

How the Dutch trade union confederation got itself out of the crisis

A far-reaching process of restructuring that did not come without difficulties.

Aug 1st, 2018

April 2014. All of the cleaning staff in the Netherlands who clean buildings belonging to the government and the state administration stop work at the same time and travel to protest in The Hague. Nobody cleans the parliament in the Dutch capital. Trains are left overflowing with rubbish. No one cleans Schiphol Airport. The cleaners working in office buildings also join the strike. As Getta Gajadhar explained to the press at the time, 'We are asking for really normal things such as sick pay, and wages that are high enough to enable our families to get by.' Gajadhar is a cleaner who works in the Dutch parliament building. 'We work in the same buildings and offices as the people in the administration. Why have they got these rights but we don't?' During this period, 75 cleaning workers founded the 'cleaning ladies' parliament' to provide the strike with representation. Many of its members were people of colour, including its chair, Khadija Tahir, and this aspect adds a particular explosive nature to this strike in light of the growing climate of right-wing populism. The strikers' motto is: Schoon genoeg or 'Clean, enough!'



© Rob Nelisse / Jo van der Spek / FNV
Bondgenoten

The cleaning ladies' parliament

During the dispute, the media was completely focused on the strike; it eventually lasted for six months – and this in a sector that many people view as difficult to organise. The cleaners were demanding wage increases of EUR 0.50 an hour and sick pay that covered their first two days of illness. However, they were mainly calling for more respect: 'When cleaning ladies at the airport tell you that they have to scrub the toilets very quickly because someone is already using the urinal next to them before they are finished,' explains Eelco Tasma, a senior policy advisor at the Netherlands Trade Union Confederation (FNV), 'then surely everyone can understand why they are demanding better working conditions and more respect.' The strike turned out to be the longest in Dutch post-war history – and the strikers' demands were met.

The cleaners' strike is just one example of a remarkable development that has taken place within the Dutch trade union movement. Although the number of strike-days per worker in the Netherlands is still relatively low compared with Belgium or France, the country is currently experiencing its highest strike rate for 30 years – and this in a country known for its corporatism. In 2017, primary school teachers, workers at the supermarket chain Jumbo, taxi and ambulance drivers, the KLM cabin crew and railway workers went on strike. According to Statistics Netherlands, the Dutch government's office for statistics, in 2017, 147,000 workers took part in 32 strikes. The strikers' demands are particularly important as they were not merely calling for wage increases; rather, they were usually demanding better working conditions. This constitutes a change of strategy, and the cleaners' struggle was ground-breaking in this regard.

The crisis

Very few observers had foreseen this change of approach. In fact, in 2011 the FNV was even fighting for its very existence. Paul de Beer, a professor in the University of Amsterdam's faculty of law, describes the situation at the time in the following manner: 'The FNV became paralyzed and [was] in danger of disintegrating.' In 2011, Agnes Jongerius, the leader of the FNV, infuriated the FNV's two largest member unions by supporting the government's plans to raise the retirement age to 67. The majority of the union's rank and file had opposed the move, and FNV Bondgenoten, a union that brings together workers from the transport, catering and services sectors, and Abvakabo FNV, the most important public services union, decided to try and block the reforms. However, despite the fact that these two unions represented two-thirds of the FNV's members, there were unable to overturn Jongerius' decision as they were outvoted on the FNV's executive council by the other fifteen general secretaries of the FNV's member unions. This almost toppled the FNV's internal power structure and several unions threatened to withdraw from the organisation. Did this signal the end of the Dutch trade union confederation?

But instead of disintegrating, the FNV actually managed to reinvent itself. In 2012, Jongerius and the FNV's vice-chair, Peter Gortzak, resigned. In the same year, an FNV conference took the decision to radically restructure the confederation. A proposal was developed to replace the FNV's council, where the unions' leaders had made the decisions among themselves, with a members' parliament that

would act as the FMV's highest body. In total, the member unions were to send one hundred delegates to the parliament, who would meet six times a year (they now meet almost monthly). Moreover, the parliament was to be provided with the competence to appoint and dismiss its own chair. All of the delegates were to conduct their work on a voluntary basis. A further sign of this process of democratisation is the fact that Jongerius' successor, Tom Heerts, an ex-police officer, was directly elected by the members. In this case, the members were sent a link to an online vote where they were able to elect a new chair.

