

‘Justice for Janitors’ goes Dutch: The Possibilities and Limitations of an Organising Approach in the Netherlands

Heather Connolly, University of Warwick,
Stefania Marino and Miguel Martinez Lucio, University of Manchester

Introduction

Since 2005, the Dutch trade union movement has taken up the strategy of ‘organising’ to recruit new groups of workers and as a broader strategy for union renewal at the grassroots level. This approach has introduced a debate in the Dutch union movement about adopting more confrontational strategies – unusual in the Dutch context that has been referred to as an example of “corporatism par excellence” (Lehmbruch, 1979) or “responsive corporatism” (Hemerijck, 1995). This paper draws on empirical research, in the form of interviews and participant observation (from 2008-2011), to present a case study of a successful organising campaign in the Dutch cleaning sector and to discuss the short term and long-term effects of such a campaign.

The first part of the paper develops a discussion around organising, identifying the main debates and issues, and the gaps in the literature – particularly around the transfer of organising approaches across countries and experiences of organising in continental European countries. In the case of the Netherlands, the question emerges around the fit of organising within a corporatist model of industrial relations. The second part of the paper outlines the model of industrial relations and trade unionism in the Netherlands and considers the weaknesses in the Dutch model particularly in terms of union weakness of representing workers who remain outside regulated spaces. The remainder of the paper discusses an emerging strategy within the Dutch trade union movement of adopting Anglo-Saxon-style organising campaigns. The paper looks at a recent case study of organising in the cleaning sector and analyses its impact on workers’ conditions and on the traditional modes of action within the Dutch trade union movement.

The paper shows that the organising approach in the Netherlands has been the outcome of active individuals who have established a community of interest and networks around organising and is also the outcome of international links with the SEIU. The approach has been successful in some sectors leading to the improvement of working conditions and increased membership. It has also stimulated organisational changes within the Dutch trade union movement and has potential long-term implications for the corporatist tradition of industrial relations in the Netherlands. However, the paper also argues that there are limits to adopting an organising approach in terms of internal tensions, relevance in traditional sectors and sustainability.

This paper draws on data from a three-year Leverhulme funded project on the development of trade union responses in relation to migrant populations. As well as looking at national level responses in the UK, the Netherlands and Spain, the research also aims to understand to what extent trade union responses are coordinated at the European level. The methodology was qualitative, with a focus on semi-structured interviews and participant and non-participant observation. The research for this paper

draws on over 50 interviews with trade union officials and activists from various levels within the Dutch trade union movement as well as participant observation of union meetings and conferences.

The organising debate

The organising model has become a central feature of trade union renewal – or at least debates on this subject - in countries such as the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States of America. It has since the early 1990s emerged as a strategy for re-connecting the labour movement into its grassroots and into an alternative model of trade union based action (Heery et al, 2000a and b). The debate on this subject is wide (see Gall 2003 & 2006). The debate has focused on the subject of what organising is, how it links with other trade union activities and what the outcomes are. However, the debate has been relatively less concerned with how organising has developed, how it has been adopted across countries and what it means in the context of national regulatory systems where trade unions have greater recourse to institutional roles and relations when compared to the Anglo-Saxon countries.

Organising as a strategy can be described in quite descriptive terms, however on defining it one realises that it is not as novel and unique as one would have first imagined (and if it is then this raises questions as to the nature of institutionalisation within unions in any one context). Organising is an attempt to revitalise unions by developing focused recruitment campaigns which draw those affected into the process of mobilisation along with their communities. The general idea is that this is a bottom up approach and that the link between the unions and workers are key activists sometimes trained for this purpose by the union (Holgate, 2005). This has led to the establishment of organising academies within trade unions aimed at creating a new generation of professional activists with the knowledge and networks to develop such campaigns (see Holgate and Simms 2008 for a discussion of the history of the TUC's Organising Academy). For some this represents a new version of trade unionism based on a social movement model which has a strong community dimension (Wills and Simms, 2004).

Many trade unions have adopted an organising approach although they have customised it in relation to their identity and modes of action (Simms and Holgate, 2008). Hence, within the UK in trade unions such as UNITE the organising strategy is based on a link to more mobilising approaches around vulnerable workers whilst within USDAW, which covers retail workers, the organising approach has been linked to the partnership approach expounded by its leadership. In the case of the USA the organising approach has been linked to a new dynamic attempt to link into more vulnerable and marginalised workers through a set of high profile campaigns – the most famous of which is the 'Justice for Janitors' campaigns in California. Milkman (2006) has argued that organising has allowed trade unions to reconnect to migrant workers from Central and South America by virtue of the way communities have been engaged, although the role of leadership and organisational bureaucratic approach in supporting such campaigns is an essential factor as well (see also May and Goulter, 2009 on New Zealand who argue that unions scale and structure are key factors in supporting organising strategies, which in this national case is a challenge). The SEIU (*Service Employees International Union*) in the USA has been a driving force in configuring organising approaches and linking them into broader

political and even international co-ordination strategies. The impact of organising is also political and ideological in so far as regardless of any outcomes – which are the subject themselves of a range of discussions – it has provided unions with a narrative to bring together its traditions of mobilisation with a new focused and communication based approach to connecting with members (Martínez Lucio and Stuart, 2009). It provides a strategy that combines action and communication that acts as a template for unions to create an over-arching story and meaning to the way they can move forward. It also provides trade unions with a new generation of activists which are bureaucratically engineered through its organising academies and which help renew the profile of its organisation.

