De syndicale onderstroom: Stakingen in de Rotterdamse haven, 1889-2010
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SUMMARY

Objective of the study

In the relatively stable and strongly regulated system of industrial relations in the Netherlands, the Rotterdam port is, of old, a notable exception. The port has endured far more strikes than any other industry. Moreover, a great many of these industrial conflicts concerned wildcat strikes. This ‘syndicalist undercurrent’ has a long history – from the first start of the port’s development at the beginning of the 20th century until the end of that century. The employment relations in the Rotterdam port also played an important role as a counterpoint at key moments in the development of the industrial relations in the Netherlands as a whole. The objective of this study is to find the cause of the strike pattern that was so very characteristic of the Rotterdam port. How did this pattern emerge, how did it develop, and why was it so ineradicable?

Theoretical orientation

This study upholds the tradition of ‘industrial relations’ and uses the strategic choice model introduced by Katz & Kochan as a conceptual framework. This is supplemented by the concept of the ‘employment relationship’ so that the informal employment relations at the worksite level can also be brought into play. The employment relationship between employer and employee comprises an economic exchange relationship, an authority relationship, and an implicit contract of unarticulated mutual expectations. Central to the definition of a strike is the breach of the authority relationship: a temporary collective refusal to work by the workers, which is not condoned by their employer.

The strike pattern can be expressed in the strike frequency (the number of strikes) and the strike volume, the number of working days lost as a result of the strike, which I refer to as ‘striker days’. For the purpose of this study, the status of the strike was of key importance: whether the strike was of an official nature or it could be classed as a wildcat strike, i.e. a strike for which the union had not given permission. In the analysis of the causes of strikes, we can distinguish between direct causes, conditional causes, and underlying, structural causes of strikes. This thesis revolves around the latter.
There are two theories that each provide an explanation for the dockworkers’ great willingness to strike. According to the isolated mass hypothesis propounded by Kerr & Siegel (1954), the high propensity to strike in ports is primarily the consequence of the geographical isolation of dockworkers. Empirical research, however, revealed quite the opposite: it is their central position within the metropolitan, industrial centres that instigated a great many strikes. The second theory is from Miller (1969), who claims that the special characteristics of the work in ports, especially the casual labour and the heavy, dangerous, and varied nature of the work, brought along a universal dockworker subculture, with strong and mutual solidarity, militant unions, left-wing political views, and a ‘casual frame of mind’ (free men or irresponsible opportunists). One objection to this theory is the superficial analysis of ‘working conditions’. This study meets this objection by applying labour process theory, central to which are the relationships of power and authority in the production process. A second objection is the deterministic and unhistorical nature of the concept of culture that Miller uses. A historical angle and a dynamic view of culture help overcome that objection.

Research method

This thesis is a historical-sociological study that covers the entire 20th century, including the foreplay and aftermath (1890-2010). The core of the analysis is a database of all the strikes in the Rotterdam port during that era. The strikes are analysed by period, in their historical context, and within the framework of the development of the industrial relations system. For both the composition of the database and the above-mentioned analysis, numerous widely varying sources were used, including the examination of records in archives, secondary sources, interviews, and the author’s personal experiences.

The strike pattern in the Rotterdam port

The strike pattern up to the First World War (1889-1914) can be said to be characterised by direct action and strikes against the introduction of the pneumatic grain unloader. The rapid growth of the port itself, especially as a transit port for the industrial expansion of the North Rhine-Westphalia region in western Germany, had drawn thousands of labourers from the countryside to the port. In these years of liberal capitalism, not a single form of labour market regulation existed in the port. The great masses of casual workers were hired in the streets and cafes on a daily basis. Without fixed work contracts, employers could only indirectly control the dockworkers. Their pay was a subject of continuous negotiation,
and conflicts about payment, unfairness, and deceit were more or less a matter of course.

The employment relations in those days can be typified as being in a ‘state of disorder’. Permanent unions did not emerge, but due to the widely differing interests of line agents, shipping firms, and ship owners, employers also had difficulties to organise. In 1905, the first collective labour agreement was a fact, but it was not until 1917 when the second agreement was signed. If the government intervened in the labour conflicts, it primarily did so by deploying the police and army to protect those who were willing to work or by attempting to mediate.

In these days, the casual nature of the work played a pivotal role in the strike pattern. The state of disorder continually resulted in conflict. Without fixed work contracts, direct action was a rational means to an end. The casualness of the work also had an influence on the type of union. The ever-changing pool of dockers, their irregular income, and their unconventional mentality was not a fruitful breeding ground for the ‘modern union’, which mainly found support among the educated industrial labourers and strived for strong organisations with ample funds for disciplined strikes. The syndicalist current within the union movement was far better in tune with the daily practices and mentality in the ports.