However, this far-reaching process of restructuring did not come without its difficulties. The smaller affiliated unions, such as the teachers' union (the AOB) and the police union, worried that they would lose influence. Each union was to be allotted a contingent of deputies that was proportional to the size of its membership; as such, the smaller unions believed that the new members' parliament would weaken their position: even though some of them are successful, highly organised organisations, the members' parliament would lead them to have less say as they had fewer members. Despite this, the members' parliament was adopted and the two largest unions affiliated to the FNV, Abvakabo FNV and FNV Bouw, an industrial union, chose to merge with the FNV, and the FNV also restructured its various sectors.

How did this turnaround come about?

The internal debates that were being conducted by the FNV could have escalated and become entrenched. There are several reasons why this did not occur. First, the political culture of the Netherlands is well known for its polder model, a corporatist system established in the 1980s, which provides for collective bargaining under state participation with the intention of drawing up binding collective agreements that apply to entire sectors. The aim of the polder model is to avoid confrontation and prevent labour disputes. However, it also provides unions with a voice in political decisions, such as on the question of raising the retirement age. Therefore, the FNV was used to lengthy negotiations aimed at establishing a consensus between opposing sides.

Second, the restructuring involved a series of measures designed to restrict the development of cliques. For example, new members became direct members of the FNV, rather than members of an individual union. A joint youth organisation was established (FNV Jong), and young people can join this organisation instead of a member union. The merger ensured that staff from various unions also took up positions at various levels of the FNV's leadership, and groups work across various sectors to promote cooperation at this level.

Third, the FNV represents a relatively large range of opinions, especially at the intermediate level of the FNV's leadership but also among its membership. The FNV has not been tied to a single party for some time and of the thirteen political parties currently represented in the Dutch parliament, none gained more than 22% of the vote at the last elections. Since facing record losses in 2017, the social democratic PvdA only has nine out of 150 seats in the Dutch parliament – six fewer than the left-wing SP. Therefore, the FNV also maintains contacts with representatives of the green, liberal and socialist parties, and this is also reflected among the rank and file.

There have been many mergers in the history of the Dutch trade union movement. Today's FNV emerged from an association of Catholic and socialist trade union confederations. The tradition of flat organisational hierarchies, therefore, probably also contributed towards the establishment of grassroots democratic structures.

All that glitters is not gold

Anyone who becomes a member of the FNV today will have a larger say than they would have had before 2011. Despite this, the personnel structure has hardly been affected in terms of the ability of people to rise through the organisation's ranks. Over the last two years, only a small number of delegates from the members' parliament have joined the FNV's leadership: 'I can only think of two examples [...] But that wasn't the parliament's purpose,' states Tasma, who had become a union member in the 1970s. He emphasises that the members' parliament should not be viewed as a career path. Most of the FNV's staff come directly from business or university: 'There are lots of old white men at union headquarters in Utrecht in particular,' states Tasma honestly.

The restructuring, which took effect in 2013, has slowed down some processes. Since the people who make the decisions are not full-time staff, they need to be sent all the relevant materials three weeks in advance to make sure they have enough time to familiarise themselves with the issues. In addition, the numerous meetings that take place incur costs, such as travel expenses and hotel accommodation; and sometimes external meeting rooms are needed. Day-to-day business is overseen by the executive committee. However, as the members' parliament rarely votes against the committee's recommendations, it could be argued that decision-making power actually lies with the committee.

In addition, membership numbers are declining steadily and restructuring has not been able to change this situation. The FNV loses around 2.5% of its members every year, mainly due to aging combined with the lack of a new generation to take their place. Between 1950 and 1980, labour-force organisation stood at over 35%; in 2008, only one in five employees was a union member. Union membership has fallen dramatically since then, and particularly since collective agreements have been declared binding for non-union members. As such, although 80% of workers are covered by collective agreements, only 13% of the workforce is organised. The FNV still has more than one million members, but it is unclear how long this will continue to be the case. There are hopes that declining union membership can be counteracted through organising.

Meeting new challenges

The FNV currently finances 30 full-time positions for organisers. The organisers were initially focused on the care sector and cleaning staff.

