up to the expectations of the supporters of socialization, or the fears of its opponents, by not decreeing any changes in ownership.

The goal of most Majority Social Democrats was not socialization in the true sense of the word, but the construction of a system of economic self-management, a planned economy – even though talk was always of "socialization". This is clearest in the idea of the "co-operative economy" (*Gemeinwirtschaft*), whose keenest proponent was Rudolf Wissell, formerly the vice-chairman of the General Commission, now Minister for the Economy. According to the memorandum submitted by the National Ministry for the Economy in May 1919, the co-operative economy was supposed to be "the national economy, managed on a planned basis and under social control for the benefit of the national community". The idea of creating an economic order designed to benefit all, while retaining private ownership of the means of production, was greeted with great scepticism by the MSPD (not to mention the USPD and the KPD). But it accorded with the ideas of the Free Trade Unions and, in particular, the Christian unions, and left its stamp on the "council articles" of the Weimar constitution (especially Article 165.3). In the situation obtaining in spring 1919, Wissell's policy foundered on the resistance of the advocates of socialization, who, however – confused over their aims and riven

⁹ Quot. H.-J. Bieber, op. cit. p. 629 f.

by dissent – were unable to prevail over the continued opposition of the MSPD and the bourgeois parties.

Thus the plans for socialization and the co-operative economy blocked each other – with the result that neither was put into practice. What is more, under the impact of events in Russia both the MSPD and the unions misjudged the role of the councils and by fighting against these organizations relinquished part of their own power base. Fears that if plans for socialization and the setting up of councils went through, the inevitable consequences would be economic chaos, the dictatorship of a minority or civil war were – it may now be said – at least partly imaginary and were one of the reasons why options that were perfectly feasible were not fully exploited. Consequently, the undemocratic (not to say anti-democratic) top echelons of the Kaiserreich in the administration, education, the judiciary, the armed forces and in large-scale industry and agriculture retained their leading positions, which they soon began to use to undermine the young republic.

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But we should not lose sight of the successes of the revolution and the republic. On the basis of the Council of Popular Delegates' "governmental programme" of 12 November 1918 some key union demands were met. By an order of the popular delegates of 23 December 1918, for example, collective agreements were declared legally and generally binding; from 1919 to 1922 the number of wage earners covered by collective agreements had more than doubled. Furthermore, a succession of decrees was issued, finally consolidated on 12 February 1920, governing the employment and dismissal of wage earners. Dismissals were made difficult for employers and it was laid down that soldiers returning from the war should be given their old jobs back. This was made easier by the fact that women who had worked during the war went back to their homes and families, or failing that were forced back (which was perfectly in keeping with trade union thinking). Together with the cuts in working hours and the inflationary state of the economy, these measures played a large part in holding down unemployment, which from a high of 5.1 per cent (of union members) in December 1918 steadily fell in the following years to 3.7 per cent in 1919, 3.8 per cent in 1920, 2.8 per cent in 1921 to 0.8 per cent in March-October 1922.¹⁰

¹⁰ Statistics from Dietmar Petzina, Werner Abelshäuser and Anselm Faust, *Sozialgeschichtliches Arbeitsbuch III. Materialien zur Statistik des Deutschen Reiches 1914–1945* (Munich, 1978), p. 119

Through the interim demobilization decrees of 23 November 1918 and 18 March 1919 the eight-hour day was introduced for workers and salaried staff. The fact that the unions, in a rider to the November agreement, had conceded that cuts in working hours could “only be made permanent [. . .] when the eight-hour day is laid down for all civilized countries by national agreement” meant that this was merely a postponement of, not a solution to, the question of working hours. True, the introduction of the eight-hour day and the 48-hour week was agreed at the first International Labour Conference, held in Washington from 29 October to 29 November 1919 (with no delegates from Germany or Austria). But the industrial states did not exactly fall over themselves to ratify the “Washington agreement”, so that the unions were soon back on the defensive over the question of working hours – all the more so as the trade union federations were divided on the issue.

The underlying principles of the November agreement finally found their way into the Weimar constitution of 11 August 1919. This is true, for instance, of the legal basis for trade union work: Article 159 states, “Freedom of association to preserve and promote the conditions of labour and the economy is guaranteed for everyone and all trades. All agreements and measures limiting or seeking to obstruct this freedom are unlawful.” The right to strike was, however, deliberately excluded from the constitution, as the lawmakers feared that they would not then be able to limit it for certain specific groups – farmworkers, railwaymen, and so on. Article 165 declared collective agreements legally binding: in addition, it confirmed that workers and salaried staff were “called upon to regulate wages and working conditions and to participate on an equal basis in the overall economic development of the productive forces”. This article also pledged that “legal representation” would be established on “works councils, regional workers’ councils and a national workers’ council”, which were supposed to take part in efforts to implement a “co-operative economic order” and socialization under Article 156. The constitution thus granted the trade unions the right to co-determination and influence not only in the field of social policy, but also in shaping the entire economic life of the country, which was to be organized in conformity with the principles of justice, with the aim of ensuring a decent life for all (Article 152). For this reason, the possibility of expropriations and the social obligations of property were expressly set out (in Article 153). Articles 157 and 163 should not be overlooked, either: they placed “labour” under the “special protection of the nation” and guaranteed the right to work or – if this was not feasible – the right to maintenance.

