

The wider context

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The climate catastrophe is everywhere

In our everyday lives as horticulturalists we are confronted with the climate crisis and other environmental destruction on a daily basis. In that season, we saw the damage that drought brings to crops. Increasing water scarcity is already putting pressure on food supply and this will get worse. But the first thing we noticed was the strain the heat and the sun put on our own bodies. We worked in +30°C outside temperatures or 40°C inside the greenhouse. Paradoxically, the climate crisis does not just cause more intense dry periods, but also more storms and heavy rains. So adapting agriculture means to prepare the sector in two opposing directions at once. We have dealt with months of rain and seen the harm it does to crops and the soil (and the concerns about missing incomes as profits and wages). In one workplace we worked with workers who talked about all sorts of conspiracy theories (inquiry no. 3 Hinterland Organics <https://www.angryworkers.org/2023/03/27/farmworker-fury-inquiries-about-organic-agriculture-ch-3-hinterland-organics/>). But even here we had the impression that workers who work outside every day and have to observe natural processes as a part of their jobs cannot credibly deny the realities of climate change (anymore).

The current situation in Germany

So far, we've mentioned some conclusions we've drawn based on our work experiences. We think it's also important to briefly sketch the bigger picture: At the moment we are in Germany so we look at this country. We have to rely on government statistics, so we have to treat these numbers with some caution.

We took this hint by the Angry Workers: "We need more precise analyses of, amongst many other things, the current division and hierarchy of intellectual and manual labour in the essential industries ('what does the common worker know?'), as well as analyses of actual forms of global supply-chains, agro-industry etc., taking into account the question of potential working class control."¹

Agriculture and horticulture

When we tell people about our jobs in agriculture, they often think we work with animals or grain. But horticultural crops such as fruit, vegetables, flowers and ornamental plants are also part of agriculture. They are very labour-intensive and are therefore mostly found on specialist farms. Horticultural crops amounted to 1.4% of the total area used for agriculture in Germany in 2020². However one hectare of horticultural crops generates several times more monetary value and labour intensity than one hectare of grain or fodder.

Still not all farms convert to horticultural high value crops for several reasons:

- path dependencies in how the business is set up: equipment, marketing channels, lack of staff with the specific skills
- vegetables still require a lot of manual work and manual work force

In everyday language the expressions: Farmer, grower, peasant, landworker, farmworker, agriculturalist, horticulturalist are often somehow lumped together. Partially they do overlap, partially they are distinct from each other. We have to keep these inclarities in mind when reading up on the sector. Beside that there are still more distinct job positions in primary production: Orchardists, forestry, shepherds, beekeepers and artisanal food processing as cheesemaking sometimes happens on farm too. As well it is likely to bump into colleagues doing office work or mechanical engineering or IT on farm. Just to name a few and to keep complexities in mind. Agriculture is sometimes an expression used to talk about animal- and grain-farming and sometimes it is intended as an overarching expression including all the distinct branches. All of those general

1 AngryWorkers. Class Power on Zero Hours. (2020). page 365

2 https://www.bmel.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/Broschueren/daten-fakten-2022.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=8 – p. 31, Accessed 11 January 2024

overview data here barely says anything about the specific situation in one workplace or another as our inquiries prove. Average numbers and statistically summarised data are great for the rough overview and to compare regions or countries with each other. However it does not say much about the actual work conditions in a specific workplace as agricultural businesses differ way more from each other than say one warehouse to another warehouse or hospital to another hospital.

Agricultural workers

Germany has about 84 million (2022) inhabitants³, of which 45.8 million are gainfully employed⁴. Of these 45.8 million, only 555,000 people work in agriculture, fisheries and forestry. (As a comparison: 34.6 million work in the service industry.)⁵. There are about 270,000 farms in Germany, employing around one million people and producing goods worth around 59 billion euros a year⁶. The number of farms is constantly shrinking. It is only a fraction of the number it used to be even ten or twenty years ago and the tendency is ongoing reduction of number of farms, while the remaining ones cultivate more and more land. In 2020, of these approximately one million workers, 434,000 were employed as family workers. Of the 504,000 non-family workers, 275,000 were seasonal workers, i.e. 55 percent⁷. However this small paragraph already shows how messy the data is, as it puts forestry and fisheries together with on-field agriculture. So this does not allow to point out the exact number of (*proletarian*) *farmworkers* in a narrow sense out of the statistics.

