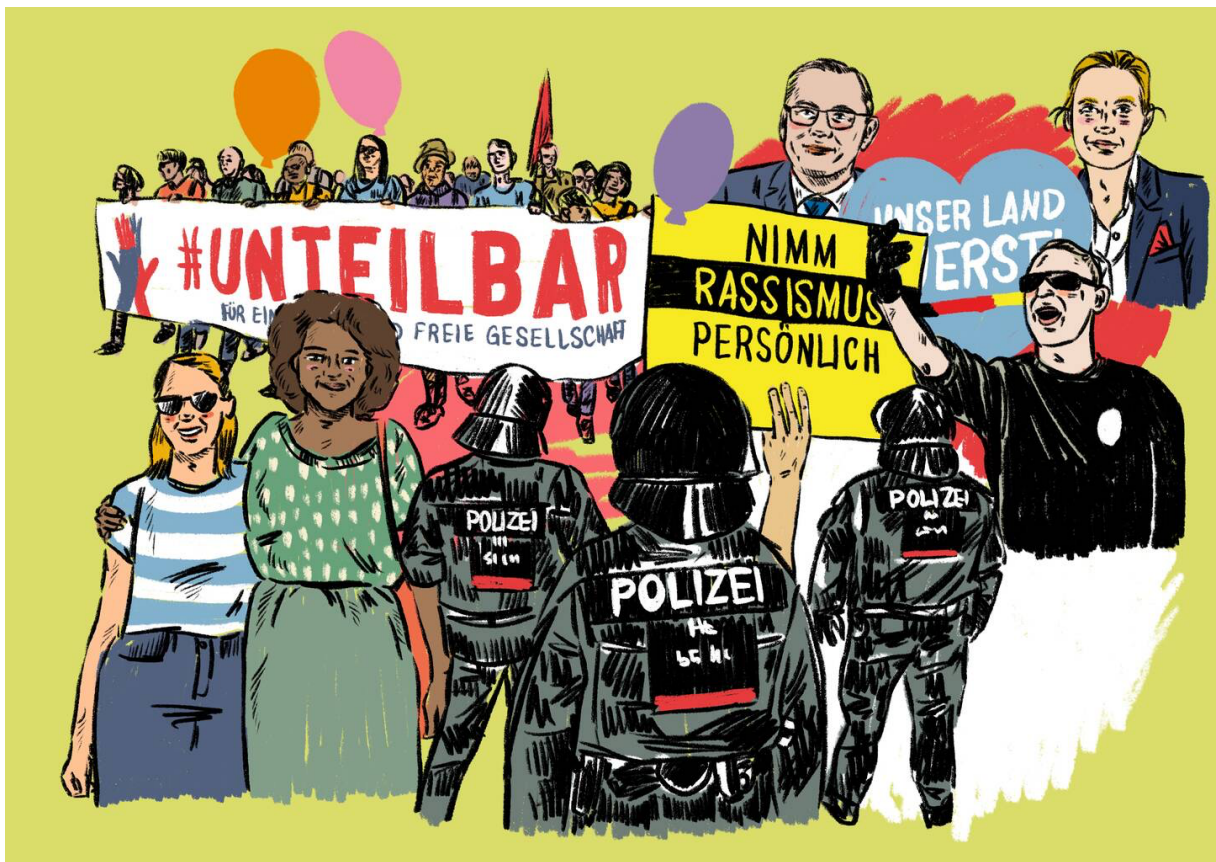


# Federal Republic of Germany: Trade Unions and Antiracism

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Labor struggles have a long tradition in Germany. Over time, they have not only focused on the demand for better working conditions, but have also been linked - albeit in a rather shy form at the beginning - to the anti-racist and anti-fascist struggle. Within the trade union political education programs, right-wing agitation was increasingly countered with a realistic picture of asylum and migration policy after the "Summer of Migration" in 2015.



## Labour Struggles in Germany: Achievements and Current Situation

An important trigger for labor disputes is collective bargaining between employers and unions. Unions often demand higher wages and better working conditions, while employers try to keep costs low. If the parties cannot reach an agreement, strikes or other collective action may take place. Labor disputes in Germany can take various forms, including strikes, demonstrations, boycotts, factory occupations, and other forms of civil disobedience. In some cases, labor struggles can also turn violent, but this is rare.



In recent years, workers in Germany have successfully fought for the introduction of a legal minimum wage. This can help to reduce wage dumping and precarious employment. Trade unions have also successfully fought for the reduction of working hours in the past, especially in the public sector. For example, the working week for teachers was reduced from 42 to 40 hours. Working conditions in the retail sector have also been improved through labor struggles, with the introduction of collectively agreed regulations for working hours, overtime and Sunday work. Workers have also fought for job security. At Deutsche Telekom, for example, a ban on dismissals for operational reasons was agreed.