Yet, research has been focused on specific dimensions of organising as we mention above. Firstly, there is discussion on what organising is and to what extent it represents a genuine political turn in the business models that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. Secondly, much has been debated on how trade unions have linked – or not – organising to its community or learning strategies (see Martínez Lucio and Stuart, 2009: 29-35). There is a concern that organising may become bureaucratically separated from other aspects of social movement unionism or there may not be other aspects of social movement unionism within an organisation. Thirdly, the outcomes are not clear as we have not seen major changes in union membership when organising has been adopted apart from cases such as the SEIU in the USA. Given this, many suggest that organising has to be viewed more broadly.

In addition, there is not much work on the way organising has been implemented and mimicked across countries. There are cases in Europe where unions have begun to look at organising, but it has not led to a systematic comparative study on this. The way unions or union activists cross reference the experience of other strategies, and why it is important, yet we are normally presented with organising as a template of practices which are adopted ‘correctly’ or idiosyncratically. Furthermore, we do not really study how organising may be linked to internal politics within unions in terms of how it challenges specific regulatory views. Some observers have tensions between business-oriented and partnership strategies on the one hand and more direct modes of organising on the other (Danford et al, 2003) yet, how organising is part of an internal dialogue within a union and its members is not always a salient feature of research which is mainly focused on nuances and types of organising strategy and the perhaps the absence of the ‘political’ (Holgate and Wills, 2008). The question of organising is rarely engaged with in terms of how it links to new constituencies of political activists within organised labour, although Holgate’s work (2009) does call for observers to appreciate the social ideals and constituencies that form the basis of new community facing organising strategies and how these are in turn premised on practices drawn from other social traditions and not just industrial relations. However, the internal politics and engagement with organising is not always central to the discussion on the subject. What is more the dilemmas trade unions face when constructing a successful organising campaign, and how it manages these, is also less common. It may be that in cases such as the UK organising is very much a top-down engineered attempt at re-defining mobilisation.

Hence the paper focuses on the how organising emerged within the Dutch context and why. It then discusses how a specific campaign brought together a range of new union constituencies and practices. The paper shows how these did not sit well with

traditional Dutch approaches to industrial relations and union practices. The question of how organising can serve to rethink the role of the union and complement more regulated approaches by addressing workers at the edge of that regulatory process is important. However, as with many other cases the paper shows that what happens after a successful campaign raises some issues as to how it is sustained and linked into a more systematic approach to raising the standards of working people.

Organising therefore needs to be studied within its national context so as to appreciate the general questions of difference and politics. Frege and Kelly (2004) attempt to map the way we can appreciate the different strategies that evolve in relation to questions such as union renewal – within which the issue of representing new constituencies of labour and citizens is key. They argue that we need to proceed with an appreciation of the different dimensions of trade unionism. Starting with social and economic change as an external trigger – albeit not one which is constructed in a reductionist manner – they see union structure being influenced by this contextual factor. This is an important thematic beginning for their model which adapts much of the work from social movement debates (see Kelly, 1998). Trade union structure and the way its politics are organised are vital starting points that are often ignored in many contemporary debates. The role of Industrial Relations institutions along with the state and employers play a further role in shaping this structure in terms of its environment. These factors impact on the way trade unions *frame* issues and give rise to particular organisational identities whether inclusive or exclusive. Institutional choices are mediated by these traditions and structures, but there will be ways of seeing and understanding problems that frame options and choices. We cannot read how unions' will understand and respond to questions of immigration, for example, from any clear structural analysis of the employment relationship or its context: union renewal is contested, open and in many cases problematic. We must appreciate structure, context, institutions and identity and framing processes in order to have a more grounded debate on union renewal: Frege and Kelly provide us with a map for explaining the dimensions of union response and renewal. However, we must also note how narratives and practices such as organising act as counterpoints to the dominant ideologies and practices of a trade union organisation. There may be dominant frames per se but there also realisations and active discussions of these frameworks by broader networks and interests, possible material tensions due to the emergence of new sets of workers and types of work which are outside the tradition spaces of control, and there may also be successful counterpoints which highlight deficiencies in dominant praxis.