But the difficulty of holding on to the achievements of the revolution-

ary period and the guarantees set out in the constitution soon became apparent. The form taken by the workers' right to co-determination in economic matters completely failed to come up to the expectations of the revolutionary period. The National Economic Council set up pursuant to Article 165 never got past the provisional stage, for lack of any organizational base. Neither was it able at any time during the Weimar Republic to acquire the decisive powers necessary to influence economic policy and the economic system.

Only at company level did the unions succeed to any extent in giving any legal form to the regulations governing the tasks of the works councils adopted at the Nuremberg trade union congress of 1919. The Works Councils Law of 4 February 1920¹¹, adopted after serious disturbances and against the votes of the USPD and the rightwing bourgeois deputies revived the workers' committee regulation of the Kaiser's era and provided for the election of a shop steward in companies employing five people or more and, where there were 20 employees or more, the election of a works council consisting of several people. Paragraph 1, however, imposed twin duties on this works council: on the one hand, it was to "defend the common interests of the employees (workers and salaried staff) vis-à-vis the employer"; on the other, it was to "support the employer in achieving company objectives". Although the works council had the right to inspect the company books, the dual loyalty demanded by paragraph 1 prevented it from ever properly representing the interests of the workers. But compared with earlier rules, the right to a say in matters of social welfare and in dismissals had been greatly improved. While the Christian trade unions and the Hirsch-Duncker associations welcomed the law, voices critical of the Works Councils Law were heard coming from the Free Trade Unions, particularly the DMV.

The social reforms laid down in the constitution and in legislation had little time to prove their worth, though; furthermore, they were soon firmly rejected by the employers.

2. Policy changes and union reorganization, 1919–20

The end of the war, revolution and the foundation of the Weimar Republic confronted the unions with tasks they were ill-equipped to cope with. Only when important fundamental decisions affecting the construction of

11 Reichs-Gesetzblatt No. 26, 1920, vol. 1, pp. 147–174

the state and the social order had already been taken did the trade unions (still split along ideological lines) attempt to adapt their programmes and organizations to the new situation, that is to say, working in a parliamentary republic.

The Free trade unions

The key factor in the reorganization of much the largest branch of the trade union movement was the tenth congress of the Free Trade Unions, which was held in Nuremberg from 30 June to 5 July 1919. Apart from the acute social ills of the day, the congress concentrated on such issues as the political truce, collaboration with the employers, workers' councils, socialization and party political orientation. Furthermore, an attempt was made, in the shape of the above mentioned "guidelines", to adopt something resembling a trade union programme.

After a heated debate, congress passed a vote of confidence in the General Commission by 445 votes to 179, thus lending its approval to the fundamentals of its wartime and post-war policy. It was no surprise, then, that the formation of the Central Association was also approved (by 420 votes to 181). By a large majority, the Mannheim Agreement between the SPD and the Free Trade Unions dating back to 1906 was scrapped. The Free Unions proclaimed their neutrality with regard to the political parties, particularly as, in view of the split in the socialist labour movement, there was no longer any single party with a claim to representing the interests of all workers. It was also a sign of political self-awareness that the Free Trade Unions did not consider that they had to limit themselves to "the narrow representation of members' occupational interests"; instead – in the words of the resolution on the relations between trade unions and parties – they must "become the focus of the proletariat's class endeavours, so as to help lead the struggle for socialism to victory".¹²

Judging by the votes taken at the congress, there was consistently strong opposition to the line taken by the executive. Some 420–440 delegates approved executive policy, while there were about 180 who took a different view on crucial issues. The internal union opposition received its strongest backing from the engineering workers, shoemakers and textile workers. There were strong dissident minorities in the railwaymen's and garment workers' unions. Probably about one third of the miners' dele-

¹² Protokoll der Verhandlungen des 10. Kongresses der Gewerkschaften Deutschlands, p. 56

gates could be regarded as belonging to the opposition; the proportion would doubtless have been higher but for the orchestrated resignations of the second quarter of 1919 and the establishment of the General Miners' Union, which later gave rise to the General Workers' Union. On the other hand, the opposition was very weak in the unions of the woodworkers, building workers, factory workers and book printers. Its regional centres were Berlin, Saxony and Thuringia, Hamburg and Bremen – generally speaking urban rather than rural industrial areas. There were hardly any other sociological or organizational common denominators: the opposition embraced both female and male-dominated unions, unions chiefly consisting of both skilled and unskilled workers, and both large and small organizations.

