

# **LABOUR RELATIONS IN THE GERMAN MEAT INDUSTRY – FROM EROSION TO RE-ORGANISATION?**

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University Conference**  
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- 1. The specific business and labour exploitation model** of the German Meat Industry
- 2. After massive Covid-19 outbreaks in the German meat industry:**  
The adoption of a new legal labour package
- 3. The impact of the new legal labour package:**  
New rules of the game and opportunities for trade unions and workers' struggles

# Neo-Liberal Policies in Germany

## and its Impact for the Meat Industry

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- 1970/1980s:**    **Privatisation** of former public abattoirs
- 1990s:**        **Opening of the German labour market**  
for posted workers from Eastern Europe
- Erosion** of **sector-level collective bargaining**
- Decline** of **trade union representation**
- 2000s**         **EU Eastern Enlargement/**  
Increasing employment of **Eastern European workers** in the meat industry
- Increasing concentration** in the meat industry  
and the emergence of large meat companies
- Establishment of a **new business model!**

# The New Business Model

## of the German Meat Industry (since the 1990s)

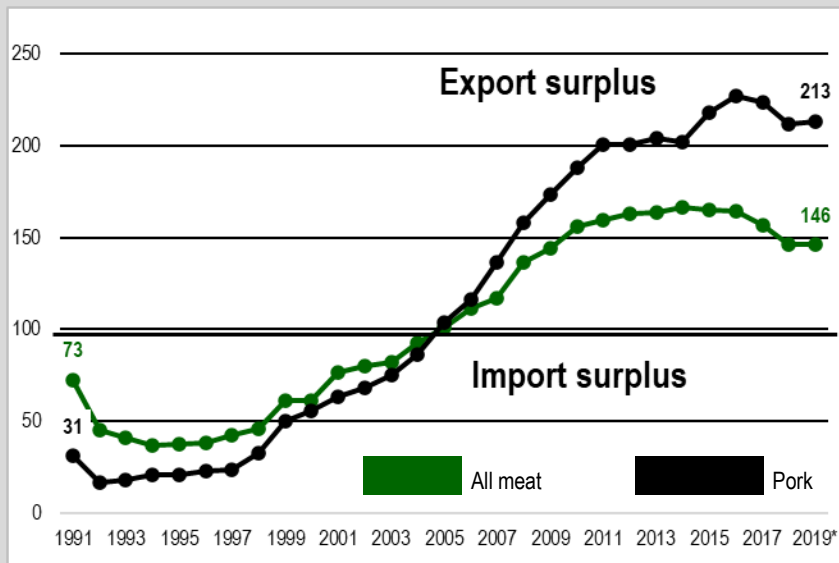


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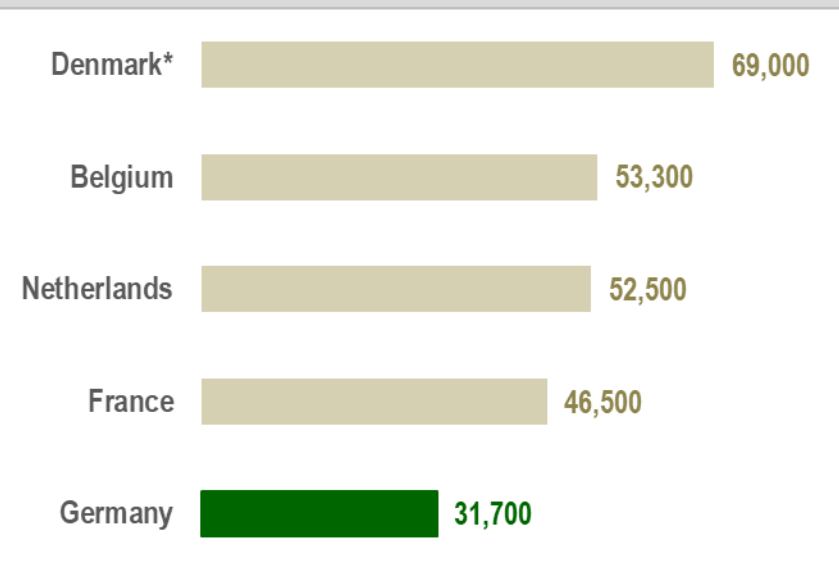
**Increasing market expansion** based on

