STRATEGY OF AMBIVALENCE:
AFD BETWEEN NEOLIBERALISM AND SOCIAL POPULISM

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Abstract. In the 2017 German election, the right-wing populist party *Alternative for Germany* (AfD) did exceptionally well among workers. AfD's electoral success can be attributed to their new focus on social policy, which is inconsistent with the neoliberal programme of the party. They combine social issues with nationalism and advocate privileges for Germans in the distribution of social benefits. This study investigates AfD's new interest in social issues and the programmatic contradictions which accrue from it. It was found that AfD with its ideological incoherence conforms to Luke March's definition for social populist parties. AfD turned to social populism because it makes them more attractive to workers, not because of their genuine interest in social issues. The party now has adopted a strategy of ambivalence, representing neoliberal and social populist positions at the same time; and it can be expected that they will play with this ambiguity in the future.

1. Introduction

In the 2017 federal election in Germany, the right-wing populist party Alternative for Germany (AfD) got 12.6 percent of the votes, won 94 seats, and had unprecedented success among workers and unionized workers. These two groups voted at a disproportionately high rate for this party. Surveys on the social composition of voters showed that 18 percent of all workers who participated in the election voted for AfD. The party also did very well among unionized workers, 15 percent of which voted for AfD (Neu and Pokorny 2017). In their electoral campaign, AfD focused on

the 'little man' as one of five primary target groups in German society (Buntenbach 2018: 174). This electoral strategy obviously paid off at the ballot box.

AfD, which was founded in 2013, started out as a party whose main positions can be described as neoliberal. They are strongly influenced by ordoliberalism, a specific type of neoliberalism. Market-radical positions form the core of AfD's official party programme (Havertz 2019: 391-392). But recently, especially after the split of 2015 which resulted in the resignation of many economic liberal members from the party, AfD paid more attention to social policy. With this shift they made inroads into the traditional domain of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), which has become much less attractive for workers due to the cuts to social benefits that were implemented by SPD-led governments as part of the *Agenda 2010*. Surveys of workers' political views, with a special focus on unionized workers, found that many of them do not feel represented by this party anymore (Dörre 2018: 69). The social composition of SPD-voters now looks very much like the social composition of those voters who cast their ballot for the Christian Democratic Union (Brenke and Kritikos 2017: 596). Trust in the mainstream political parties of Germany – not just in SPD – has declined among the German electorate. Dissatisfaction with the way the democratic system in Germany works has been identified as an important motive to vote for AfD (Hansen and Olsen 2019: 12). But the main issue affecting the vote for AfD was the immigration and refugee policy which the Merkel government pursued in the two years before the election. Anti-immigrant sentiments were found to be the strongest predictor for an AfD-vote (Daigle, Neulen and Hofeman 2019: 76, Dostal 2017: 591). This is of interest in our context, because AfD is combining its newly found interest in social issues with nationalism and a specific anti-immigrant stance (Bose, Köster and Lütten 2018: 211). The type of solidarity which they advocate is nationalist and exclusionary – measures of social policy are meant to benefit only those who have a German passport and exclude everybody else. The success of AfD among workers leads us to the first puzzle of this study: Why is a party that has an almost purely neoliberal programme so appealing to workers?

A strong faction in AfD is actively trying to replace SPD as the main workers' party in Germany. Their message is that it is them (and nobody else) who care about workers. This presumption is connected to their populist claim that AfD is the only legitimate representative of the people. Currently, there is a discussion going on in Germany on whether AfD can be seen as a labour party (Becker, Dörre and Reif-Spirek 2018, Häusler and Kellershohn 2018, Sauer *et al.* 2018); and this study will reflect on whether there is any credibility to the claim that some kind of right-wing labour movement has emerged in Germany with AfD as its parliamentary representation.

Another puzzle is whether the social elements in AfD's rhetoric can be understood as a credible expression of their concern for the well-being of workers, or if we are dealing with a form of pseudo-radicalism that tries to be more appealing to *workers as voters* by covering issues that are of interest for them, but with no real intention to actually change the conditions under which they work and live. Luke March (2011: 19) defined social populist parties as parties with an 'essentially incoherent ideology,

fusing left-wing and right-wing themes behind an anti-establishment appeal'. According to March, such parties cannot be regarded as left parties nor be seen as genuinely social. It appears that AfD is now at least partly matching this definition of a social populist party.