Agricultural Incomes

Agricultural workers in Germany work long hours and get paid relatively little for it. In 2018, men working full-time in agriculture, forestry and fishing had the longest working hours of all gainfully employed people in Germany at 49.9 hours per week (women at 45.3)⁸. The country's average full-time working week stood at 41.4 hours. The average gross monthly earnings of a full-time

3 <https://de.statista.com/themen/27/bevoelkerung/#topicOverview> - Accessed 10 January 2024

4 <https://de.statista.com/themen/5602/arbeitsmarkt-in-deutschland/#topicOverview> - Accessed 10 January 2024

5 <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/1248/umfrage/anzahl-der-erwerbstaetigen-in-deutschland-nach-wirtschaftsbereichen/> - Accessed 10 January 2024

6 <https://www.bmel-statistik.de/landwirtschaft/> - Accessed 10 January 2024

7 <https://www.bmel.de/DE/themen/landwirtschaft/agrarsozialpolitik/saisonarbeitskraefte-landwirtschaft.html> – Accessed 10 January 2024

8 https://www.destatis.de/DE/Presse/Pressemitteilungen/2020/03/PD20_071_133.html – Accessed 11 January 2024

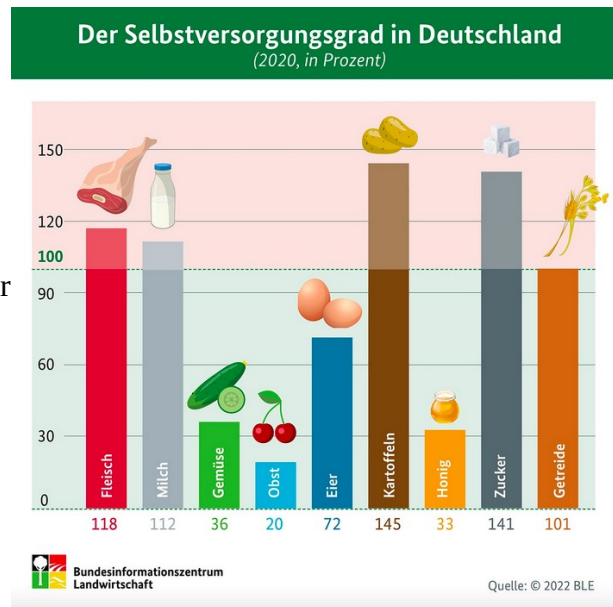
employee amounted to around €4,100 in 2022⁹. Agriculture, forestry, fishing and horticulture is one of the lowest-paid sectors, with a monthly gross salary of €2,609 for a full-time job¹⁰.

Self-sufficiency

For meat, milk, potatoes, sugar and grain, Germany produces more than it needs itself¹¹.

But the country cannot cover its own needs for fruit and vegetables. In 2021, the degree of self-sufficiency was 36% for vegetables and only 20% for fruit¹². The degree of self-sufficiency for tomatoes is less than ten percent: more than 700,000 tons of tomatoes are imported from abroad¹³.

This has a lot to do with competitiveness on international markets and nothing with what is reasonable for people or animal or nature.



If we want to safeguard healthy diets for everyone, it will be crucial to establish links to suppliers in other countries while we build up and increase the infrastructure and skilled work force needed to grow the vegetables and fruit we need ourselves. Of course, this raises interesting and difficult questions. Do we need to or want to be entirely self-sufficient? Which food products do we need? Do we keep importing 1.31 million tons

Source picture:

https://www.ble.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/BZL/Informationsgrafiken/220225_Selbstversorgungsgrad.jpg;jsessionid=47DC9BA2EAA8B32364616C3B393A48C8.2_cid325?__blob=publicationFile&v=5

⁹ <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/161355/umfrage/monatliche-bruttoloehne-und-bruttogehaelter-pro-kopf-in-deutschland/> - Accessed 10 January 2024