Dutch Industrial Relations

The Dutch system of industrial relations has been considered an example of corporatism par excellence (Lehmbruch, 1979), a 'harmony model' of political economy characterised by a high degree of consensus, cooperation and coordination among responsible 'social partners' of organised capital, organised labour, and the democratic state (Hemerijck, 1995). The most important employers association, the VNO-NCW, and the most representative trade union confederation, the FNV, co-chair the bipartite Labour Foundation (STAR) where the negotiation of central agreements occurs. STAR is recognised from the government as official partner in deliberating on budgets, wages and social policies. Within STAR, employers and trade unions prepare each new round of collective bargaining and negotiate central agreements. The

arrangements made at this level are not binding for the (local) negotiators of collective agreements at the industry and enterprise levels, although they do influence the negotiations. The other corporatist body, the SER (*Sociaal Economische Raad*) includes representatives of employers, of trade unions and members appointed by government. It is the main advisory council of government on wage policy and on the organisation of the welfare state.

The government and the “social partners” interact through STAR and SER for tripartite as well as bipartite/labour *overleg*. *Overleg* is a central concept in Dutch labour relations defining a “harmonious interchange that may range from consultation to bargaining with the sincere intent on both sides to compromise without any conflict. In the Netherlands, no collective bargaining related activities are undertaken of whatever kind, without previous *overleg* with those involved.” (Slomp, 2004: 38). These consultations occur on the basis of leading economic predictions made by the Central Planning Bureau (CPB) twice a year. In the autumn *overleg*, which occurs in STAR, all parties discuss the outlook and the initial responses to it. Sometimes the social partners make an agreement or a “statement of intent” which tends to stress the need for wage moderation, to be compensated by working time reduction, extension in training facilities or other improvement in secondary labour conditions: ‘The main function of the central accords and recommendations is to influence the ‘bargaining climate’ and creates an atmosphere of goodwill” (Visser, 1998a: 306).

Bargaining is essentially framed by three laws. The 1927 law on collective agreements leaves employers free to decide whether and with whom they will bargain. If they conclude an agreement with a union, they must apply its conditions to all comparable employees including those who belong to other unions. All agreements are legally binding. The 1937 law on Extension and Nullification of Collective Agreements allows the minister to extend a collective agreement, in whole or in part, to employers who are not members of the signatory associations if the agreement covers a substantial majority of the industry (55 percent coverage rate). Where this is not the case, the Product and Industry Boards may lay down minimum conditions. Extensions do not affect companies that have already negotiated a company agreement. Since 1994, the minister has used the possibility of not extending agreements as a measure to reach policy objectives, in particular the creation of entry wage scales (near the minimum) for low-skilled workers with little training (Visser, 1998b). Under the 1970 Wages Act (amended in 1980) collective Agreements must be registered at the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment. This act allows the minister, after consultation with the STAR, to order a temporary suspension of a new agreement.

These legal principles give firms an incentive to join the relevant association and help explain the high level of collective organisation among employers and the high coverage rate of collective agreements. Unions are in a more ambiguous situation: on the one hand the legal system prevents competition between union and non-union firms, on the other hand, it removes incentives for workers to join (Visser, 1998a). Compromises are facilitated by the broad range of subjects covered by collective bargaining: social security benefits, employee participation, employability provisions, childcare facilities, internships for apprentices, jobs for ethnic minorities and effects of production on the environment (Slomp, 2004). In some cases negotiations are breached and the unions may announce workplace actions, but strikes are rare: ‘as a

rule collective agreements contain a peace clause, and strikes are in breach of contract during their currency. While the right to strike is not otherwise regulated by law, the Courts have tended to accept their legality if used as a means of last resort when contracts have expired and efforts to negotiate a new one have demonstrably failed” (Visser, 1998b: 276). However, in these cases, too, strikes are not common, and the Netherlands is placed at the bottom of the international strike league, next to Switzerland and Austria. Since only signatory unions are bound by a peace clause, employers are normally keen to involve all unions with significant memberships.

For this reason, agreements with only one union or without the FNV are rare. On the other hand, unions prefer to be included because only the signatory unions gain the union representation rights established through collective bargaining, and only they receive the annual employers’ fee in compensation for the erga-omnes application of agreements: “this configuration has a built-in bias towards moderation of demands, since the most radical party on either side runs the largest risk of exclusion” (Visser and Hemerijck, 1997: 84). This risk is also fuelled by the fact that there is no exclusive jurisdiction in the Netherlands; hence unions belonging to different federations must cooperate with each other in collective bargaining. Single-table bargaining with employers is the rule. Any union can enter the contest and try to secure a place at the bargaining table, and strikes for this purpose are permitted: “In the absence of the legal right of recognition for unions and given the threat of exclusion, coalition building is the only remedy” (Visser and Hemerijck, 1997:183). That implies a convergence on a common view that excludes radical attitudes within unions. Furthermore, union divisions work against the union whose views deviate most strongly from the employer’s initial position (Rojer, 1996 in Visser, 1998b).