This study starts with a reflection on recent developments of the right-wing populist movement in Germany and the role that AfD plays as the parliamentary representative of that movement. It then turns to the neoliberal positions that are still at the centre of AfD's programme. The neoliberal programme of the party will only be covered briefly, because it is already well-established in the literature that their approach to matters of the economy is basically neoliberal (Butterwegge 2018: 45, Gebhardt 2018: 44-45, Havertz 2019: 391-392, Ptak 2018: 33). From there it moves to the social populist pronouncements of the party and its promises to protect workers against the social and economic depravations of neoliberal capitalism and the effects of globalization. This includes an examination of the contradictions between the neoliberal party programme and the claims of some party officials that the party is now the only legitimate representative of workers in Germany. The main focus of this study is on the question whether and how far AfD can be considered as a social populist party – an issue which to date has not been treated in the English language.

It will also be investigated whether the world of labour itself may contribute to workers' shift to the right. A survey by Sauer *et al.* (2018: 192) found that corporations with their deteriorating turbo-capitalist working environments which are characterized by permanent restructuring are a 'fertile ground' for the agitators of the far right. According to Sauer *et al.* (2018: 192) these conditions result in a 'regime of uncertainty' where workers experience a permanent state of crisis. AfD's messages are resonating especially among those workers who are afraid of social downward mobility and who feel anxiety about their future (Lorenzen *et al.* 2018: 146, Sauer *et al.* 2018: 195-196). To date, populism research has not paid much attention to the world of labour. If its conditions really contribute to the rise of right-wing populism, a huge task lies ahead for populism research to provide us with a deeper understanding of these issues.

2. Recent developments of right-wing populism in Germany

AfD is now the strongest opposition party in the Bundestag, the federal parliament of Germany. For the first time since the 1950s, a party that has both right-wing radical and right-wing extremist elements is represented in this parliament. AfD also gained seats in all 16 state legislatures on subnational level (Stelzenmüller 2019: 3); and it has 11 members in the European Parliament. AfD's entry into the Bundestag marks a political caesura in German history (Häusler 2018a: 93). For decades, the crimes of National-Socialism worked as a deterrent for the large majority of Germans and kept them from veering politically to the far-right (Greven 2016: 3). Until recently, the stigmatization of right-wing extremism has prevented any major success for the parties of the right-wing extremist fringe (Decker 2015: 121). Thus, the rise of AfD

signals a change in the relation which Germans have to their contemporary history.

Some of AfD's representatives, first and foremost Björn Höcke, chairman of the party in the state of Thuringia, and Andreas Kalbitz, the former chairman of the party in Brandenburg, criticized the social disruptions brought about by the neoliberal system. They depict themselves as the only legitimate representatives of 'the people' and their will, and paint everybody else as being in it only for themselves and to betray 'the people.' This is where AfD conforms to the definition of populism formulated by Cas Mudde (2004: 562): "An ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people." While posing at a genuine democratic force, populism is actually at odds with democracy, because it claims exclusiveness of representation (Müller 2016: 20).

According to Mudde (2017: 30), populism is a 'thin-centred' ideology that tends to be combined with other ideologies. What makes it a right-wing type of populism in Germany is its combination with ideologies that can be classified as right-wing radical or right-wing extremist. One of the core ideologies of AfD is volkish nationalism, a specific type of ethnic nationalism, which focuses on the resurrection of the 'people's community' (Volksgemeinschaft) (Salzborn 2018: 76). The right-wing populists of AfD dropped traditional racism which includes the notion of a superior race and replaced it with ethnopluralism, a specific type of cultural differentialism which involves the idea that all people and cultures have the basic right to be different (Dörre 2018: 70). This insistence on differences has the consequence that any mixture of cultures is seen as potentially destructive. They reject multiculturalism and claim that the existence of German culture and identity is threatened by immigrants, especially if they are Muslims. Islam is seen as the 'main enemy' of the right-wing populist movement in Germany (Kellershohn 2016: 23). In fact, AfD's 2016 programme explicitly states, "Islam does not belong to Germany" (AfD 2016: 49).