The importance of party political allegiance in all this should not be overestimated, for the formation of “wings” within the unions followed the split in social democracy, and when the USPD split, that was reflected, too. Although the chief party political loyalties of the Free Trade Unions were again clearly seen to lie with the MSPD and the rump of the USPD in 1922, the conflict with the KPD and the Communist trade unionists, who were accused of forming cells inside the unions, became a perennial problem, resulting in union expulsions and attempts by Communist trade unionists to set up their own organizations.¹³ Communist trade union policy of the 1920s largely conformed to “guiding principles” laid down at the Second World Congress of the Communist International in Moscow in July–August 1920. Communists of all countries were instructed to seize political control of the trade unions, to subordinate the unions to the party leadership and finally – if a social revolutionary realignment of the trade unions proved impossible – to create their own unions. It should also be remembered that the socialist workers' critical attitude towards the unions was also articulated in their own syndicalist unions, though after the revolution petered out they lingered on in obscurity for a while, until their members drifted back to the Free Trade Unions – or, from 1929–30 on, went over to the RGO, the Revolutionary Trade Union Opposition (or Organization).

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While the friction resulting from the formation of political wings within the Free Trade Unions caused certain losses that impaired their effective-

¹³ According to Werner Müller, *Lohnkampf, Massenstreik, Sowjetmacht. Ziele und Grenzen der „Revolutionären Gewerkschafts-Opposition“ (RGO) in Deutschland 1928 bis 1933* (Cologne, 1988), p. 26 ff.

ness, the reorganization of the unions was intended to strengthen it. The tenth congress of the Free Trade Unions held in Nuremberg in 1919, the first post-war congress, established an umbrella organization, the General German Trade Union Federation (Allgemeiner Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund – ADGB). The General Commission, set up in 1890, was now replaced by a fifteen-man federal executive consisting of a chairman, two vice-chairmen, a treasurer, an editor, two secretaries and eight unpaid committee members. The unions' supreme body was the federal congress, which – every three years – also determined the composition of the executive. The work of the executive was overseen by the federal committee, on which each union executive had one vote or, in the case of unions with over 500,000 members, two votes. Thus whereas the federal committee stressed the unions' equal standing, the number of delegates at the trade union congress was roughly in proportion to membership. Regionally, the ADGB was divided into local committees (the former local “cartels”), in which the local payment offices of the ADGB unions were amalgamated under a self-elected executive, and, from 1922 on, regional committees whose secretaries were appointed by the federal executive. The local ADGB organizations were expressly forbidden to encroach on the powers of the individual unions, which retained the right to decide on policy matters relating to the industrial struggle.

New ideas on the structure of the individual unions, whose construction was similar to that of the ADGB, were also aimed at tightening up trade union organization. After a great deal of controversy, the ADGB's Leipzig congress of June 1922 recommended the setting up of industrial unions – one company, one union.¹⁴ The DMV, in particular, had come out strongly in favour of organization by industry so as to be in a better position to square up to the employers, who had closed ranks against the unions. This idea was opposed by men such as Fritz Tarnow, the chairman of the Woodworkers' Union, who in a resolution adhered to the principle of occupational solidarity as a “valuable method of trade union organization, schooling and discipline”. So matters went no further than a recommendation, which was only tentatively carried out anyway. But things were nevertheless (slowly) moving in that direction: the number of individual unions fell from 52 in 1919–20 to 44 in 1923.

Admittedly, the tendency in the white-collar and civil service unions was different. In November 1920 the Association of Free Unions of Sala-

¹⁴ See Protokoll der Verhandlungen des 11. Kongresses der Gewerkschaften Deutschlands (1. Bundestag des Allgemeinen Deutschen Gewerkschaftsbundes), abgehalten zu Leipzig vom 19. bis 24. Juni 1922 (Berlin, 1922), p. 35 f.

ried Staff became the General Free Union of Salaried Staff (Allgemeiner freier Angestelltenbund, or AfA-Bund), which concluded a co-operation agreement with the ADGB in April 1921 and under Siegfried Aufhäuser pursued a policy of social reform. When the German Civil Service Union (Deutscher Beamtenbund – DBB) was formed in late 1918 as the top organization for all civil servants' unions, the Free Trade Unions initially refrained from setting up a civil servants' union of their own. Then in 1920 the federation of senior officials left the DBB, forming the core of the National Federation of Senior Civil Servants, with approximately 60,000 members. And in 1922 the union-oriented civil servants left the DBB over its refusal to support the first strike by German civil servants (the railwaymen's strike of 1922). They set up the General German Federation of Civil Servants (Allgemeiner Deutscher Beamtenbund – ADB), which in March 1923 also concluded a co-operation agreement with the ADGB.

By 1922–23 these amalgamations were largely over. The trade union organizations – the smaller ones included – had evidently stabilized. It is worth noting, however, that by 1922 the five largest unions alone (the engineering, factory, textile, transport and agricultural workers) accounted for more than 50 per cent of all the Free Trade Unions' members.