¹⁰ <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/237674/umfrage/durchschnittlicher-bruttomonatsverdienst-eines-arbeitnehmers-in-deutschland/> - Accessed 10 January 2024

¹¹ https://www.ble.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/BZL/Informationsgrafiken/230203_Selbstversorgungsgrad.html – Accessed 10 January 2024

¹² <https://www.landwirtschaft.de/landwirtschaft-verstehen/wie-funktioniert-landwirtschaft-heute/markt-und-handel/der-selbstversorgungsgrad-wie-ist-es-um-die-versorgung-mit-lebensmitteln-in-deutschland-bestellt> – Accessed 10 January 2024

¹³ <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/659012/umfrage/selbstversorgungsgrad-mit-nahrungsmitteln-in-deutschland/> - Accessed 10 January 2024

of bananas a year from countries like Guatemala, Panama, Costa Rica¹⁴? What do the banana growers think of this in times of revolt? Eating other things instead of bananas in socialism has been discussed comprehensively by comrades in *dissentmagazine*¹⁵. And how this can be much more nourishing and fun than capitalism's stupid bananas. However this is an old discussion in Marxism. For fellows who love it more abstract: Changing circumstances will create different kinds of subjects and subjectivities. Therefore those subjects may have totally different needs longing to get satisfied, then we do have right now under the current capitalist conditions. Fancy discussion here about what is a *need* how does a *need* in a subject come into being and is it a *true need* or *compensational*... Of course all of this is very dialectical and impossible to figure out in detail in theory in advance bla bla bla... PhD paper here, book there, debating club elsewhere... Enjoy. :-)
Still these are very hands on questions: Which food comes from where? Why? And who is doing that work?

Food production

In 2022, half of Germany's total land area was used for agriculture¹⁶. Germany is the fourth largest agricultural producer in the European Union¹⁷. More than half of the agricultural land, grassland and arable land is used for fodder production¹⁸. So our vegan comrades definitely have several valid points here regarding a sane use of land. For human consumption, Germany mainly produces meat, bread grain, potatoes, sugar beet, oilseeds (e.g. rape), fruit and vegetables¹⁹.

Organic agriculture

In 2022, 14.2 percent of German farms were certified organic²⁰. 11.2 % of the land used for agriculture is organically farmed²¹. The German government claimed to aim to get this up to 30% by 2030.

14 <http://www.fruitandvegetablefacts.com/sites/default/files/Factsheet%20GERMANY%20import%202022%20estimation%20base%20oktober%2022.pdf> – Accessed 5 January 2023

15 https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/bananas-for-socialism/ (accessed 9th of January 2025).

16 <https://www.bmel-statistik.de/landwirtschaft/bodennutzung-und-pflanzliche-erzeugung/allgemeines-zur-bodennutzung> – Accessed 10 January 2024

17 https://www.bmel.de/DE/themen/landwirtschaft/landwirtschaft_node.html – Accessed 10 January 2024

18 Ibid

19 Ibid

20 <https://www.bmel-statistik.de/landwirtschaft/oekologischer-landbau> - Accessed 10 January 2024

21 ibid

Across the EU 9.1% of the utilised agricultural land is cultivated certified organic²². Of all EU member states, Austria has the highest percentage of organically farmed land, with 25% in 2020²³. In 2015, fifteen member states were below 5%, including Ireland, UK, Netherlands, France and Belgium²⁴. The aim of the EU is to get the European average up to 25% in 2030.

Subsidies

According to the German federal information center for agriculture, subsidies account for between 41 and 62% of agricultural income, depending on the structure of the main farm.

<https://www.landwirtschaft.de/landwirtschaft-verstehen/wie-funktioniert-landwirtschaft-heute/warum-wird-die-landwirtschaft-so-stark-subventioniert> As far as we eavesdropped in the

workplaces we were working, the subsidies were much smaller – probably because organic fruit and vegetables is a somewhat different business model. The generated value per land unit is several times higher. Meanwhile most subsidies are distributed according to numbers of hectares under cultivation. So the bigger farms get more money than the smaller ones; proportionally as well as in absolute numbers. Agricultural subsidies within the European Union are a very complex topic. We lack the capacity to go into that here properly. However it needs to be investigated properly to understand the sector and its political and economic hardships better. For the European Union agricultural subsidies is the biggest expense in their budget, and the policies on its specific spendings, changed a lot with political fashions over the course of decades. At some time it was a lot about food security, in the context of cold war, at other times it was more about supporting bigger farms and suppressing smaller farms. In other times it was about pressuring or supporting certain technologies or modes of conventional/organic production or capping the use of certain pesticides or herbicides. This issue can easily become a book of its own.