Some party officials have produced headlines with anti-Semitic statements. The party leadership was very reluctant to reprimand them, which can be interpreted as a form of tacit consent. According to Salzborn (2018: 75), anti-Semitism 'can be attested on many levels' within AfD. Another important element of AfD's ideology is anti-feminism. They are running a fierce campaign against what they call 'gender madness,' which refers to governmental efforts to facilitate gender equality, for instance, through gender mainstreaming (Siri 2016: 73-74). What connects all these ideological elements of right-wing populism is their focus on inequality (Decker *et al.* 2018: 65). They concentrate on the formation of identity through procedures of exclusion. Which means that they define identity primarily in a negative way. The distinction between 'us' and 'them' is centred around who is 'not us.'

The refugee movement of autumn 2015 certainly contributed to the strong performance of AfD in recent elections. It sparked a fierce reaction of right-wing populists who stoked fears of foreign domination and of cultural loss caused by immigrants. The refugee crisis, which can primarily be understood as a crisis of the

political system of Germany, was a crucial factor in the recent electoral gains of AfD (Häusler 2018b: 11, Reif-Spirek 2016: 25). It has often been described as a 'catalyst' that drove voters into the arms of AfD, especially working-class voters who see the new arrivals as potential competition in the distribution of resources (Ptak 2018: 20, Sauer *et al.* 2018: 184). AfD promised its sympathizers to resolve this issue, offering the simple solution of keeping migrants out. This promise involves the resurrection of a strong German state that protects the interests of ordinary Germans against claims of outsiders.

There is an apparent contradiction between AfD's advocacy of a *strong state* when it comes to matters of immigration, public order, and criminality (issues which they see as interconnected) and their call for a *small state* when it comes to economic matters. But this is only a seeming paradox. As Stuart Hall (1990) has shown in his analysis of Margret Thatcher's neoliberal policies, neoliberals have a specific affinity to the strong state which they need to police the implementation of their market-radical agenda. After all, there appears to be a deep relation between neoliberalism and authoritarian populism.

3. AfD as neoliberal party

AfD started out as a party whose main positions can be described as neoliberal. In its beginnings, the primary agenda of the party was getting Germany out of the euro zone. Despite the public perception of AfD in its early days as a one-issue party, there have been connections into the milieu of the intellectual New Right since the phase of its foundation, which helped preparing the more recent shift of the party to the far-right (Häusler 2018b: 10).

Some of the leading figures of AfD explicitly committed to ordoliberalism, among others Jörg Meuthen, one of the two chairmen of the party, Alice Weidel, one of the two floor leaders of the party in the Bundestag, and Marc Jongen, member of parliament and co-author of the 2016 programme of AfD (Havertz 2019: 391). Ordoliberalism, a specific type of neoliberalism, holds that government should design a framework for the market and thus define the boundaries for economic activity. Within these boundaries, agents in the market should be able to pursue their interests freely without any direct government intervention.

The programme of AfD can clearly be described as ordoliberal. It explicitly mentions the work of Walter Eucken, Wilhelm Röpke, and Alfred Müller-Armack, three of the main theorists of ordoliberalism, as theoretical foundation of their economic positions (AfD 2016: 67). It contains several positions that are in line with basic ordoliberal principles; and it idealizes an '*order framework*'[1] for the economy which is established and overseen by the state (AfD 2016: 9). The idea of this regulatory framework is the centre piece of the ordoliberal approach and the main element that distinguishes this type of neoliberalism from its Anglo-Saxon sibling. The framework order sets the rules that inform the conditions under which

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[1] Emphasis added by the author.

the market is expected to function without any direct interference of government. In this perspective, two conditions are deemed essential for the smooth functioning of the capitalist system: Competition and price stability.

In accordance with its ordoliberal ideology, the economic programme of AfD is strongly focused on competition (AfD 2016: 67). The term competition is mentioned twenty times in this document. As Havertz (2019: 392) pointed out, the section of the programme on economic policy is 'a collection of core ideas of ordoliberalism':

> It includes the commitment of the AfD to provide for as much competition in the market as possible and as less government involvement in economic activity as necessary, praises competition as a premise for the free enterprising activity of individuals, rejects the subsidisation of businesses and states the party's preference for a reduced public spending ratio. It maintains that individuals who pursue their interests in the market with success will simultaneously always serve the common good with their activity (Havertz 2019: 392).