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The unions' growing membership and greater chances of influencing the economy and the state confronted them with a host of new tasks. Let us first look at their efforts to target specific groups of workers. When the restrictions contained in the Law of Association were lifted, the proportion of young people (14–18) and women in the unions increased. Under the leadership of a youth leader or representative (usually 18–25 years old) young people were organized in local youth sections, for which the ADGB's Youth Secretariat published the monthly paper "Jugend-Führer" (Youth Leader). The women's side of trade union work was also strengthened. In 1916 the Free Unions had started a trade union newspaper for women, the "Gewerkschaftliche Frauenzeitung", edited by Gertrud Hanna, which was intended to counteract the oppositional line of another paper, "Gleichheit" (Equality). It was also Gertrud Hanna who spoke on the "organization of female workers" at the Nuremberg congress of 1919 and demanded special efforts to reach and recruit women. The resolution adopted by congress was in line with her comments. Educational work among women was to be stepped up, organized women activated and every effort made to ensure that the demand for "equal pay for equal work" was met. Moreover, congress recognized the right of women to



Carl Legien in 1908. Until 1920 chairman of the General Commission of the German Trade Unions and the General Federation of German Trade Unions



Theodor Leipart, chairman of the General Federation of German Trade Unions 1920-33



Siegfried Aujnauser, chairman of the General Free Union of Salaried Staff until 1933



Anton Erkelenz, one of the most prominent trade unionists in the leadership of the Federation of German Trade Associations (H-D)



Adam Stegerwald, until 1929 chairman of the General Association of German Christian Trade Unions, and the (Christian-National) German Trade Union Federation



Bernhard Otte, chairman of the General Association of German Christian Trade Unions, 1929-33



Heinrich Imbusch, chairman of the (Christian-National) German Trade Union Federation 1929-33

“workplaces that are in accord with their nature, strength and abilities. It makes it incumbent on the unions to ensure that misogynist views are not permitted to play any part in the recruitment and dismissal of employees.”¹⁵

But the reality was often quite different. Although the wording of the demobilization regulations was not “gender-specific”, the criteria on which redundancies were enforced placed women at an overwhelming disadvantage: it was permitted to dismiss anyone who was not forced to take paid employment and who was not in paid employment at the outbreak of war. The participation of women also had the backing of the Works Councils Law (paragraph 22); but from 1919 on it was above all women who – as Gertrud Hanna said – showed understanding for the “exigencies of the hour” and relinquished their jobs. Moreover, women’s wages continued to lag behind men’s throughout the 1920s (Table 3e). When, at the eleventh trade union congress in 1922, four of the seven female delegates (out of a total of 690) made yet another attempt to put their demands across, they were thwarted by the men’s lack of interest. The problem of “women and the unions” ceased to be a matter of topical concern for the time being.

The “major task” which the trade union congress of 1919 set itself in paving the way for socialism was the “socialization of education”. And in actual fact trade unionists needed more knowledge in order to make full use of co-determination. As early as 1919 the Free Trade Unions set up the Tinz Heimvolkshochschule (Home Folk High School), near Gera. This was followed in 1930 by the ADGB’s first federal college of its own in Bernau. In collaboration with the universities, the “Free Trade Union College” was established in Cologne and – together with the Christian trade unions – the Academy of Labour in Frankfurt; in 1922 the colleges of economics and administration in Berlin and Düsseldorf, in which the trade unions were involved, opened their doors.

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Looking at the realignment and reorganization of the Free Trade Unions, one is left with an ambivalent impression. The successful centralization and expansion of the organization must be seen alongside the political strife within the unions. Despite the powerful internal opposition the majority nevertheless managed to get their political ideas enshrined in the

¹⁵ Protokoll der Verhandlungen des 10. Kongresses der Gewerkschaften Deutschlands, p. 412 f.

“programme” almost unchallenged, from the political truce policy to the Works Councils Law. This was partly due to the unassailable personal position of Carl Legien, to whom the opposition could provide no alternative, nor even an adequate challenger.

On Legien’s death on 26 December 1920, the Free Trade Unions quickly installed a successor who had established a profile at the turn of the century and in the war years and also in his role as main speaker at the Nuremberg congress, as a representative of the “old” executive line. On 19 January 1921 Theodor Leipart was appointed chairman of the ADGB. This was no change of generation: Leipart, born the son of a tailor in Neu-Brandenburg on 17 May 1867, was only six years younger than Legien. From 1881 to 1890 he worked as a turner. In 1886 he was elected on to the executive of the German Turners’ Union; and in 1890 he assumed editorial responsibility for the “*Fachzeitung für Drechsler*” (Turners’ Journal). In 1901 Leipart became chairman of the Turners’ Union and, when the turners joined the German Woodworkers’ Union, vice-chairman of this national union. As a member of the MSPD, Leipart was the Württemberg Labour Minister in 1919–20 – until his move to the top of the ADGB. The continuity of executive policy was ensured; but whether Leipart would attain the stature of a Legien depended on the outcome of the disputes that were to mark the months and years to come.

The Christian-national unions

While the Free Trade Unions did little to actively promote the revolution, the Christian unions saw it as their duty to prevent any social upheaval. Even at the autumn committee meeting of 29–30 October 1918, the federation of Christian unions was still proclaiming its loyalty to the throne.¹⁶ But a few days later, after the Kaiser’s abdication, the Christian unions were pressing for the convening of a “constitutive German national assembly”. The readiness of the Christian unions to play a part in building up the new state was, of course, chiefly motivated by the desire to prevent “something worse” – that is, a socialist revolution.