There is a strong division by law between collective bargaining, which is under the exclusive jurisdiction of trade unions, and employees’ participation within the enterprise through works councils (Ondernemingsraad-OR), which are mandatory in all firms with more than 35 employees. These structures, elected by all workers, have the task of promoting the interests both of the enterprise and of its workforce. ORs do not have the right to discuss matters covered by industry or company agreements. Instead they have the rights of consultation over important economic decisions of the company, co-determination on decision related to the HRM and monitoring on the implementation of collective agreements. Employee representation at that level is mainly carried out by works councils, which are company and not union bodies. Union representative structures in workplaces, in fact, have never succeeded and remain quite weak.

The Dutch system has proved to be stable also in the face of external challenges. Deregulation and decentralisation of collective bargaining, for instance, are now widely discussed. Employers are trying to obtain more flexibility on the labour market and there are some pressures to decentralise sectoral collective agreements. Yet, most employers still embrace centralised negotiation, and only few larger companies have signed their own collective agreements with trade unions. In a study of decentralisation in Dutch industrial relations in the period 1980-2000, Tros (2001) confirmed the existence of an emerging decentralisation process from the national level to sectoral level. However, he observed that some specific aspects of labour management became more centrally regulated than before: “it appears that policies to

promote decentralisation and deregulation may have led instead to further centralisation and regulation” (Poutsma and Braam, 2004; p. 164).

Nonetheless, in 2004, social dialogue broke down between unions and the government with proposed changes to early retirement and pension reform. The government decided to accelerate the ongoing reforms by introducing a new savings scheme with the possibility for workers to ‘opt out’ existing and future collective schemes, and reforms of the disability, sickness and unemployment schemes. The trade unions staged several protests and demonstrations in opposition to government policies. After nearly a month of secret negotiations, the union federations accepted a wage freeze in exchange for a softening of social security retrenchments. This episode ended in November 2004 with a new Social Pact, which was ratified a month later by a membership referendum of the FNV. Since then there has been a moderate resurgence of social dialogue with some follow-up agreements on specific issues.

The breakdown in social dialogue exposed weaknesses in the Dutch Polder model. The model has helped the formation of highly centralised trade unions that remain central actors despite a decline in union membership from 36.5% in 1970 (Visser, 2006) to 23% in 2007 (EIRO, 2011). Visser argues that ‘sometimes employers publicly voice concern that unions may become too weak to continue their much praised role of stable, reliable and reasonable bargaining partners, but there are no examples of relation being broken off’ (Visser, 1998a: 298). Union legitimacy has usually come under attack when unions claim a new and stronger role in the labour market, but employers have never tried to destabilise the unions or to create a union-free environment (Visser and Hemerijck, 1997). Dutch unions, in fact, are reasonably well-financed and staffed, and they enjoy wide recognition from the other social parts; and their embeddedness in the corporatist institutions gives them stability and power within the system.

Industrial relations scholars, in fact, stressed that by ensuring trade-union access to policy-making processes and influence on the national political economy, institutional embeddedness reduces the trade unions’ need to resort to membership resources and lower union interest in recruiting newcomers whose interests might either clash with those already represented or could be difficult to frame within union goals (Visser, 1998; Regalia, 1988, Baccaro et al, 2003). Nonetheless, the decline since the 1980s in trade union membership undermines the representativeness of the union federations.

Dutch Trade Unions: Strategies for Renewal and Widening Worker Participation and Engagement

There are three main federations in the Netherlands. The Confederation of Dutch Trade Unions (FNV) with 1.2 million members, the Christian-National Union Confederation (CNV) with some 350,000 members, and the Union of White Collars and Senior Staff Association (VHP) which is about half size of the CNV. The FNV, is the most representative union in the Netherlands, represents the 62% of all union members through its affiliated union. FNV. It is an umbrella organisation representing affiliated unions, and not workers directly and becoming a trade union member is only possible through a trade union. There are 18 unions affiliated to the FNV, with a million members in total. Affiliated unions are generally recognised and directly or indirectly (through their confederations) represented in all advisory, consultation and

policy-implementation bodies of Dutch corporatism. Beside formulating policies and bargaining guidelines for sectoral unions within the corporatist bodies, the FNV acts on matters that go beyond the boundaries of individual sectors, such as consultation with government and employers, publicity (such as joint press releases) and promotional activities (such as image campaigns). The Confederation also coordinates actions with a common interest, such as campaigns against government measures that affect the members. There is a shared strike fund, complementary to the union strike funds. Although not linked to any political party or movement, FNV tries to influence political decisions by bringing up facts and arguments during the decision-making process.