The programme describes the middle class and small-and-medium-sized businesses as 'the heart' of Germany's economic strength (AfD 2016: 69). It advocates the removal of any wealth taxes and the scrapping of the inheritance tax. For Butterwegge (2018: 45), the proposal to remove the inheritance tax and wealth taxes clearly indicates that AfD is a 'party of the privileged.' According to Gebhardt (2018: 44-45) the positions which AfD takes in its programme on social-economic issues bring the class interests of right-wing populism into focus. Ptak (2018: 33) sees AfD as a party that shows unconditional support for free markets and competition as exclusive coordination mechanisms of the economy.

4. AfD as social populist party

4.1. AfD's electoral success among workers

Surveys on the social composition of voters who participated in the 2017 federal election show that the share of workers who voted for AfD was disproportionately high with 18 percent. AfD also did very well among unionized workers, 15 percent of which voted for AfD (Neu and Pokorny 2017). This is surprising, because these demographics have traditionally leaned toward the SPD, which is now underrepresented among workers (Brenke and Kritikos 2017: 596).

The support for AfD is especially strong in the working class and lower middle class (Hilmer *et al.* 2017: 29). But this does not mean that AfD has become a labour party, because there is also a significant portion of voters with a disproportionately high income who vote for AfD (Lengfeld 2017: 225). In the 2017 elections, AfD was able to make considerable gains among the precarious milieu and the bourgeois centre (Vehrkamp and Wegschaider 2017: 12-13). Both of these groups are in support of the current system but are doubtful whether it will last and afraid that

they will end up on the losing side if socio-economic circumstances worsen in the future (Vehrkamp and Wegschaider 2017: 35). Those in the precarious milieu are already facing increasing social disadvantages and experiencing exclusion. Those in the bourgeois centre are concerned about the excessive demands that are put on them at the workplace, which results in fears of downward social mobility within this social group. Several studies found that dissatisfaction is a strong predictor for people to vote for AfD. This dissatisfaction may, as already pointed out, concern the (perceived) personal situation of voters, but it often is also about the dissatisfaction with the democratic system in Germany in general which they do not trust anymore (Hansen and Olsen 2019: 14).

Hilmer *et al.* (2017: 6) stress that the main influence factor for people to give their vote to AfD is not their actual living conditions, that is, their *objective* social situation, but their *subjective* social situation. How people *feel* about the circumstance of their lives is a crucial factor in their decision to cast their ballot for this party. Most of the voters of AfD are actually not in a precarious financial situation. However, there is strong evidence that they do not feel well-protected against any future crises. Among AfD-sympathizers the proportion of those who profess fear of a general increase in poverty in Germany is much larger than among sympathizers of other parties. AfD-sympathizers are also significantly more fearful of personally descending into poverty (Lorenzen *et al.* 2018: 149). It primarily is this fear which brings voters to cast their ballot for AfD; and it is this very fear which AfD connects and amplifies with its nationalist and anti-immigrant positions.

The survey of Sauer *et al.* (2018: 145) about the relation between organized labour and right-wing populism provides an explanation for the fact that AfD is disproportionately successful among workers and unionized workers: Workers' preference for AfD is resulting from a marked deterioration of labour conditions, which they do not see as a temporal phenomenon but as result of the continuity of a historic crisis: permanent pressure exerted by the constant restructuring of their work places results in the perception of 'crisis as a permanent condition' (Sauer *et al.* 2018: 145). What exacerbates the situation for many workers is the fear to lose control of their careers. The sense of a loss of control emerges because of the unclear consequences of those restructuring processes. It is not the restructuring itself that makes them worried, it is the lack of knowledge what the process may bring for them personally (Sauer *et al.* 2018: 127).

