<https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/11/12/german-employees-are-europe-s-sick-leave-champions_6732606_4.html?lmd_medium=al&lmd_campaign=envoye-par-appli&lmd_creation=ios&lmd_source=default>

**German employees are Europe's sick leave champions**

Economists view this as a significant impediment to growth recovery, with several analysts suggesting that the economic losses stemming from these absences could amount to the crucial half percentage point of GDP needed to lift the country out of recession.

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(…)

Germany is the sick man of Europe – quite literally. According to [official statistics](https://www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Arbeit/Arbeitsmarkt/Qualitaet-Arbeit/Dimension-2/krankenstand.html#:~:text=Arbeitnehmer%202023%2015%2C1%20Tage,Grippe%2D%20und%20Erk%C3%A4ltungswellen%20zur%C3%BCckzuf%C3%BChren%20sein), Germans are getting sicker and sicker, taking longer and longer time off work when they are ill: four days more sick leave on average last year than in 2021, with 15.1 days in 2023, compared with 11.1 two years earlier, according to the Federal Statistical Office (which only counts sick leave of more than three days). And the trend is accelerating, since a record is expected this year, with the federation of health insurance companies, the Allgemeine Ortskrankenkasse (AOK), having warned that a new peak had been reached as early as August, even before the onset of winter.

In a country in recession, the subject is by no means anecdotal. The publication of these figures had a major impact in Germany, generating an unusual wave of introspection. "Have we all become slackers?" ran the headline in the *Tagesspiegel* a few days ago. "Are we lazy or simply finished?" the tabloid *Bild* even asked, while *Handelsblatt* spoke of "the sick Republic." Commentators were quick to point out that the country has become Europe's sick leave champion. However, international comparisons, which are complex if not impossible due to differences in regulations, often lead to divergent conclusions. Employee surveys carried out by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) are not so affirmative, although the organization's experts admit to observing a recent increase. By way of illustration (the data are not directly comparable), a report by the French Inspectorate of finances, published in July, stated that private-sector employees in France were absent for an average of 11.7 days for health reasons in 2022, and public-sector employees for an average of 14.5 days.

**A pillar of the social state**

On the other side of the Rhine, reactions to these statistics speak almost louder than the figures themselves: Is Germany, home of the Protestant work ethic, undergoing a cultural shift? Economists see it as restricting a return to growth, with some even arguing that the loss of earnings due to absenteeism would be enough to make up the half-point of GDP needed to pull Germany out of recession. "High absenteeism is an additional risk to companies' chances of overcoming weak growth," said Andreas Storm, head of one of Germany's leading health insurance companies (DAK), in the October 28 edition of *Bild*. For their part, the right and the liberals see this as a symptom of an overly generous welfare state, the cost of which is hampering Germany's recovery.

As for business leaders, they see it as a legacy of the past that is in urgent need of reform. The German Economic Institute (IW), which is close to employers, put the cost of this social acquis for employers at almost €77 billion last year, an amount that has more than doubled since 2010, according to economist Jochen Pimpertz. In September, managers at the Tesla factory in Brandenburg made unannounced visits to the homes of employees on sick leave to check whether they were really ill, arguing that the absenteeism rate at the plant was up to three times higher than the industry average.

The matter evokes strong symbolism, with sick leave included in a pillar of the German welfare state. The country boasts one of the world's oldest and most generous systems, introduced in 1884 under Bismarck. Companies are obliged to pay sick employees their full salary for six weeks, after which the health insurance funds take over. **"**Studies tend to show that sick leave reduces the spread of viruses and increases productivity instead," pointed out Christopher Prinz, an expert in health issues for the OECD.

**Reduce the salary guarantee from 100% to 80%**

However, experts are at a loss to explain why Germans are more likely to call in sick than in the past. Especially as this is a long-term trend: "A moderate increase in the number of sick days has been observed from 2008 onward," noted the statistics office, which pointed out that in 2007, sick leave averaged 8.1 days per year. Covid-19, which has changed habits by getting sick people used to isolating themselves, is not the only culprit, according to the experts interviewed over the last few days. Nor are flu epidemics or the reforms that have made it easier for people to file their claims electronically.

In the absence of genuinely satisfactory explanations, analyzes focus on the profile of the employees concerned. Women, for example, are more likely to be ill, as they are more exposed due to their proximity to children or other sick people. Employees in Western Germany also tend to be absent less often than those in Eastern Germany, where employees are on average older and work more in arduous branches such as agriculture or construction, while incomes are lower. Health insurers also point to a slow but steady rise in mental illnesses, which require longer absences – up 47% in 10 years, particularly in the social professions.

The publication of these figures has nevertheless reactivated a recurring idea, supported by some of the right and business leaders: to reduce the salary guarantee from 100% to 80%, as Chancellor Helmut Kohl had done in 1996, before the reform was canceled two years later by the Schröder government, following strikes. The president of the German Medical Association, Klaus Reinhardt, has come out in favor of sick leave calculated by the hour rather than by the day, which would be facilitated by homeworking. The former finance minister, Christian Lindner, suggested scrapping the option to obtain sick leave by telephone, introduced during the pandemic and maintained to ease congestion in doctors' surgeries, but which has been accused of facilitating fraud. "If you call a doctor, you know how difficult it is to get through to them on the phone," insisted Carola Reimann, head of the AOK federal health insurance companies' association, in an interview with *Handelsblatt* on October 26. "Nobody calls in sick for no reason."

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