This hostility towards the revolution facilitated efforts to forge a united front of non-socialist unions. On 20 November 1918, the German Democratic Trade Union Federation (Deutsch-Demokratischer Gewerkschaftsbund – DDGB) was founded by the organizations affiliated to the

¹⁶ See Sitzung des Ausschusses des Gesamtverbandes, in *Zentralblatt* No. 23 of 4. 11. 1918, p. 190–92

German Workers' Congress and the Congress of Libertarian-national Workers' and Salaried Employees' Unions, headed by the Hirsch-Duncker associations.

As the revolution petered out and it became clear who commanded a majority and where the power lay in the working class and the labour movement, the differences between the liberal and the Christian-national organizations once again became more apparent. After the federation's name had been changed on 19 March 1919 to the German Trade Union Federation (Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund – DGB), to avoid being identified too closely with the German Democratic Party (DDP), on 14 November the Federation of German Trade Associations (Hirsch-Duncker) left the DGB. On 22 November 1919, the German Trade Union Federation was set up as an amalgamation of the Christian-national unions, consisting of three pillars: the General Association of German Christian Unions (the “workers’ pillar”); the General Association of German Salaried Staffs’ Unions (Gedag), which also included the German Nationalist Union of Clerical Assistants’ (DHV); and the General Association of German Civil Service Unions, which was, however, disbanded in 1926.

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The Christian-national trade unions of the DGB considered themselves to be professional organizations (*Standesorganisationen*); the term *Stand** was not merely a functional definition of their status in the “popular community”, which was based on “solidarity between the classes” (*Stände*), but above all a criterion incorporating a value judgement. They saw the ‘popular community’ (*Volksgemeinschaft*) as an historical community of destiny and culture, which thus bridged the classes and was essentially national in character. In this the Christian-national unions were clearly differentiated from the class struggle ideology and internationalism of the Free Trade Unions, who were accused of toeing the Social Democratic line in their policy commitments.

The Christian-national trade unionists, on the other hand, were spread over the entire spectrum of the bourgeois parties. Whereas the overwhelmingly Catholic Christian unions’ closest political ally was still the

* Translator’s note: The German word “Stand” has no one-to-one equivalent in English. Historically, it corresponds to English “estate (of the realm)”, though in a more modern context this is not a satisfactory rendering. It may be variously translated, depending on the context, as profession; class or rank; status or station.

Centre Party, with only a few representatives in the German People's Party (Deutsche Volkspartei – DVP) and the German National People's Party (Deutschnationale Volkspartei – DNVP), the protestant-dominated unions were allied with the bourgeois nationalist parties. As a result of the radicalization of large sections of white-collar workers, which particularly benefited the German Nationalist Union of Clerical Assistants (DHV), around 1930 the National Socialist German Workers' (Nazi) Party (NSDAP) was also to join the ranks of the DGB unions' political interlocutors. In all these parties, however, the Christian-national trade unionists were lobbying alongside, if not among, other organizations. The Centre included, in addition to the workers' wing, strong agricultural and industrial groups; in the DVP and DNVP the trade unionists were not only in the company of landowners and industrialists but also of "sweet-heart unions", that is, representatives of labour associations committed to industrial peace. The latter had amalgamated in October 1919 to form the "National Federation of German Trade Unions", whose name was changed in 1921 to the "National Federation of German Occupational Associations" (Nationalverband Deutscher Berufsvereine).

It is against this background that one must consider Stegerwald's policy speech at the Essen congress of the Christian trade unions, in which he expounded the idea – not without a certain measure of political ambition of his own – of founding a trade union-oriented party of the centre. Its fundamental principles would be: German, Christian, democratic and social.¹⁷ Despite the assent with which the idea was greeted, the plan came to grief over people's reservations about Stegerwald personally (he always wanted to be both things simultaneously, a politician and a trade unionist) and over the Catholic workers' traditional links with the Centre. The time to establish an explicitly Christian, though non-denominational party was not yet ripe.

Much more specific than the steps to set up a "People's Party" were the discussions at the Essen congress on the matter of organizational structure, which were basically similar to the ADGB's. There were other similarities, too, in the expansion of work among youth and women, and in the construction of a broad-based trade union education system. The launching of the DGB's own newspaper – "Der Deutsche" (The German) – in April 1921 was in keeping with its ambitious political plans to create a Christian-national coalition movement.

17 See Adam Stegerwald. *Die christlich-nationale Arbeiterschaft und die Lebensfragen des deutschen Volkes*, in *Niederschrift der Verhandlungen des 10. Kongresses der christlichen Gewerkschaften Deutschlands*, abgehalten vom 20. bis 23. November 1920 in Essen (Cologne, 1920), p. 183 ff.