Big vs small workplaces

We have no work experience in big conventional agricultural companies. Still, from what we see and hear around us, we see rough differences between small and big workplaces. Bigger workplaces are generally more clearly structured. They are more professional, impersonal and hierarchical, so

22 https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-04/agri-market-brief-20-organic-farming-eu_en.pdf – p.5, Accessed 10 January 2024

23 https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-04/agri-market-brief-20-organic-farming-eu_en.pdf – p.5, Accessed 10 January 2024

24 https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2019-10/report-organic-agriculture-eu-2015_en_0.pdf Accessed 10 January 2024

there are more workers with common interests, facing very few bosses. In the past few years German media covered numerous scandals about work conditions of seasonal workers in big conventional places not getting their wages, or covid outbreaks in overcrowded accommodation²⁵. In comparison, everyday work on smaller farms is often more improvised and less tied to established routines. In smaller work places, the business side is often much more mixed up with the personal side of life. For example, the owners pay low wages and at the same time expect their employees to deeply love their work and do a lot of overtime (as in chapter 2 on the family business <https://www.angryworkers.org/2023/03/02/farmworker-fury-inquiries-about-organic-agriculture-the-family-business-chapter-2/>). It is common to have retired (grand-)parents or relatives helping out on the farm (even unpaid). It is also a widespread practice for apprentices to live on site and share facilities with the business and/or owner and their family, so at least some workers are half-adopted into the family(-business). On top of that, the self-exploitation of many farm-owners is enormous, so it is difficult to approach that context with a traditional leftist *capital vs. labour analysis* only. Farm owners are obviously exploiters of surplus in the current economic structure. At the same time they are under massive market pressures themselves. Matter of fact within the food industry, the biggest capital and capital's power lies in wholesale, food retail and with food processors like dairy plants or industrial butchers. Capital simply leaves its hands of the risky business of actually growing food to farmers/growers but controls prices by controlling the whole food processing and food logistics chain.

Many leftists and ecologists have a lot of romantic images of small-scale peasant work. Personally, I think these people live in a very urban bubble and have not done enough weeding, as the everyday experience of workers on small farms is often tough. However, we have also visited small farms that are actually economically profitable, with better wages and overall better working conditions for owner and workers. In our experience, it has a lot to do with doing proper business planning and calculations on the side of the owner, on top of being skilled agriculturalists/horticulturalists²⁶.

25 <https://www.hoerspielundfeature.de/nach-der-arbeit-100.html> (accessed 8th of January 2025) *Nach der Arbeit hängen die Kleider ihre Menschen auf*. This research even won some radio prizes and leaves quite some space to Romanian workers in Germany to speak for themselves about their employer Tönnies and their troubles and lives. This activist podcast is as well worth listening to: <https://gemeinsam-gegen-die-tierindustrie.org/podcast/page/2/> (accessed on 8th of January 2025). Episode No. 6 deals with the work conditions in the meat industry. Or the leftist newspaper a&k on a farmworkers wildcat strike in 2021 <https://www.akweb.de/politik/verschweigen-verdraengen-ignorieren/> (accessed 8th of January 2025). a&k Issue 661 of 15th of June 2020 *Verschweigen. Verdrängen. Ignorieren*. Written by Elmar Wigand.

26 For example those two small scale growers appeared to us to actually be successful businesses without working themselves to death, at least upon visiting for a few hours: <http://www.weierhoefer-gartengemuese.de/> and <https://www.gemuesegarten-hoxhohl.de/> (both accessed on 8th of January 2025).

Really thinking through every little detail in work processes does make the difference in the end if profits are made or not, if it is endless toiling or decent work, if the atmosphere is good or bad.