FNV-Bondgenoten is the richest and biggest union in the Netherlands (with nearly half a million members) and has the strongest strike capacity. It was formed in 1998 by a merger among the *Industriebond* (industrial sector), *Dienstenbond* (shop assistants, clerical workers), *Vervoersbond* (transport workers) and the *Voedingsbond* (agricultural and food workers). The union has 15 industrial groups, which are divided into sectors. Members of the same group will usually be covered by the same collective labour agreement. The FNV-Bondgenoten industrial groups comprise the following sectors: transport, metalworking, information technology and electrical engineering, the chemical and paper industries, textiles, clothing, leather and synthetics, financial and commercial services, retail and wholesale trade, food and agriculture, and finally, benefit recipients and older people. It has suffered a serious setback in membership and finances both before and after its foundation. In 2002-2003 it went through a profound crisis of leadership, identity and membership, compounded by a serious threat to its financial survival.

Previous studies confirm the weakness of recruitment and organising activities towards underrepresented workers (Roosblad, 2000; Marino, forthcoming). Until recently, FNV action towards workers with foreign background has been mainly aimed to improve their condition both on the labour market and within the union itself. Both strategies have a strong top-down nature. With respect to the first point, the union has negotiated several formal and informal agreements within bipartite and tripartite bodies (to be then implemented in sectoral and company level agreements) aimed at improving the education levels and the employability of these workers (especially of young minority workers) and at promoting special channel of recruitment by firms. In recent times, the FNV has also supported the campaign “Equal work for Equal Pay” launched by one of its affiliated union, FNV-Bondgenoten within a coordinated European network. On the one hand, this campaign was addressed to governments and employers’ associations at national levels, the aim being to gain law improvements on equal working conditions for foreign workers; on the other hand, it focused on collective labour agreements at both sectoral and workplace levels in order to introduce special clauses on this matter.

Many other initiatives have been created to promote diversity. Diversity has been, and still is, the most important policy framework for the initiatives related to migrants and ethnic minorities (as well as towards women and young workers). This framework, embraced by the FNV at the end of the Nineties, has been reconfirmed as central in the 2005 and in the 2009 Congresses. Special policies have been adopted both to stimulate diversity within the union movement and to encourage employers to support and respect the interests and rights of an increasingly diversified workforce. Several

initiatives have been planned to increase the participation of people with foreign background within the organisation both at central level and on work-floor. FNV-Bondgenoten and FNV-AbvaKabo, for instance, have produced a brochure entitled "Together at work, together in the Works councils" aimed at explaining to trade unionists on workplace how to increase migrant employees' involvement in works councils.

At the central level, two projects have been introduced to get more ethnic minority women in top-union position. The first project resulted in twenty ethnic minority women incorporated in middle management positions. Starting in February 2009, the FNV has been training other 25 ethnic minority 'top women' for executive positions on the boards of affiliated unions. The training programme for ethnic minority women is a collaborative initiative between the unions, associations (the Forum multicultural institute) and the government (the ROI training institute). The FNV has also organised 50 information meetings in collaboration with immigrants' organisations; furthermore, it successfully lobbied for lifting unnecessary restrictions for elderly immigrants who receive social assistance and substantially increased the diversity of FNV-appointed representatives on the boards of Chambers of Commerce.

As mentioned above, such projects and initiatives have a strong top-down character. Most of these policies were developed at confederal level by special advisory bodies and departments and then transmitted to affiliated unions to be further elaborated and implemented. Others initiatives were developed directly by affiliated unions but, again, within specific departments placed at the central level. Although addressed to migrant and ethnic minority workers, hence, such policies did not envision their direct participation both in the development and implementation processes. While being able to improve the condition of migrant and ethnic minority workers at the workplace and able to increase diversity especially within the union, such actions alone could not increase the level of participation and unionisation of groups of workers at the edge of the regulatory process and working in sectors not protected by collective agreements.

While active in defending workers rights on the labour market and in promoting anti-discrimination policies on workplaces, the Dutch unions have been generally weak in building up a fruitful relationship with these workers and in including them within the organisation both as members and activists. Although precise data on unionisation of migrant workers are not available, their unionisation rates have been estimated to be very low. The presence of migrant and ethnic minority workers on workplace representative structures has also been reported to be scarce (Marino, forthcoming). As better explained in the next section, this weakness has become a central issue in the union debate in the half of 2000s as result of contextual and internal union changes.