- **cheap mass production**
- **strong export-orientation**
- **exploitation of cheap labour from Eastern Europe**

Trade balance of the German meat industry



Annual Labour Costs in the meat industry (2018)



# The Specific Labour Exploitation Model of the German Meat Industry (since the 1990s)

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## Extensive use of cheap workers from Eastern Europe

- hired not by the meat producer but by **sub-contracting companies**
- extremely **low wages**; not covered by **collective agreements**
- extremely **hard working conditions** and **long working hours**
- **many offences against** health and safety and other legal labour standards
- extremely poor **housing conditions**
- **no workers' representation**, as **works councils** in the meat companies have almost no representation rights regarding workers from sub-contractors

# Attempts to limit labour exploitation in the German Meat Industry (since the 2010s)

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**Regular scandalisation** of exploitative labour  
and housing conditions **in the media**

## **2015: Introduction of a statutory minimum wage**

and subsequently also temporarily a collectively agreed sectoral minimum wage for the meat industry.

**In Practice:** Minimum wages were often undermined, especially through excessive working hours!

## **2014 ff: Voluntary commitments of the meat companies**

to improve conditions and to reduce the number of subcontractors.

**In Practice:** Almost no effect!

**2017: A special law** (*GESA Fleisch*) obliging meat companies to monitor compliance with labour standards at subcontractors.

**In Practice:** Almost no effect!

# Massive Covid-19 Outbreaks in German Slaughterhouses (May/June 2020)



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## FINANCIAL TIMES

Coronavirus pandemic + Add to myFT

### German slaughterhouses in spotlight after virus outbreak

Migrant workers endure conditions scientists say are prime Covid-19 incubators



GERMANY

### Coronavirus: 'Modern slavery' at the heart of German slaughterhouse outbreak

Just as lockdown measures are lifting, more than 200 employees at a slaughterhouse in western Germany have contracted COVID-19. DW spoke to workers living in dilapidated, crowded conditions.



THE TIMES

CORONAVIRUS

### Coronavirus: Slaughterhouse at centre of huge new German outbreak



The Guardian

This article is more than

### 'Exploitative conditions': Germany to reform meat industry after spate of Covid-19 cases

Ban on use of subcontractors and fines of €30,000 for slaughterhouses breaching new labour regulations a 'historic moment', say campaigners

- Coronavirus - latest updates
- See all our coronavirus coverage





# After the Covid-19 Crisis: **A New Era for the German Meat Industry?**



**Handelsblatt**

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**TÖNNIES, WESTFLEISCH UND CO.**

## Die Schlachtindustrie steht nach den Corona-Ausbrüchen vor einer Zeitenwende

Lasche Vorgaben haben Deutschland zu einem führenden Standort für Schweinezüchter und Schlachter gemacht. Nun droht die Politik mit „Konsequenzen“ – und lädt zum Branchentreffen.

 Katrin Terpitz  Silke Kersting

24.06.2020 • Update: 24.06.2020 - 12:23 Uhr • 2 Kommentare • 10 x geteilt





# The New Legal Labour Package for the for the German Meat Industry (2021)

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## Occupational Safety and Health Inspection Act

(*Arbeitsschutzkontrollgesetz*)

- **Legal ban of sub-contracting** in the core areas of meat production from 1 January 2021
- **Legal ban on temporary agency work** from 1 April 2021
- Requirement of electronic recording of **working hours**
- Minimum number of **workplace inspections**
- Minimum standards for **company housing**
- **Higher financial penalties** for employers which violate labour standards
- **Changing rules of the game**  
for workers' representation and trade unions

# Impact of the New Legal Labour Package in the German Meat Industry

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## The end of the subcontracting system?

