

Local minimum wages in Germany, 1885-1914

Abstract: This dataset contains the 'ortsüblichen Tagelohn gewöhnlicher Tagearbeiter' (customary local daily wage of ordinary day laborers), which was determined by the German administration in consultation with local authorities and companies when calculating sickness benefits after the introduction of nationwide statutory health insurance in 1883. It was therefore not an average wage, but the lowest wage paid, which interestingly also took into account non-monetary wage benefits. As it was collected nationwide according to uniform criteria, it offers, in comparison with price data, the possibility of determining and comparing real wages and the standard of living in Germany at a very detailed local level. The data set presented here is limited to the reproduction of daily wages for 210 cities; hundreds of other smaller municipalities are listed in the sources cited.

The compilation and publication of wage data was a political issue in the early German Empire. Social reformers hoped that it would provide information about actual working conditions, and for the same reason the dominant political forces were against the publication of wage statistics. The first nationwide (and at the same time first Prussian) wage survey was therefore not carried out and published until 1892.¹ There are only two earlier enquêtes with data: in 1876, tellingly, the Imperial Chancellery (and not the Imperial Statistical Office) surveyed the factory wages of women and children throughout Germany. However, the wages are only broken down according to the regional districts. In 1878, a Germany-wide survey was carried out on wages in the tobacco, iron and textile industries, but it was limited to these sectors.² Apart from overviews for miners and seamen, there are no other Prussian or Reich-wide studies on wages before the end of the 1880s.³

A very interesting source is therefore the information provided by the social insurance institutions on local daily wages. According to §8 of the Health Insurance Act of June 15, 1883, the "Betrag des ortsüblichen Tagelohnes gewöhnlicher Tagearbeiter" (amount of the usual local daily wage of ordinary day laborers) was decisive for the assessment of health insurance

¹ Cf. Wolfgang Gerß (1977), *Lohnstatistik in Deutschland. Methodische, rechtliche und organisatorische Grundlagen seit der Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Volkswirtschaftliche Schriften, 268), Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, pp. 17–24, and Rüdiger Hohls (1992), *Arbeit und Verdienst. Entwicklung und Struktur der Arbeitseinkommen im Deutschen Reich und in der Bundesrepublik (1885–1985)*, Diss. FU Berlin, pp. 24–31, 38.

² Cf. *Ergebnisse der über die Frauen- und Kinderarbeit in den Fabriken auf Beschluß des Bundesrats ausgeführten Erhebungen, zusammengestellt im Reichskanzleramt*, Berlin: Heymann 1877, and Reichsenquete Tabak-, Eisen- und Textilindustrie, in: *Drucksachen und Sitzungsprotokolle des Bundesrats* (1878).

³ Cf. Victor Leo (1909), *Arbeitslohn (Statistik)*, in: *Handwörterbuch der Staatswissenschaften*, 3rd edn., vol. I, Jena: Fischer, pp. 1065–1101; Gerß (1977), pp. 17–24, and for the current state of research (still) Rüdiger Hohls (1995), *The Sectoral Structure of Earnings in Germany, 1885–1985*, in: Peter Scholliers/Vera Zamagni (eds.), *Labour's Reward. Real Wages and economic change in 19th- and 20th-century Europe*, Aldershot: Elgar, pp. 37–60, 210–230, here pp. 37–43.

contributions and the sickness benefits to be paid by the health insurance funds.⁴ In addition to the municipal authorities, the higher administrative authorities in charge also consulted local employers to determine the standard local daily wages. For this reason, this data should be regarded as empirically determined daily wages. What makes these figures particularly valuable for empirical research, apart from the care with which they were presumably determined, is the fact that non-monetary wage benefits, i.e. above all remuneration in kind, were taken into account at their value. There is no a priori reason why the authorities setting the daily wage could have had an incentive to deviate downwards or upwards or that this would have been handled differently from region to region.⁵

This data was initially not published officially. The general reluctance of the government to publish wages may have played a role in this. Employers in particular did not want this, as they suspected it would provoke wage demands in low-wage regions.⁶ Nevertheless, in 1886, an overview was published privately, initially in only 150 copies.⁷ On behalf of the Ministry of the Interior, the Imperial Statistical Office compiled corresponding overviews at intervals of four to five years from 1892, which were published in the *Zentralblatt für das Deutsche Reich*.⁸ These differentiated between daily minimum wages for men and women (both over the age of 16) as well as male and female adolescents. In 1892, the *Statistisches Jahrbuch deutscher Städte* also began to report these daily wages for adult day laborers, initially for 48 cities.⁹ This means that overviews of daily wages throughout the German Reich are available for the years 1885, 1892, 1902, 1910 and 1914, which have hardly been consulted by researchers to date.

The daily wages in both sources (Schmitt/*Zentralblatt* and *Jahrbuch*) match almost perfectly, which is not surprising as they were taken from the same official data. In a few cases there are deviations, in which the data from the official *Zentralblatt* was preferred in cases of doubt, with one exception.¹⁰

⁴ *Reichsgesetzblatt* (1883), pp. 73–104; cf. also Ernst Hirschberg (1893), Die ortsüblichen Tagelöhne gewöhnlicher Tagearbeiter, in: *Jahrbücher für Nationalökonomie und Statistik*, III.6, pp. 870–877, here pp. 870f.; Ernst Lange (1893): Die ortsüblichen Tagelöhne gewöhnlicher Tagearbeiter im Deutschen Reiche, in: *Archiv für soziale Gesetzgebung und Statistik* 6, pp. 1–13.

⁵ Cf. Lange (1893), p. 2

⁶ Cf. Hohls (1992), p. 38.

⁷ J. Schmitz (1886), *Übersicht der für die sämtlichen deutschen Bundesstaaten in Gemässigkeit des § 8 des Reichsgesetzes betreffend die Krankenversicherung der Arbeiter vom 15. Juni 1883 festgestellten ortsüblichen Tagelöhne gewerblicher Tagearbeiter*, Berlin: Siemenroth & Worms (2nd edn. 1888).

⁸ Published in *Zentralblatt für das Deutsche Reich* 20 (1892), pp. 717–783; 25 (1897), pp. 421–488; 29 (1901), pp. 441–516; 33 (1905), pp. 399–475; 38 (1910), pp. 715–797 and 42 (1914), pp. 65–113. Cf. Lange (1893), pp. 1f.

⁹ *Statistisches Jahrbuch deutscher Städte* 2 (1892), p. 123; 6 (1897), pp. 333, 336; 9 (1901), p. 208; 14 (1907), p. 255; 19 (1913), pp. 823–829.

¹⁰ Deviations for adult women concern Altona 1884, Breslau 1902, Flensburg 1884, Kiel 1884 and Potsdam 1884 (the exception mentioned in the text) and for adult men in Potsdam 1884 and Schöneberg 1892.

The data set only contains the daily wages for a total of 210 large and medium-sized cities. Gaps in the data set are related to the circumstances of the underlying research project, i.e. it should be possible to fill them by consulting the *Zentralblatt*. Moreover, Schmitz's book and the periodical data in the *Zentralblatt* contain daily wages for hundreds of other small municipalities.