Mental health and social dynamics matter

In many countries, research shows that suicide rates are much higher among farmers than among general members of the population. In the US, the suicide rate for farmers is more than double that of veterans of war²⁷. In Germany, research suggests that 4.5 times as many farmers are affected by burnout than members of the general population²⁸. The rate of depression among farmers is three times higher than in the general population²⁹.

The differences we observed between companies were not entirely structural, but were also related to social dynamics and the mental health of the owners and/or workers. Even though structurally, it changes very little, it does make a difference to our everyday lives if the boss is a polite, reasonable person or a dickhead (erratic, yelling, tricking with wages, moody..). In the cooperative (chap. 5 <https://www.angryworkers.org/2025/12/05/farmworker-fury-inquiries-about-organic-agriculture-ch-5-the-collective-cooperative/>), we felt trusted and respected, and our ideas were generally welcomed and taken seriously. In the CSA project (chap. 4 <https://www.angryworkers.org/2023/08/02/farmworker-fury-inquiries-about-organic-agriculture-ch-4-a-community-supported-agriculture-project/>), the bosses did not welcome our suggestions (sharp knives, rainjackets...) at all, which was frustrating. In all workplaces, the work pressure in the high season was very high (over time is regular, weather etc.). Troubles with mental health seem to be so wide spread, that we have to essentially figure out comradely collective working class approaches on mental health to deal with it not just individually but as a political movement.

Health and safety

We learnt that health and safety is always a hot topic. Of course, minimum requirements exist by law. Someone might have heard of some authority fairy in a far away bureaucracy forest who enforces those standards with a magic wand, but in reality it is us workers enforcing and

27 <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/dec/06/why-are-americas-farmers-killing-themselves-in-record-numbers> (accessed on 8th of January 2025).

28 <https://www.wochenblatt-dlv.de/dorf-familie/landleben/angst-burnout-depression-bauern-trifft-oeffter-568531> – (Accessed 10 January 2024).

29 *ibid*

implementing safe(r) work conditions, or nothing happens at all. Guess what; as the inquiries proof, asking nicely or pointing out official regulations in a polite conversation with the bosses is not helpful in this regard. It is simply not the interest of the business/boss to spend more money than is absolutely necessary. This is contrary to workers' interests to stay healthy and sane while working.

No surprise on gender issues

In Germany, around 36% of all agricultural workers are female³⁰. We think this number might be higher in organic companies. Still, in most workplaces, we saw a very "traditional" role division: generally, more men were in charge of machines like tractors, chainsaws, and welding equipment, and more women were in charge of the social side of the business and household tasks like cooking and cleaning, paper work and (informal) conflict mediation. We perceived the women's work often to be less visible on first sight.

Around 22% of women working in agriculture are permanently employed, 35% are seasonal workers. The proportion of family workers is 43%. The majority of these female family workers are spouses (59%). Female business owners make up only 18% of the female family workers³¹. We have only been told of the ELAN-network, they sound interesting but we do not know how strong or active they are³². They seem to be at the threshold of agriculture and queer-feminism. All the data we found only worked with binary gender definitions.

Some thoughts on vegan agriculture

As we describe in inquiry number 5, most (organic) horticulture relies on a steady input of animal products, such as hog hair pellet fertiliser. Some liberal-leftist NGO's as well as animal rights activists and climate activists see veganism, including vegan agriculture, as one way out of the climate crisis. We think reducing our consumption of animal products makes a lot of sense when looking at the land use and environmental impact of animal farming. But we do not have a strong opinion about a 100% vegan agriculture. We think it is best to look at what approach fits best for specific ecosystems, instead of propagating veganism as the most ethical approach in all circumstances. For example, compost and mulch materials have to come from somewhere and be transported, so they are not always good alternatives to animal manure. However we are not going

30 <https://www.praxis-agrar.de/betrieb/betriebsfuehrung/frauen-in-der-landwirtschaft/> (accessed 8th of January 2025).

31 Frauen. Leben. Landwirtschaft. Eine Fotobroschüre des Thünen-Instituts und der Universität Göttingen in Kooperation mit dem Deutschen LandFrauenverband e.V.
https://www.bmel.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/laendliche-Regionen/Ehrenamt/fotobroschuere-frauen-leben-landwirtschaft.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=3 (accessed on the 8th of January 2025).