Organising in the Netherlands: A Case Study of the Cleaning Sector

The already mentioned trade unions opposition to the policies of the II Balkenende government started one of the most tumultuous periods in the history of Dutch industrial relations. In 2004, the Dutch trade unions staged the second largest demonstration in the post-war period, and forced the government back to the negotiating table. The FNV and affiliated unions attributed great importance to this

mobilisation and promoting workers' participation and representing underrepresented groups became important issues in the union debate. As a result, weaknesses around union membership and worker participation became central issues in the 2005 FNV Congress. Topics such as representativeness, union democracy, workplace relations, and participation started to be outlined, influencing also the stances taken towards ethnic minority workers – who tended to over-represented in sectors with low membership density and precarious working conditions. The union made 'internationalist' declarations on the need to create more room for ethnic minorities and to recruit them. In April 2005, the FNV published the results of a desk study on trade-union innovations in a report entitled '*De vakbeweging van de toekomst: Lessen uit het buitenland*' (The Trade Union Movement of the Future: Lessons from Abroad). The declared intent was to provide new inputs to Dutch unions, which were trying to 'redefine themselves'. This research finally resulted in a booklet that was translated into English as material for the international debate on innovative trade-union strategies to counter union decline. The booklet asserted the importance of organising new groups of people, among which ethnic minorities and immigrant workers, young, the unemployed, workers in the service industry, and non-standard employees.

In order to build union membership and develop member engagement, the Dutch trade union activists became influenced by the organising approach adopted by the SEIU in the US. This influence extended to developing links with the SEIU and having training and coaching by SEIU activists who became based in trade union offices in the Netherlands. The FNV's search for ways to improve union membership came at the same time as the SEIU was looking to develop international links. In 2004 the SEIU launched a strategy to form sustained, international coalitions in the service sector, building on previous campaigns with British and Danish unions against firm such as Group 4 Securicor and FirstGroup. The SEIU's strategy involved dedicated partnerships with selected unions, most notably the Transport and General Workers' Union (T&G – now UNITE) in Britain and Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union (LHMU – now United Voice) in Australia. In order to build stronger ties with partner unions, the SEIU employs local union officials who act as bridge builders between the SEIU and local partner unions. It invests significant resources in regional offices and organisers in Australia, Britain, South Africa, India and Poland. In addition, membership and leadership exchanges are organised, in order to connect campaigns to the rank-and-file. Through the international services union UNI, the SEIU set-up an international initiative to organise cleaners and security staff and has also invested several million dollars in organising campaigns that target international food service, cleaning and security employers, and has assigned staff to Australia, Poland, Britain, India, France, Switzerland, Germany, the Netherlands, South America and South Africa. Following the example of the SEIU's 'Justice for Janitors' campaign, similar campaigns have been launched in these countries, for example, the 'Justice for Cleaners' campaign in Britain, the 'Clean Enough' (*Schoon Genoeg*) campaign in the Netherlands and the 'Clean Start' campaign in Australia.

In the Netherlands, leaders from the service sector union FNV-Bondgenoten, and the public sector union, FNV-AbvaKabo attended SEIU conventions. One official from FNV-Bondgenoten, responsible for the cleaning sector, undertook a training course on organising in America in 2006 and was charged with bringing back the organising approach to the cleaning sector in the Netherlands. Other activists had been to London

to follow the London Citizens campaign and had built up links and networks with organisers working in the 'Justice for Cleaners' campaign in London. Visits and leader exchanges appear to have had an important influence on the support given to the organising approach and the intensity to which it has been implemented in some sectors. When asked what the catalyst for organising was in the Netherlands one Dutch organiser said that it was seeing the success of the SEIU campaigns and when union officials went to SEIU conventions they wanted the power they saw for their own union. It was also apparent that organising was engaged with because it appealed to a group of trade union activists who saw a moral and meaningful – and even dynamic - dimension to it in a context of institutionalised and sometime predictable approaches to employment relations.

The organising approach was embraced especially by FNV-Bondgenoten, the most militant of the affiliated unions. In 2007 the union launched a campaign in the cleaning which culminated in prolonged strike action in 2010 for improved pay and working conditions. The cleaning campaign was framed around two issues, to fight for an increase of ten euros an hour and for respectful treatment of cleaning workers by employers. In the beginning the union concentrated high levels of resources in the cleaning sector and also encouraged self-organisation and the formation of leaders at the workplace level. The cleaners' campaign was launched during a meeting at Schiphol Airport attended by five hundred cleaners. In the following months, organising committees were created in Maastricht, The Hague, Utrecht, and at Schiphol Airport. Migrants' organisations, churches, mosques, social movement groups and others pledged their support. The campaign itself was considered unique for the Netherlands. A combination of grass roots organising, direct action and broad coalitions applied pressure on employers and their contractors. The approach adopted in the cleaning sector in the Netherlands has been directly influenced by the SEIU, and the tactics used in the 'Justice for Janitors' campaigns. The cleaning campaign was modelled on the 'organising' model following the success of the SEIU 'Justice for Janitors' campaign. In our research we interviewed an SEIU activist based in the Netherlands, who had come to Amsterdam in 2007 to help with training activists around organising. The union activists used tactics and strategies of organising common to campaigns used in other countries – not only 'Justice for Janitors' in the US but 'Justice for Cleaners' in the UK – which included mapping workplaces, targeting and 'shaming' client companies of cleaning contractors. In Amsterdam, the campaign involved direct action against client companies, including banks and airports. The cleaners and activists accompanied by a samba band and 'rebel clowns' stormed bank headquarters; they also went on 'millionaires tours', visiting the richest bosses of cleaning companies. The campaign showed results after a year when in 2008 cleaners won higher wages as a result of the '10 Euro' campaign. In early 2008, cleaners reached an agreement on higher wages, vocational training, language courses and a more transparent collective agreement. These outcomes were clearly celebrated and referenced so as to instil them within the forward momentum of trade union activity in this area and the changing experiences of the workforce.