‘Organising’ refers to a participatory trade union strategy based on Saul Alinsky’s ‘community organising’, which has been implemented in the US since the 1970s. Alinsky brought people who live in close proximity into contact, identified their problems and worked with them to develop strategies aimed at developing political solutions. After many years of losing members and declining mobilisation skills, organising is an attractive approach for the FNV.

Labour struggles on campsites

The FNV is currently running campaigns at bol.com, the Dutch branch of Amazon and the food delivery service Deliveroo. Deliveroo forces its couriers to work as freelancers, thus saving social security contributions. Bol.com is the largest player in e-commerce in the Netherlands and employs about 4,000 people directly, especially IT specialists. All other areas are outsourced: its call centre, warehouse workers and logistics.

Mari Martens, the person responsible for the trade sector at the FNV, talks about the situation at bol.com: ‘These are American working conditions at their worst. I’m sure that we’ll soon have a form of Uber for parcel delivery, where private individuals deliver parcels and are paid dumping prices.’ The degree of organisation in the e-commerce sector remains very low. The people who work on temporary contracts in the large warehouse in Waaldijk are often migrants. ‘There used to be a campsite in Waaldijk where you could go on holiday; it doesn’t exist anymore, because the workers live there,’ says Martens. Organisers and union members talk to the workers at campsites such as these and establish contacts so that they can take joint action. But this takes time. The cleaners mentioned above took their first tentative steps towards organising in 2002; it was not until 2010 that they gained their first big success, after a four-month strike.

Involving the next generation in the union

Young and United is an initiative that particularly targets younger workers. Young people are paid a lower minimum wage in the Netherlands than other workers. Companies only have to pay people under the age of 15 an hourly rate of EUR 2.74. Even 18-year-olds can be paid just EUR 4.33 per hour. The former FNV organiser, Ron Meijer, commented on this in 2015: ‘If you’re 18, you can vote, drink alcohol and drive a car. But you earn half the minimum wage. That’s bizarre.’ The adult minimum wage in the Netherlands is EUR 9.11. Therefore, it should not be surprising that work in the low-wage sector, and this includes supermarkets, is largely undertaken by school pupils. Supermarket chains such as Albert Heijn particularly like to employ school children on Sundays and public holidays, when adult workers would have to be paid extra. Young and United’s most successful campaign helped reduce the age to which the adult minimum wage applies (from 23 to 21) and increase the minimum hourly wage for 18- to 20-year-olds.

However, in the headquarters in Utrecht people are undecided as to whether organising represents a sustainable strategy. The union researcher De Beer calls this the ‘deeper-lying friction between unions increasingly embracing the organizing approach in recent years and unions traditionally embedded in social partnership arrangements.’ This leads to questions about the challenges that the loss of membership poses to the union as long as it has enough active members. Tasma is very clear about this point: ‘I believe that we would lose our relevance as a trade union confederation if we were to represent less than one million members.’ Tasma also emphasises the importance of ensuring that membership expansion takes place across the board. Similarly, Martens defends organising: ‘If we were to have no contact with workers at all, then the membership numbers would fall much faster. Just because people pay membership fees does not mean that they are involved in an organisation.’ If workers were to demand active participation in the decisions that affect their working conditions and were willing to take action to secure these rights, then the degree of organisation would increase by itself. The AOB in particular has succeeded in expanding its membership, and it has conducted various strikes and forms of action.

Now everyone is sitting at the same table

Despite the contradictions and internal debates, the challenges that could have signalled the end of the FNV resulted in a merger and a process of internal democratisation. Today, on the outskirts of Utrecht, 2,000 people work at the FNV’s new headquarters, a glass building just a short distance from the factories owned by the coffee giant Douwe Egberts. The lobby teems with visitors; staff wander to the canteen. From the well-lit ground floor, visitors can look up to the upper floors, and vice versa. A small library has been set up. In the lift, employees from various departments meet each other briefly. ‘The Abvakabo used to have its headquarters in Zoetermeer and FNV Bouw was in Woerden,’ recalls Tasma. ‘All of the unions had their headquarters in a different part of the country.’ Now everyone meets in the same building – everyone sits at the same table – and the building has become a symbol of the FNV’s astonishing new beginning.