The Hirsch-Duncker associations

After leaving the DGB in November 1919, the following year the Hirsch-Duncker associations set up an umbrella organization of their own, the “Trade Union League of Workers’, Salaried Staffs and Civil Servants’ Associations”. Though the H-D associations had great reservations about the revolution, they positively welcomed the November agreement and the ZAG, and supported both the elections to the national assembly and the “construction of the republican state”, which they ultimately helped defend against the Kapp *putsch*. The “doctrine of class struggle” was firmly rejected, “because it is un-trade union and also undemocratic”, to quote the words of Gustav Schneider, of the Trade Union Federation of Salaried Staff at the fourth congress of the Trade Union League in November 1930.¹⁸ They continued to profess party political independence and religious neutrality, and wished to offer no more (and no less) than a purely economic and social reform movement representing its members’ interests. The strike was endorsed as the ultimate means of asserting one’s interests, but in practice the negotiated settlement was preferred to a much greater extent than in the Free Trade Unions. Ideologically, the H-D associations and the Trade Union Federation of Salaried Staff (Gewerkschaftsbund der Angestellten – GdA) and their affiliated unions had their roots in socially oriented liberalism, so that they found “their” party political ally in the DPP, the leading leftwing liberal party of the Weimar period. This also entailed a decisive acceptance of the Weimar republic, which was convincingly championed by Gustav Hartmann and especially Anton Erkelenz in the leadership of the Trade Union League. When the DDP was almost entirely wiped out at the end of the Weimar republic, the H-D associations moved closer to the SPD and the ADGB.

International trade union confederations

Almost as fast as they fell apart on the outbreak of war, the international organizations of labour were reconstituted after it. As early as 28 July–2 August 1919, 90 delegates from 14 countries, representing almost 18 million trade unionists, met in Amsterdam to reconstitute the International

18 4. Freiheitlich-nationaler Kongress des Gewerkschaftsrings deutscher Arbeiter-, Angestellten- und Beamtenverbände am 15. bis 17. November 1930 in Berlin (Berlin, undated), p. 67

Trade Union Federation, to which the ADGB also belonged. The German trade unionists had to accept the loss of their leading position in the Federation because of their war policy. The establishment of other international union federations showed that the schism and conflict in the German trade union movement were symptomatic of more universal tensions. The Communist and syndicalist unions, and also the oppositional groups in the "reformist" unions, got together to form the Red Trade Union International. Its inaugural congress in Moscow in July 1921 was attended by 380 delegates from 42 countries, representing some 17 million members. After disagreements about the role played by the German Christian trade unions in the war, the Christian trade unions also reconstituted the International Federation of Christian Trade Unions (IFCTU), with its seat in Utrecht. This was also the headquarters of the International Federation of Neutral Trade Unions, set up by the liberal unions in 1928.

Membership trends

Looking solely at the rise in total union membership, one cannot say that the unions had no backing for their policies. Membership of the Free Trade Unions exceeded 8 million in 1920, the Christian unions had 1.1 m members and the H-D unions a good 225,000. In addition to these, there were the Free and Christian-national federations of salaried staffs with 690,000 and 463,000 members respectively. This amounted to a tripling of the pre-war (1913) membership figures. In 1920 a total of 12.5 m workers, salaried employees and civil servants belonged to trade unions or similar organizations. Using the results of the 1925 occupational survey as a basis, one arrives at a level of organization of 40 per cent – or indeed as high as 68 per cent, taking the workers' unions on their own.¹⁹ Thus the politicization of the working class by no means bypassed the trade unions; but it did not lead to a stable membership, owing to the swift onset of disappointment with the course and results of the revolution, and, in particular, the social and economic crisis of the inflationary years.

The increase in union membership 1919–20 was probably influenced crucially by legal and political developments. The recognition of the unions by employers and the constitution, the extension of freedom of association to all occupations, the fundamental politicization of broad

¹⁹ Heinrich Potthoff, *Freie Gewerkschaften 1918–1933. Der Allgemeine Deutsche Gewerkschaftsbund in der Weimarer Republik* (Düsseldorf, 1987), p. 43

sections of society, especially the workers, during the war and the period that followed – all these factors made it easier for the unions to make progress in occupations, companies and regions that had previously been closed to them.

At first the new members tended to come from occupations that had scarcely (if at all) been organized before – government workers, railwaymen, farmworkers and white collar workers – though union success in organizing farmworkers, home workers and white collar workers should not be overstated. “New” regions were conquered. The Free and Christian trade unions penetrated into areas where they had previously found it hard to get a foothold because of the political or religious situation. The Free Trade Unions spread to eastern Germany and the Saar region, the Christian unions to central and eastern Germany and, again, the Saar – especially as the end of the “trade union dispute” promised episcopal suzerainty, if not support. Though the overall membership of the Christian unions always lagged a good way behind the Free Trade Unions’, it should be borne in mind that their regional concentration – as late as 1929, one half of their members were in the Rhineland and Westphalia – made them stronger than the Free Unions in the small and medium-sized towns in this region. Only now were the unions managing to work their way into the large concerns, aided by the provisions of the Auxiliary Service Law and, from 1920, the Works Councils Law. It was above all the number of women, young people and unskilled workers that was on the increase. For the reasons mentioned above, however, the proportion of organized women continued to lag far behind the proportion of women employed in all industries or trades.