What adds to the frustration is that workers often get the feeling that their individual performance is no longer fairly recognized and appropriately compensated (Sauer *et al.* 2018: 145). In this situation, right-wing populists use refugees and also those dependent on social welfare benefits as scapegoats. These groups are blamed for the increasing pressure and insecurity which many workers feel (Sauer *et al.* 2018: 136). According to Dörre (2018: 51), in times with little prospects of an improvement in their socio-economic situation, wage earners are more susceptible to 'interpretations of the social question which reinterpret top-down antagonisms as conflicts between inside and outside, between migrants and a perceived culturally homogeneous German people.' For some of them, the refugee movement of 2015 functions as a

mirror of the social fears within German society; refugees reflect the vulnerability of one's social position and the fragility of the prosperity which once seemed very secure (Sauer *et al.* 2018: 199).

4.2. The social populist turn of AfD

Since the split of the party in 2015 and the resignation of some of its national-liberal members, AfD has increasingly focused on social issues. This *social populist turn* of the party goes so far that some observers of German politics are discussing whether a right-wing labour movement is emerging in Germany (Buntenbach 2018: 269, Dörre *et al.* 2018). One of the key figures of the right-wing populist movement in Germany, Götz Kubitschek[2] (2018), explicitly stated that he deems it possible for AfD to challenge the left for its domination of social issues and thus take in possession its 'crown jewel,' the social question. AfD certainly is no longer the purely neoliberal party that it was at its foundation in 2013. The party incrementally adopted positions on social policy that seem at odds with its neoliberal core – so much so that a powerful wing has emerged in the party, the members of which are advancing ideas on social issues that signal a social conscience of the party. This social populist wing has primarily grown in the East of the country, where it has taken root in the state associations of AfD. It is no accident that the same individuals who promoted the social turn of the party are also behind the course correction toward the far-right which the party has taken since 2015 (Becker, Dörre and Reif-Spirek 2018: 16). They are collaborating in many platforms the most important of which is the so-called 'Flügel' (which can literally be translated as 'wing'). The 'Flügel' was officially dissolved in April 2020, but it still exists as an informal network with increasing influence in AfD. The name of this grouping is interesting, because a wing can never stand for the whole of a party; it can become a strong or even dominant part, but it would always leave room for other factions. The name of this influential party group reveals an important element of AfD's strategy: Different party wings which differ regarding their main ideological focus may appeal to distinct groups of voters with no regard for the incoherence which this factionalization means for the ideological position of the party.

According to Dörre (2018: 51), the New Right gains in influence, because it manages to connect the social question with ethnopluralist and nationalist interpretations of the changing social conditions in Germany. The main protagonist of that shift is the aforementioned chairman of AfD in the state of Thuringia, Björn Höcke. In his speeches and writings, Höcke (as cited in Gebhardt 2018: 46) castigates 'the destructive forces of predatory capitalism' and denigrates the left as 'socialist appendix of global financial capital.' He combines this anti-capitalist rhetoric with calls for a 'solidary patriotism' (Höcke and Hennig 2018: 246) which involves the integration of social and volkish-nationalist ideas. As Höcke wrote in an interview book which he published together with Sebastian Hennig, 'only a nation-state with

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[2] Kubitschek is publisher of the publishing firm *Antaios*, and editor in chief of *Sezession*, a metapolitical journal of the intellectual New Right, both are attached to the Institute of State Politics, a right-wing radical think tank that was co-founded by Kubitschek.

a defined solidary community can also be social' (Höcke and Hennig 2018: 246). For Höcke and his fellow campaigners, the national and the social belong together. Which is why some critics referred to this approach as 'national-social' (Hank 2018), a term reminiscent of National-Socialism. When Höcke advocates combining the national with the social, it means that social welfare benefits should preferably go to those who he sees as part of the German people. A good example for this approach is the proposal for a reform of the national pension scheme by AfD's party association in the state of Thuringia. The so-called 'pension concept' includes three main proposals for a reform of the pension system: 1. The paper stresses the need to raise the pension level to 50 percent of previous earnings before taxes (AfD 2018: 28-29). 2. It introduces the idea of a 'citizen's pension' (Staatsbürgerrente), which would include additional payments for those who worked for at least 35 years but still have a relatively low pension (AfD 2018: 31). The citizen's pension is designed to provide benefits only for Germans. Those who do not have a German passport but worked for 35 years or more in Germany and regularly paid their pension contributions would simply be excluded. 3. Child-rearing is rewarded by this concept. When retiring, parents would get additional payments for every child. Moreover, the pension contribution of those with children is slightly reduced with each child (AfD 2018: 35-36). What is problematic about this retirement scheme is the exclusive payment of the 'citizen's pension' only to Germans. This scheme would cover the majority of all pensioners in Germany and unjustly discriminate those who do not have a German passport for that very reason.