## **Striking in the Public Sector and in Public Transportation**

In the collective bargaining in 2023, the inadequate offers of the employers caused great unrest among the workers. In March, one of the biggest strikes in recent years took place. The service company Ver.di and the railroad and transport union (EVG) called a total of around 350,000 employees in various sectors across Germany to a 24-hour warning strike. The strike affected the entire transport sector, including public transport, rail, airports, ports and locks. More than 30,000 employees took part in strike action at 350 locations.

## **What Are the Demands of the Unions?**

► The EVG is demanding wage increases totaling twelve percent for a period of one year, but at least 650 euros as a "social component." More than 50 rallies were held throughout Germany during the day.

► In Potsdam, the Ver.di union entered collective bargaining for around 2.4 million public sector employees. The union is demanding 10.5 percent. The employers are offering a total wage increase of five percent for a period of 27 months and a tax-free one-off payment of 2,500 euros to compensate for inflation. The workers' indignation spreads and leads to further protests.

### What Happens Now?

Employers have a tool called arbitration. A procedure that has been agreed since 2011 and is still being negotiated to achieve a result. During conciliation, there is a peace obligation. However, this does not begin until three days after negotiations have failed. Strikes are to be expected during this period.



### Trade Unions and Antiracism

The trade unions' restraint grew as the openly fascist wing of the AfD grew stronger. After a young man of color, died in a fight with an Iraqi refugee in Chemnitz in August 2018, right-wing thugs organized hunts and attacks on migrants. Large parts of the AfD leadership demonstrated with violence-prone Neonazis. They showed they have the same goal: To use



violence to create an ethnically and culturally cleansed Germany. German Interior Minister Horst Seehofer legitimized the violence by saying migration was the "mother of all problems." Many media outlets joined in the agitation. The police did nothing against the racist attacks.



With the Alternative for Germany (AfD), a fascist party has established itself that radiates far into the political center. It has a strong national-social wing and also has an impact on wage earners and the unemployed, including quite a few trade union members. The AfD defends fossil-fuel industrial capitalism and agitates against a "stateless big capital" that transfers profits abroad "at the expense of the German worker."

## Facts not Populism

Another obstacle to an offensive counter-mobilization in the trade unions was the AfD's self-dramatization as the "party of the little people," due to the above-average approval by workers, the unemployed, and trade union members for the party in the 2016 and 2017 state and federal elections. After the so-called summer of migration in 2015 (when the Federal Republic of Germany took in almost one million people seeking protection from the war-torn and crisis-ridden countries of the Middle East), the political education program of the trade unions intensified its efforts to counter the agitation from the right with a realistic view of the causes of flight and migration. With the seminar series "Facts not Populism" on asylum and migration policy, for example, ver.di is primarily targeting trainees and young employees.



The #Unteilbar alliance was formed. On October 13, 2018, more than 240,000 people demonstrated in Berlin for an open and solidary society in which the social question, the struggle for good education and work, and the right to flee are not played off against each other. Social cuts and racism are separate problems but also linked.

## Opposition and Open Door

This awareness was missing in the trade unions before. From now on, the independent racist character of the AfD party was more frequently emphasized as a threat and downgrading of the migrant members of the unions. As a helpful maxim for action, the trade unions have the slogan "Opposition and open door": Opposition against the right and fighting together against reactionary. It also means working together for solidarity-based solutions to social problems. This can have an effect at the trade union and workplace level in four core areas.

- **The Importance of Equal Rights for Common Struggles**

The often racist division of workers into core and border groups offers starting points for addressing the principle of equal rights, such as the right to vote for all regardless of citizenship, as a strengthening of the whole working class.

- **Antiracist Education**

Unions should do more to push back the division between "us" and "them." A historical understanding of racism is needed. Lack of language courses and residence rights show that the ruling class has long been uninterested in integration policies.

- **Shifting the Debate**

The right opposes the deterioration of working conditions and social insecurity with an "us versus them" approach. Against this, trade unions must be strengthened as the protective power of all wage earners - employees, the unemployed, precarious workers, migrants, etc.

- **Living and Anchoring Diversity**

The labor struggles of recent years show that the fixation on a white German skilled workforce has little to do with reality. Almost 22% of all IG Metall members, 500,000 people, have a migration background. This must also become more visible in committees and leadership positions.

## Use and share!

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This is a graphic story-telling inspired by the article "From Symbolism to Practice. German Unions Need to Support Anti-Racism in the Fight Against the Dangers of the Right" by Romin Khan, which was published in the anthology "[If Not Us, Who? Global workers against authoritarianism, fascism, and dictatorships](#)" ([external link, opens in a new window](#)) by Dario Azzellini.

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