In early 2009 FNV-Bondgenoten began a new campaign to organise cleaners in Schiphol airport. The union recruited over half of cleaning workers in the airport and the activists were able to build on the success of the 2007/2008 campaign to mobilise workers to try and achieve better working conditions. The union was again successful and after four days of strike action, the cleaners won travel expenses, job security and

a 50 Euro bonus. They also managed to negotiate a one-off bonus for all Dutch cleaners of 0.5 per cent of their yearly income. The campaign continued until 2010 and culminated in prolonged strike action concentrated in key areas of the economy, mainly the airports and the railways. The cleaners won further concessions from employers and were able to negotiate sectoral level agreements in the cleaning sector. The campaign resulted in improved working conditions for the cleaning sector and led to the development of a core of union organisers in the mainly service sector based trade union FNV-Bondgenoten¹.

A key feature of this campaign was the high levels of commitment of union organisers and high levels of resources concentrated on building up self-organisation amongst the cleaners. Our research shows that the organising approach was the outcome of active individuals in the union who have established a community of interest and networks around organising. Amongst some Dutch trade union organisers there is an almost cult like status attached to organising – which was reflected in our research by one organiser having ‘organize’ tattooed on his forearm. Many of the activists appeared to have been inspired by their training from the SEIU activists. In the run up to this strike action we observed meetings of cleaner activists where union officials and organisers applied techniques used in organising campaigns – for example the ‘escalator’ approach towards direct action. The success of the campaign was built on an ability to empathise and engage with the workforce in new and novel ways. In meetings during and after the campaign a very positive and supportive approach to new activists was apparent as a close set of mentoring and strategic relations were established between the organisers and the new representatives.

The limits and possibilities of organising

Whilst the organising approach appears to have delivered results, there are several tensions in the approach adopted by the Dutch trade unions. Firstly, there are tensions between unions in different sectors as organising presented a departure from less confrontational strategies traditionally employed in the Dutch trade union movement. For example, in the cleaning campaign, the cleaning activists targeted finance companies who were the client companies for cleaning contracts. In one campaign the cleaners offered a ‘golden shit’ award to the worst client company, which was difficult for the finance sector employees and various trade union officers, who have a good working relationship with their employer. There is therefore an initial tension that emerges from the way in which social partnership and longer term relations are established between employers, managers and union ‘officials’. The manner of the campaigning in the cleaning sector actually questions relations of proximity and introduces a more conflictual element: especially where social partnership is more embedded and can actually reference significant social and employment outcomes unlike the United Kingdom where the outcomes of partnership have been variable. In fact during the research the social gains of regulation and policy in the Netherlands were not always that clear to various interests propagating the organising model. However what was clear was the failure to extend many gains into new areas of work and new groups of workers such as migrants.

¹ The campaign also recently won the international award for the best union campaign by the global services sector union UNI. Increasingly unions are attempting to use benchmarking exercises to allow for innovative practices to be shared.

Secondly, organising campaigns have been concentrated around low-wage work, but it has been difficult for unions to transfer organising into more traditional areas of the economy, such as nursing or ports and chemicals, for example. The cleaning campaign has inspired follow-ups in other sectors of the Dutch economy, such as in domestic work, agriculture and retail industry. Furthermore it has inspired other trade unions, among which the FNV-AbvaKabo to take up an organising approach in the workplace. However, there has been scepticism from union officials in traditional sectors about organising. In the public sector union FNV- AbvaKabo, the union executive agreed to a pilot project in order to test out the organising approach. The project was to organise nurses at a university hospital. The campaign focused around a specific issue, which was that the hospital needed new equipment. The campaign succeeded but the activists found that the nurses quite loyal to their employer and patients and it was felt that organisers were not seen as relevant in the public sector, but were more suited for the market or private sector (interview with union organiser, FNV- AbvaKabo, June 2010). The regulatory process in the public services still retained a form of institutionalism.