While the neoliberal and the social populist wings of the party disagree about the organization of the pension scheme, they agree that foreigners should be largely excluded from its benefits. Dörre (2018: 71) points out that this would result in the factual devaluation of the work performance of foreigners. AfD adopts an approach of *exclusive solidarity*, where solidarity is only meant for the in-group and not for anyone who is perceived as not-belonging. Inwardly, right-wing populists 'try to create a social coherence – based on the idea of ethnic homogeneity – outwardly, they distance themselves from immigrants, refugees, or Muslims, whom they consider not only as a threat to internal security but also social security' (Hentges 2018: 110). Exclusive solidarity involves the *ethnicization of the social*, where social relations and divisions are primarily interpreted along ethnic lines. This includes an alteration of the way social conflicts are interpreted. They are no longer seen as located 'on a vertical axis of conflict between 'top' and 'bottom' – as in a class-analytical approach between capital and labour – but on a horizontal plane: 'We' against 'the others'' (Sauer *et al.* 2018: 185). Accordingly, the social programme of AfD (2017) stresses the importance of borders: 'The welfare state needs borders,' is what the platform of the party for the federal election in 2017 said, and it literally meant borders:

> The stabilization of social systems with a shrinking and aging population calls for special efforts. Our limited resources therefore are not available for an irresponsible immigration policy, as would not be expected in any other European country. Our welfare state can be retained only if the

required financial solidarity is provided within a clearly defined limited
community (AfD 2017).

The connection of the social question with questions of identity is part of a
deliberate strategy of AfD (Häusler and Mescher 2018). This strategy has also been
adopted by Gauland, the honorary chairman of the party. In a speech that he gave
in the state parliament of Brandenburg, he promoted the provision of a 'solidarity
package' for socially weak Germans only to denigrate refugees in the same breath
(Dietl 2017: 60). Another protagonist of the social populist turn of AfD was Andreas
Kalbitz, who was chairman of AfD in the state of Brandenburg and member of the
federal executive board of AfD until his ousting from the party in May 2020. In
an interview with Benedict Kaiser for *Sezession*, he stated that the left is losing its
hegemony in the area of social policy, while AfD is gaining support among workers,
and suggested that a connection of social issues with nationalism would allow AfD
to emerge as a catch-all party (Kalbitz and Kaiser 2018). He complained that the
'principle of social market economy has been jimmied by the primacy of profit
maximization and the growth ideology' and advocated the 'return to a truly socially
oriented market economy' (Kalbitz and Kaiser 2018). In this statement, Kalbitz tried
to seize the term 'social market economy' for the right. The term was introduced
by Müller-Armack, one of the main theorists of ordoliberalism, and has since been
used to describe the economic system of West Germany after the Second World War
with its economic success. Therefore, it has a strong connotation with economic
prosperity and social stability. The term 'social market economy' was adopted by
the parties of the centre (CDU, SPD, and FDP) as a symbol for the socio-economic
achievements of Germany after the war. Now the ownership of the concept social
market economy is contested, and AfD is claiming to be its only true representative.
Kalbitz' words correspond to Benedikt Kaiser's (2016: 30) anti-capitalist
distinction between capitalism, understood as the contemporary neoliberal system,
where society with everything in it becomes a subsystem of the economy, and hence
a commodity, on one side, and social market economy, on the other side, which
is seen as an ideal system that takes in account the effects of market activity on
humans and mitigates them through the establishment of a legal framework and the
education of the citizens in economic ethics. The ideas of an order framework for the
economy and the need of an education in economic ethics are classical ordoliberal
ideas. Kaiser presents the social market economy as a remedy for the shortcomings
of a radical market system. Like other social populists of the far right, he connects
the 'social question' with the 'national question'. He claims that the 'national
question' already is a topic of great salience for voters, while the 'social question'
is just about to gain importance. In his eyes, these two problems pose a challenge
which the left is not up to (Kaiser 2016: 30-31). He claims that what is needed is a
party that can take on both issues; and he leaves no doubt that in his eyes this can
only be AfD. He recommends that the party should seize the opportunity that has
presented itself with the large number of dissatisfied people in the working class
and middle class of Germany and perform a radical turn away from neoliberalism