32 <https://elannetzwerk.wordpress.com/aktuelles/> (accessed on the 9th of January 2025).

into this discussion here. Among leftists this is one of the most annoying and most fierce but fruitless discussions ever. As far as we understand the climate catastrophe has a lot to do with burning coal, oil and gas and the usage of petroleum based products. So this must stop first. And yes of course there is a lot of lobby bullshit thrown into media and science, which makes it hard to get proper information on it. However we are not convinced by people arguing “100% vegan and nothing else!”. As this usually comes from urban upper class liberals. However a strong reduction of animal farming does make sense to us. A rule of thumb may be to have only as many animals on site, as the farmland can feed. In temperate climates this is roughly one adult cow (or equivalent) per hectare of grassland. This should reduce animal farming a lot and make big international food imports (soy from Brazil to Europe...) unnecessary.

It does not make sense to us to insult animal farmers on so claimed moral high grounds. And beside all the meat industry money we would like to know where the vegan team gets their money from³³? Matter of fact we wish to have proper conversations on this in the spirit of solidarity among comrades and fellow workers. We wish to encounter as much empathy and practical solidarity with working class people of all genders, races, ethnicities and identities as the animals receive from political veganism.

However we definitely agree on the aim of reducing suffering for all beings. We wish this conversation to be held in a goodwill debating culture among comrades. By the way if you do not care about capitalism and patriarchy we do not care about your stuff at all.

We need to link up with other workers

We noticed that the conditions from one agricultural company to another differ much more than in other industries, like from one factory to another factory. This makes it harder for workers to see their common interests and join forces. Also, agricultural workplaces have no (great) history of industrial action and are generally poorly unionised. *Notes from below* comrades dug deep into the history of landworker struggles in the UK. The most recent incidents they came up with were big strikes and riots in 1830, 1872 and 1923. More than 100 years ago! Anyways their book on the topic is a great read and feels like a sibling to this little furious farmworker book³⁴.

As in other sectors, workers are disillusioned and have little faith in their ability to change things. It is therefore very hard to imagine any kind of revolution starting in agriculture. The “farmers”

33 For example this organisation: <https://faba-konzepte.de/en/about-us/#Gruendung> (accessed on the 8th of January 2025).

34 *Notes from Below*. (Summer 2023). *Issue 18: Seeds of Struggle Food in a Time of Crisis*.

protests in many European countries in winter 2023/24 often have had to different extents far right-wing or conspiracist flavours. However this was almost never farmworkers but rather farmowners and random right wingers. While the Left was mostly absent from this. It is worth to mention the exceptional interventions here of the small anarchosyndicalist German union FAU section *Grüne Gewerke*³⁵ and AbL³⁶ (*Arbeitsgemeinschaft bäuerliche Landwirtschaft* – the German sibling of the international peasant organisation *Via Campesina*). As far as we know, we never met anyone at work, for whom any kind of trade union was a relevant point of reference in the 2020s. So from our side solidarity and love to the FAU for seriously trying to get a class based organising started in the sector. It is overdue and no one else will do it, if not ourselves. The AbL is still worth mentioning. It seems to be a small but rather noisy organisation, from my view it is limited in its potential as it is a cross class organisation, trying to include mostly farm owners and all sorts of people who in different ways “identify” themselves with agriculture in a broad sense. Anyways we respect their ardent continuous work and enjoy reading their monthly newspaper *Unabhängige Bauernstimme* (<https://www.bauernstimme.de/home>). For sure it opens up space for relevant conversations on agriculture. For example on genetically modified organisms GMOs.

Even though landworkers are unlikely to be at the forefront of the next revolution for all the structural issues described in this book. Whoever starts the revolution will need to establish links to farms, or rather the farms’ workforce immediately. In case of a workers’ takeover, workers in food production will have to coordinate closely with workers in food logistics, food processing, food retail, as well as with food workers in different countries. We have to start establishing these links now.

35 <https://gruene-gewerke.fau.org/> (accessed 9th of January 2025).

36 <https://www.abl-ev.de/start> (accessed 9th of January 2025).