Thirdly, there is the broader question of sustainability of this approach, as the cleaning campaign was framed around achieving a particular result and the literature on organising shows that there is a tendency for ‘one-issue’ organising campaigns to dissipate once the desired result is achieved. Organising and its systematic support and follow through brings a need for sustained organisational strategies and some type of bureaucratic underpinning (albeit progressive) and this case shows some of the challenges of this once the initial campaign has been successful. Linked to this is the extent to which members are really in control of the campaign – and even if organising campaigns have led to securing better conditions of employment, there is a question as to what extent there has actually been more democratic unionism with more grassroots participation within the structures of the union and not just the organisational spaces of specific campaigns. In 2009, FNV affiliated unions recorded increases in membership – with FNV Bondgenoten growing by 2,500 members in a 3 month period. The assertive campaign in Schiphol airport led to over half of cleaning workers becoming members of FNV Bondgenoten. Whilst these results are impressive, it is difficult to measure the extent of engagement of these workers in the post-campaign period. In addition, managing the expectations of the cleaners in cases such as the Schiphol campaign once it finished was difficult because these expectations and excitement levels had risen but the behaviour of management and supervision, and some of the basic conditions in terms of breaks and monitoring, were still a focus of concern. The exuberance that permeated the campaign had to be carefully managed after the mobilisations when workers felt that core aspects of their job had not been changed. This post-event phase in organising was clearly challenging as issues emerged on a constant basis and where change and union activity had to be measured and carefully planned.

Despite these dilemmas, organising approach is acquiring a greater measure of consent within the union official debate and several projects aimed at promoting union presence and activism at local levels are emerging also in those affiliated unions not directly involved in organising campaigns. Such projects, inspired by organising principles, have the goal of promoting structural changes, moving beyond the problem of ‘one-issue’ campaign. The extent to which organising principles will be able to promote organisational changes in terms of structure, culture, and activity

as well as the eventual effects of such changes on the Dutch Industrial Relations model, remain open to question. Organising as a way of transforming a trade union more broadly in its purpose and objectives is not a given. However, the introduction of the organising approach already constitutes an important novelty in the union debate. One interesting development has been the development of research into organising by FNV-Bondgenoten and the increased support and resources being concentrated in organising. The SEIU, clusters of motivated activists and officers, and a new generation of leaders appear to be forming a coalition of interest that is steadily creating a tapestry of cases, struggle and new organisational memories that can assist in broader renewal.

From our research there is evidence to suggest that the formal adhesion to organising model, as formulated in the 2005 FNV Congress, resulted in the actual implementation of organising strategies and in the adoption of more confrontational views at decentralised levels. Such novelty has found supporters in trade union executive boards of the affiliated unions and sympathisers in the FNV, likely to create some frictions within the union. In fact, Dutch unions have traditionally acted as agents of social regulation, with formal and informal agreements reached within corporatist bodies aimed at promoting inclusion and anti-discrimination. We could argue that the introduction of organising constitutes, using Schmitter and Streeck (1981) categories, a move from the logic of influence to the logic of membership. Furthermore, it also resulted in the adoption of more bottom-up strategies against the traditional top-down approach of the strong centralised Dutch union. This has consequences for the Dutch model of industrial relations. These changes alone are unlikely to determine, even in the long run, the end of the corporatist tradition in the Netherlands. However, union strength coming from a renewed membership could promote the shift from an ‘employer-led corporatism’ to forms of “democratic corporatism” (Baccaro, 2002).

Conclusions

The paper has considered developments around organising in the Dutch context. It does however, also offer some broader lessons on the ways in which practices and approaches around organising are transferred across unions working in very different regulatory contexts. The revitalisation literature found that in national contexts where trade union benefit from “political and institutional supports” this diminishes the incentive to “organise the unorganised, build coalitions with other groups, or give support to grass-roots initiatives” (Baccaro *et al.* 2003: 121). The Dutch system guarantees trade unions with stable recognition by the state and employers that, in most cases, is not dependent on membership, strike power, certification or elections (Visser, 2002). Visser also argues that ‘by enhancing the institutional security of unions and their leaders and by establishing a quasi-monopoly of union representation, corporatism intentionally diminishes the need for unions to prove their strength through mobilisation and lowers the political and organisation incentives for union recruitment’ (Visser, 1986 cited in Ebbinghaus and Visser, 1999:145). The system in the Netherlands has helped the formation of highly centralised trade unions that remain central actors despite a decline in union membership from 36.5% in 1970 to 23% in 2007. However, what we see from our research is that in spite of the institutional and political supports, trade unions in the Netherlands are more exposed

than we might think and that organising has been an attempt to limit the union movement's exposure to the weaknesses of 'employer-led corporatism'.

If we consider the regulatory context, the institutional position of trade unions and traditions of union identity in the Netherlands, we would expect to find unions' strategies (for renewal) to be based around the strengthening of social rights and regulation in the Netherlands. To a great extent this remains the case in the Netherlands, with unions continuing to play an important role in national level collective bargaining and being accepted as a social partner by employers and the state – at least in many of the traditional sectors. In spite of a level of path-dependency, we see from our research that trade unions can experiment and engage with new ways of acting and engaging. In the case of organising this has acted as a space around which to provide new narratives and relationships which can point to alternate ways of developing strategy. The question becomes how organising embeds itself and maintains a momentum at the same time.

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