toward a stronger coverage of social issues (Kaiser 2016: 31). It appears that some in AfD were listening to this right-wing radical journalist. The social populist turn of the party has since then been initiated by some of its more influential members in the German East.

It is noteworthy that the party programmes of AfD (2016, 2017) do not have an elaborate position on social policy. Neither the 2016 party programme nor the electoral platform of 2017 include an elaborate stance on social policy. An exception is labour market policy where the social populist faction of AfD had some influence. The 2016 party programme includes a commitment to minimum wage laws, though, without specifying exactly how high the minimum wage should be.

4.3. The workplace as an area of right-wing populist agitation

Another crucial element of AfD's social populist turn is the attempt of the right-wing extremist network 'One Percent for Our Country' (Ein Prozent für unser Land)[3], which is strongly supported by AfD, to develop right-wing extremist structures in works councils and labour unions (Bose, Köster and Lütten 2018: 211, Detje and Sauer 2018: 201, Hentges 2018: 112, Sauer *et al.* 2018: 190). Works councils are elected bodies of labour representation; and since 2018 right-wing populists have increasingly tried to gain influence over works councils by placing their people in this influential office. *One Percent for Our Country* encouraged workers from the right-wing spectrum to participate in the 2018 works council elections and to set up their own candidate lists (Hentges 2018: 112). This already had some success in the Daimler works in Stuttgart-Untertürkheim (where Mercedes cars are built), where the right-wing extremist candidate list 'Zentrum Automobil' (Center Automobile) gained several seats on the works council (Bose, Köster and Lütten 2018: 211). According to Sauer *et al.* (2018: 189), there is a strong possibility that elections of works councils are used to establish right-wing extremist organizational networks and advocacy structures within firms. Right-wing populists are targeting certain companies and specific regions where employees are seen as susceptible to their right-wing populist messages.

Sauer *et al.* (2018: 189) interviewed many union officials, who expressed concerns that representatives of the New Right appear not only unrecognized on trade union lists but may also set up their own lists. There are strong indications for a changing atmosphere at the workplace. Union representatives are reporting a considerable polarization in corporations. There often is a noticeable tension in meetings of labour representatives with workers, especially when works councillors or labour union representatives talk about the necessity of the fight against the New Right (Sauer *et al.* 2018: 188). There have been reports of works councils who opposed the hiring refugees, because they feared that the new arrivals might threaten the position of the core workforce in their firms (Sauer *et al.* 2018: 141). There also were incidents where workers resigned from their unions because they did not like their support for

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[3] *One Percent for Our Country* was initiated by the *Identitarian Movement Germany*, the *Institute for State Politics*, the journal *Compakt*, and some involvement of AfD-officials, especially Hans Thomas Tillschneider, who is a member in the state parliament of Saxony-Anhalt (Hentges 2018: 112).

immigrants and their critique of the New Right (Sauer *et al.* 2018: 189). As a result, labour representatives have started to tread lightly around these issue in order not to scare away more members.

The world of labour has clearly come into the focus of right-wing populist activists. They discovered the workplace as an area of interest for right-wing populist agitation. Within corporations right-wing populists rarely present themselves as neoliberals or as volkish-nationalists. Instead, they try to create an image of themselves as relentless advocates of the 'little people' in the corporation (Sauer *et al.* 2018: 188). In Hans-Jürgen Urban's (2018: 189) assessment, making the corporation the 'central arena of right-wing populist agitation' is consequent, because the firm is the place where many of the social and cultural crisis dynamics of German society converge. Urban (2018: 189) points out that, to date, research on populism was only marginally interested in the way labour-industry relations influence the emergence of right-wing populist attitudes among workers.