- All approx. 35.000 former subcontracted workers **were directly employed by meat companies!!!**
- Subcontractors were still used for **recruiting** of migrant workers
- **Work organisation/hierarchies of subcontractors** were often taken over from the meat companies
- Some companies try to **bypass** the ban on subcontracting (legal cases are pending and are still not decided by courts)
- Whole new legislation is **legally contested** (has to be decided by the German Constitutional Court)

# Impact of the New Legal Labour Package in the German Meat Industry

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## Improvement of conditions?

- **Working time:** Formerly extended working days (up to 16 hours) are reduced to max 10 h/day, due to digital recording and controls
- **Inspections** by state institutions were extended (but still not satisfying)
- **Working conditions** did not change substantially. Harsh, authoritarian regime inside factory continues -> supervisors of the former subcontracting firms still in charge
- **Division of workforce** (core – migrant workers) proceeds
- **Still high labour turnover rate** among unskilled migrant workers
- **Housing situation** improved, but not resolved -> still no new legal framework

# Impact of the New Legal Labour Package in the German Meat Industry

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## New rules of the game:

1. **Workers councils** at companies  
are in charge of the entire workforce
2. **New Opportunities for trade unions**  
to organise migrant workers and  
to re-regulate the sector via collective agreements
3. **Strengthening networks** between unions  
and other NGOs (churches, welfare organisations etc.)
4. Better support for migrant workers through  
the union-run **advisory organisation**  
**“Faire Mobilität”**



# New Trade Union Campaigning in the German Meat Industry



## Collective bargaining for new sectoral agreements

**March 2021:** Start of negotiations

**April 2021:** **Wave of industrial action**

- nation-wide more **than 50 protests and strikes at slaughterhouses**
- **largest number** of activities since decades

**May 2021:** Agreement on a **sector-wide minimum wage** above the level of the statutory minimum wage

**2022ff.** Negotiations started on **other working conditions** (working time, holidays etc.)

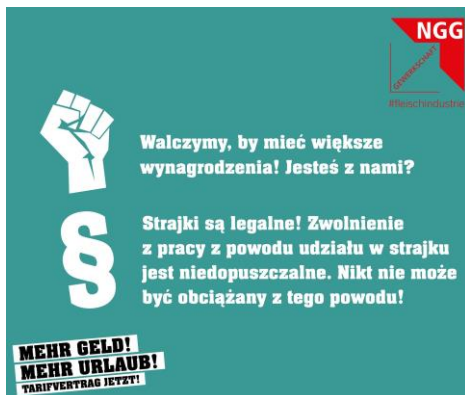


# New Trade Union Campaigning in the German Meat Industry



## Collective bargaining in multiple languages

- Significant participation of migrant workers  
**in industrial action**
- **Raising self-confidence** of migrant workers
- Significant (but still rather limited)  
**organising** of migrant workers



# Perspectives and Discussion:

## From Erosion to Re-Organisation?

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- New **rules of the game** and subsequent union and civil society activities started a **(social) transformation of the German Meat Industry**
- despite first gains the **union NGG is still in a weak position**, civil society network small
- There will be new opportunities for **works councils** in the meat industry (especially after electing in spring 2022)
- **Social transformation will need more years** to gain stable improvements and to change production and business model more fundamentally



# Perspectives and Discussion: **From Erosion to Re-Organisation?**

## Relevance for labour relations analysis:

- **A re-organisation** of rather disturbed labour relations and exploitive business models **is possible!**
- It requires both **political** and **trade union action.**



# Many thanks for your attention!



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## Further Reading:



## Download:

[https://www.wsi.de/de/faust-detail.htm?sync\\_id=HBS-007928](https://www.wsi.de/de/faust-detail.htm?sync_id=HBS-007928)



## Download:

<https://www.bpb.de/shop/zeitschriften/apuz/fleisch-2021/344835/ein-jahr-arbeitsschutzkontrollgesetz>