Another structural characteristic of trade union development in 1918–19 was the growing distance between the membership and the officials. Many posts in the unions leaderships had to be filled, because some executive members had switched to politics or administration; but there was no change of generations. Instead, it was “second rank” officials who advanced into the key positions. So the “old guard”, chiefly consisting of long-serving trade unionists, stayed at the top. Trained as artisans, they were used to discipline and firm believers in the long, slow path of reform. By contrast, the new members had often simply taken a job in a factory, with no apprenticeship behind them, and first felt the impact of politics during the war or immediately after. This difference in experience between the generations contributed in no small measure to the tensions between the leadership and the rank and file, resulting in growing opposition, particularly in the Free Trade Unions.

The extent and speed of the rise in membership raised a number of pro-

blems for the machinery of all the federations. Simply issuing hundreds of thousands of membership cards, not to mention the opening of new payment offices, placed a tremendous strain on officials and increased the need for more full-time and part-time staff. Yet conditions of work were far from attractive. An eight-hour day was out of the question and pay was poor; the demands of the job had, however, increased with the growth in the unions' organization and functions. "Union officials" gradually emerged as a breed to whom critics of Right and Left would insultingly refer as "big shots" and "bureaucrats", blaming them for many, if not all, the problems of the Weimar republic.

3. *Back on the defensive: from the Kapp Putsch to inflation*

The November agreement and the Weimar constitution changed the whole basis of trade union work. The unions pinned all their hopes on an expansion of social reform under the Weimar republic. The Free Trade Unions and the H-D associations identified unreservedly with the new parliamentary system. As stated above, they exerted considerable influence on the social system in the early years of the republic and were thus able to record what were, by their own lights, quite a few successes. But this was exactly what provoked much of the criticism of the young republic.

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The disappointment and resentment of large sections of the political Left at the limited success of the revolution were probably exceeded by the contempt and hatred of the "nationalist Right" for the "November criminals" and "fulfilment politicians" (so-called for their readiness to "fulfil" the Treaty of Versailles), the *Diktat* of Versailles and the entire "Weimar system". The first obvious sign of this war on the republic was the Kapp Putsch. When the "Ehrhardt Brigade" marched into Berlin on 13 March 1920, proclaiming the former East Prussian civil servant Wolfgang Kapp Chancellor and the legitimate government – left in the lurch by the *Reichswehr* – fled Berlin, large numbers of workers and civil servants proved their loyalty to the endangered government. On the very same day, 13 March, the ADGB and the AfA-Bund called a general strike; the call was supported by the Communist KPD on the 14th, the Christian trade unions on the 15th and the German Civil Service Union on the 16th. After



The Kapp Putsch on 13 March 1920: the insurgents gather at the Brandenburg Gate

a general strike lasting five days, on 17 March the authors of the coup gave up.

The Free Trade Unions now considered that they were entitled to ask the government to meet a number of their demands as thanks for their help. In their statement of 18 March, they demanded not only that “all public and corporate administrations be thoroughly purged of all reactionary elements”; they also called for “a decisive say [. . .] in the shaping of the national and provincial governments” and the “overhaul of economic and social legislation”.²⁰

Although the unions of all political tendencies had stuck together through the general strike, this unity soon collapsed. The Christian unions saw the demands of the Free Unions as an attempt at political blackmail, in which they would have no part. They observed with suspicion the nego-

²⁰ Der Generalstreik gegen den Monarchistenputsch. in Korrespondenzblatt No. 12/13 of 27. 3. 1920. p. 152 f.

uations to form a pure workers' government, headed by the ADGB chairman, Carl Legien. But such plans anyway came to naught because of the schism between the USPD and the MSPD – and Legien's refusal to assume the office of Chancellor. Instead, a coalition government consisting of the SPD, Centre and DDP was formed. And the pledges given to the Free Trade Unions when the general strike was called off went largely unfulfilled, for example, with regard to union influence on the formation of the Cabinet, and socialization policy. Many trade unionists were also, no doubt, enraged at the way the armed disturbances on the Ruhr, which were to a certain extent to demand the concession of the revolutionary demands (though not supported by the unions), were bloodily crushed. The situation changed entirely to the detriment of the (Free) trade unions after the elections of 6 June 1920, when the MSPD share of the vote almost halved, leading to the formation of a bourgeois coalition government by the Centre, DDP and DVP.

The unions had proved strong enough to ward off the Kapp Putsch, but they were too weak to give practical political effect to their claims to power, which were not asserted with much cohesion. That discredited them with the Left; but on the political Right, the union claim to exercise decisive political influence was sufficient in itself to taint them with the slander of seeking to establish a "trade union state". This slogan concealed the fact that nothing could be further from the truth. What were the actual facts of the matter? Social policy was stagnating under the pressure of devaluation; there had been no thorough democratization of the administration or judiciary; and the question of economic power – specifically, the issue of socialization – had never been reopened.

Soon afterwards the unions were dragged into the Ruhr struggle and soaring inflation, which combined with the Hitler Putsch made 1923 the most crisis-ridden year of the 1920s. Unions of all tendencies allowed themselves – more or less willingly – to be drawn into the government's policy of "passive resistance" to the occupation of the Ruhr, which was ruining the national finances and fuelling inflation. Partly against their better judgement the Free Trade Unions were also infected by the nationalist slogans of this "spontaneous defensive struggle" – perhaps also hoping to reap some reward, in the shape of concessions in the sphere of social policy, for demonstrating yet again their readiness to "do their patriotic duty". But this was not to be. On the contrary, in the wake of inflation the unions were forced back on to the defensive even on their own ground – pay policy.