Meanwhile, AfD and sympathizers of the party have established several organizations with the purpose of labour representation. Häusler, Puls and Roeser (2018) list five such organizations. One of them is the *Alternative Association of Workers* (Alternative Vereinigung der Arbeitnehmer), which was formed by members of the federal parliament and does not present itself as a labour union. Its self-defined purpose is 'to win over workers, as largest social-political demographic group, to cooperate actively with AfD' (*AfD Kompakt* as cited in Häusler, Puls and Roeser 2018: 48). The other four organizations pose as 'alternative' labour unions and encourage workers who are already members of established unions under the roof of the *German Federation of Trade Unions* (Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund, DGB) to change over to them. The *Alternative Workers Association Middle Germany* (Alternativer Arbeitnehmerverband Mitteldeutschland) blames established unions such as Ver.di, which represents workers in the services sector, for the 'predatory exploitation' of workers in this sector. They accuse Ver.di for collaborating with the established parties of the German party system in a concerted effort to undermine the position of workers in their struggle with employers. Jürgen Pohl (as cited in Häusler, Puls and Roeser 2018: 49), co-chair of the *Alternative Association of Workers* and of the *Alternative Workers Association Middle Germany*, claimed that Ver.di, in reality, is not representing workers' interest but capital interests. This is also a position which right-wing populists take increasingly in corporations, where they voice their radical criticism in an escalating tone, while they portray and attack works councils as part of the establishment (Sauer *et al.* 2018: 188).

These labour unions focus on 'solidary patriotism,' using a phrase which Höcke has frequently included in his writings and speeches (Bose, Köster and Lütten 2018: 211). It is a phrase that indicates a combination of social policy and nationalism. Höcke, who is a crucial figure in AfD's move to the far-right, is also the main protagonist in the party's social populist turn. At a demonstration in Erfurt (Thuringia) against a plant closure of *Siemens*, Höcke gripped and waved a banner of the union of metal workers (IG Metall) which exists under the roof of the *German Federation of Trade Unions*. It was a staged move to symbolize AfD and its labour

organizations' claim of being the only true representatives of workers in Germany (Buntenbach 2018: 169).

It is too early to say, if these labour organizations will have a stronger influence on the way labour is represented in Germany. There are no publicly available figures regarding the membership in these 'alternative' labour unions, and it is fair to assume that their influence, to date, is marginal.

5. Conclusion

The rise of right-wing populism in Germany can be understood as a reaction to neoliberal capitalism which is deeply penetrating the fabric of German society. The permanent market-oriented restructuring of corporations has resulted in enormous pressures on individual workers. The effect of these developments on ordinary citizens is increasing fear, insecurity, and a sense of loss of control over their careers. AfD and its newly founded labour organizations are trying to exploit these insecurities. They portray traditional labour organizations as traitors to the average worker and pose as the only viable alternative to them. Höcke, the chairman of AfD in the state of Thuringia, together with right-wing extremist networks such as *One Percent for Our Country*, is leading the charge of this right-wing populist attempt to seize the social question for the far right. AfD is aware of the vulnerability of workers and has started an attempt to reach them with its message of 'exclusive solidarity' right at the workplace. This new focus of AfD on social issues is of course at odds with the neoliberal programme of the party, which shows little concern for workers and is very enterprise-friendly. It is highly doubtful that these social populists really want to lead the party in a new direction away from their neoliberal programme. It can therefore not be considered as a right-wing labour party.

The ambivalence between its neoliberal or, more precisely, ordoliberal stance and its newly adopted social populist positions does not seem to faze the party. On the contrary, this ambivalence has become a central element of AfD's strategy, which is why Dörre (2018: 73) called them 'masters of ambivalence.' AfD is not necessarily facing a choice between neoliberalism and social populism. Even though both are logically opposed to each other, they can be seen as complementary elements of their strategy. AfD may keep a position that is *for* and *against* neoliberalism at the same time (Gebhardt 2018: 47). These very inconsistencies in the positions of AfD lead us to the conclusion that it conforms perfectly to March's (2011: 19) definition of social populist parties. For the medium term, it is likely that they will stay their course of ambivalence, combining 'exclusive solidarity' and neoliberalism.

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