

REPORTS and CORRESPONDENCE

Workers and Their Culture in Comparative Perspective

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On April 12, 1984, some thirty historians from the Federal Republic of Germany and the United States gathered in Baltimore to participate in a three-day symposium entitled, "Workers and Their Culture in Comparative Perspective." Initiated by Professor Erich Angermann of the University of Cologne and hosted by the Johns Hopkins University history department, it was one in a series of German-American conferences sponsored by the Volkswagen Foundation during the tricentennial celebration of German settlement in North America.

Professor Vernon Lidtke of Johns Hopkins performed much of the work involved in conceptualizing the meeting and defining and structuring its thematic sessions. These were entitled, "The Culture of the Workplace," "Life and Work in Rural Societies," "Family and Work," and "The Lives of Workers and the Labor Movement." Each session began with the presentation of two papers, one based on the American experience and the other on the German. Session commentators sought to highlight the international parallels and contrasts suggested by the papers. That often proved a tall order, since panel members frequently proved to be interested in different kinds of questions—and therefore defined key words differently.

This problem, in fact, surfaced during the first session, charged with exploring workplace culture. David Montgomery's presentation grew out of his work on the evolving struggles pitting skilled employees (here, machine-builders) and employers over "shop culture" issues of worker autonomy and work-process control during the half-century after 1870. Hermann Schäfer (University of Freiburg), on the other hand, focused on "factory culture" in the Alsace region, defined as the factories' physical structure and material conditions therein. Hard-pressed to compare such

different papers, commentator Klaus Tenfelde (University of Munich) wound up evaluating them separately and offering some comparative thoughts of his own, an example followed by a number of commentators in subsequent sessions. The discussion which followed Prof. Tenfelde's contribution likewise proceeded along two distinct axes.

In the second session ("Life and Work in Rural Societies"), Nell Painter of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill reviewed the experience of black workers in four twentieth-century southern industries—coal mining, tobacco, iron and steel, and textiles—indicting the unions involved for their discriminatory practices. The second presentation, by Regina Schulte of London's German Historical Institute, once again radically shifted the focus. Her fascinating paper convincingly linked nineteenth-century wedding rituals among Bavarian peasants to underlying (and changing) property, family, and gender relations in the village.

Alice Kessler-Harris of Hofstra University opened the third session on family and work by ruminating on the special assumptions, values, and goals which she suggested have historically informed the attitudes and behavior of women wage-earners in the U.S. Perhaps, she speculated, women's very distinctive family roles, life patterns, and moral sensibilities (related, in turn, to society's code of feminine domesticity) gave rise to equally distinctive ways of relating to wage labor. Turning back to Germany, Jean Quataert (University of Houston, Clear Lake) discussed the impact of nineteenth-century proto-industrialization on gender and work roles among rural families involved in cottage textile production. Her paper made innovative use of data gathered in insurance surveys among weaver families in the Oberlausitz region.

David Brody (University of California, Davis) opened the fourth conference session with a re-examination of "Work-Time and Leisure during Early American Industrialization." This paper analyzed the ten-hours demand raised by late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century American journeymen as a nationally specific response to their growing exploitation at the hands of employing master craftsmen. Dieter Langewiesche (University of Hamburg) followed with an historiographical discussion of the relationship between the organized labor movement and working-class culture and daily life in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Germany.

The final panel—featuring Profs. Gerhard Ritter (University of Munich), Jürgen Kocka (University of Bielefeld), Ira Berlin (University of Maryland) and Ronald Walters (Johns Hopkins)—agreed on the need for more systematic comparative historical study of work and social class, grappled with the evident difficulties involved, and discussed various lines along which that study might best be conducted.