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While the unions' main concern in 1918–19 had been to make up for the loss of purchasing power during the war, in 1920 the race against devaluation began. Wages were unable to keep pace with the soaring cost of living. Though pay varied according to industry, occupation, qualifications and locality, there can be no doubt about the general drop in living standards. Inflation attacked the unions' very existence. Their finances worsened rapidly as a result of the fall in dues and the devaluation of their assets. Officials had to be dismissed, newspapers closed, benefits reduced or stopped entirely. And the remaining full-time officials were faced with the need to conduct constant wage negotiations that strained the machinery to breaking point.

At the beginning of 1920, the Free Trade Unions had rejected a sliding wage scale; from the end of 1922 pay talks took place every week; on 4 July 1923 the ADGB's federal committee recommended the individual unions to include a wage adjustment clause in their collective agreements. Pay was to be calculated on pay day on the basis of an official yardstick equivalent to the weekly rise in the cost of living, and from the summer of 1923 this cost of living index was, in fact, adopted.

The unions were also on the defensive over the question of working hours, not only in the field of industrial struggle – for example, in the south German engineering industry – but also in law. After long arguments which culminated in the SPD leaving the ruling coalition, a new decree on working hours was promulgated on 21 December 1923, which retained the principle of the eight-hour day but permitted a whole range of exceptions. The consequences were soon apparent: while until 1923 the unions were able to fend off all onslaughts on the eight-hour day and 48 hour week, in 1924 the working week increased to 50.4 hours following the relaxation of the rules, and then slowly decreased once more (Table 4b).

The trade union commitment to questions of pay and working hours led to a great number of industrial disputes in the years 1920–22, despite the decline in purchasing power (Table 2c). Of course, willingness to strike is clearly dependent on the ups and downs of the economic cycle. But the sudden leap in strikes and the high level maintained from 1919 to 1922 demonstrated more than anything the expectations of the workers, who were determined to bring about some improvement in their social and economic position. As early as 1923 – during the surge of inflation – these hopes gave way to bitterness and resignation. The fact that industrial action did not reach its “old” level in 1924 was no doubt partly due to the weakness of the unions, but chiefly to the introduction of the arbitration service.

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In view of the high level of industrial action, it was in the interests of the employers and the state to push through peaceful ways of settling disputes, which the weakened unions were initially prepared to accept, believing they would not be able to assert themselves on their own. After several arbitration decrees, the arbitration service was given its definitive form by the decree of 30 October 1923. If the parties could not agree, the authorities – bipartite arbitration committees, mediators and the national Labour Ministry – would propose a settlement. If this was rejected, the chairman of the arbitration committee or the mediator had to form an arbitration tribunal and summon employer and employee representatives in equal numbers. “If this still did not result in consensus, the tribunal had to put forward a proposal as a basis for an agreement (arbitration award). If both parties accepted the award, it had the effect of an agreement.”²¹ If they were unable to agree on an arbitration award, the chairman had the casting vote. After a new round of talks the award could be declared binding by the mediator for that district or by the Labour Minister. The award thereupon acquired the status of a collective agreement, even against the will of one of the parties.

The way the arbitration process was constructed, particularly the instrument of compulsory arbitration, involved the state in industrial relations. The consequence was that the unions and employers were no longer absolutely constrained to reach agreement; they were able to shift the responsibility for, say, wages on to the state. The consistently high number of cases referred to arbitration and particularly the high proportion of one-man awards and declarations making them binding indicate a tendency for both sides to dodge the responsibility and “pass the buck” on to the state.



A survey of union policy in the early years of the Weimar republic does not present us with a consistent picture. It must be counted a success for the unions that they managed to expand in the way they did, itself a result of the improvements gained in their legal and political position with the wind of revolution in their backs. But the contribution of the revolution was exactly the element which the unions were inclined to play down; their policy was sustained by the illusion that the achievements of

²¹ Hans-Hermann Hartwich, *Arbeitsmarkt, Verbände und Staat 1918–1933. Die öffentliche Bindung unternehmerischer Funktionen in der Weimarer Republik* (Berlin, 1967), p. 29

November 1918 had also ensured parliamentary democracy. But as the works councils and socialization campaigns petered out, the traditional power structure was consolidated and its beneficiaries remaining in place. This was also a consequence of trade union policy. The policy of the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft* (“working union”) undoubtedly brought the unions and employees clear social and political improvements; but at the same time it provided the employers with a jumping-off point for a fresh rise to political power – as was already becoming apparent in the early 1920s. The “era of the working union” came to an end – largely owing to the ruthless policy pursued by heavy industry – in profound disillusion. The Free Trade Unions left the ZAG in January 1924, though the Christian unions clung on to the idea of the working union – even though there were hardly any employers willing to co-operate.