In the Interbellum (from 1918 to 1940), the pattern of direct action continued. It was, moreover, in this period that the biggest strike of the entire century took place in the Rotterdam port: the port and seamen strike of 1920. During the time of the depression in the 1930s, strikes occurred far less. In 1918, the SVZ federation of employers in the port and shipping industry founded the HAR labour pool, with hiring halls, a central payment office, and its very own police corps. This did not alter the casual nature of the labour, but it did cut out the master stevedores as go-betweens. The control of the dockers’ work conduct remained indirect, but it was now exerted through the HAR and its disciplining bodies. The employers thereby presented a collective face, which strongly contributed to the ‘port-wide’ antagonist relations.

The founding of the HAR took place in the days of the ‘scared upper classes’. Under the pressure of the rise of the socialists, universal suffrage, and the revolutionary developments in Russia and Germany, the employers tended to give in to the unions. The attempt made by the enlightened entrepreneur Nijgh to set up a corporatist deliberative body (the ‘Pay Council’) failed miserably, due to the resistance of diehards in his own circle as well the great differences of opinion between the unions. In the bitter pay strike that followed in 1920, the social-democratic union, the CBT, and the syndicalist NFT federation of seamen and dock-workers fought a fierce ideological battle. When the strike was eventually
lost, it marked the beginning of the end of the NFT and the seeming dominance of the ‘modern union’ in the port.

In the after-war period (1945-1969), the greatest strikes in the first years after the Second World War revolved around the recognition of the EVC federation, which was affiliated to the Dutch Communist Party. The establishment of the corporatist system of industrial relations in the Netherlands, the budding Cold War and the pillarisation in national politics formed the political context of these strikes. Despite its great support among the dockworkers and the strikes for its recognition, the EVC was never ‘acknowledged’. It would eventually not survive this exclusion. The ‘recognised’ unions that focused on collaboration abstained from any form of action, but the pattern of direct action continued to exist. Of the 128 strikes that took place between 1945 and 1970, only one was organised by a ‘recognised’ union, and it failed due to the lack of the dockworkers’ co-operation: a syndicalist undercurrent on which the official system of industrial relations in the Netherlands could not get a grip.

The port's growth in the 1950s and 1960s resulted in a shortage in the labour market and a drastic fall in the number of casual workers in the total pool of dockworkers. In 1955, moreover, the casual workers got a fixed contract with the CvA centre for work provision, which had been set up by the SVZ employers' federation. When its successor, the SHB foundation of cooperative port industries was established in 1967, the dockworkers in the labour pool could also count on a guaranteed cyclical income.

The employers had hoped that this ‘decasualisation’ would take away the foundation of the dockworkers' tradition to strike. But that did not happen. This cannot be adequately clarified from a cultural lag, the phenomenon that culture changes slower than the circumstances from which it arises. An additional but stronger explanation is based on the fact that general cargo transhipment does not agree with Taylorist organisational principles. Whereas scientific management in manufacturing industries had led to a division of tasks, detailed work instructions and direct supervision of the factory worker, the dockworkers kept a great degree of autonomy in the execution of their work. The freedom and variety in the work did not only draw the kind of people that appreciated this liberty, but it also provided them with a basis of power against the bosses. In spite of the existence of a fixed contract and a collective bargaining agreement, a practice of informal, additional negotiations developed at the shop floor. Both the unions and the employers' organisation disapproved of this practice – which went hand in hand with conflict situations and stoppages of work. It, nevertheless, proved to be ineradicable.
After the relative peace and quiet of the 1960s, when no major strikes occurred, the 1970s saw a new strike wave in which the large-scale wildcat pay strikes of 1970 and 1979 stand out the most. The strike pattern in the following decade was characterised by employment actions in general cargo transhipment and strikes over the collective agreement in bulk transhipment, all led by a radicalised union.

The most important contextual factor of influence in these days was the container that was rapidly making headway. This had far-reaching consequences for the labour process. The relative autonomy of the dockworkers who handled general cargo was replaced by routine tasks with automated process management in the new container terminals. Whereas in 1970 the strike had still been port-wide, it was the division between the two sectors that caused disunity among the dockworkers in 1979. It would eventually contribute to their defeat. The containerisation also led to an increasing surplus of dockworkers in general cargo handling. The actions in the port organised by the union in the 1980s resulted – with the help of active mediation and financial support from the local and national governments – in a series of social agreements that, in fact, made compulsory redundancy impossible. Thus, the paradoxical situation arose that dockworkers who, due to the system of casual labour, had belonged to the workers with the least job security, were now included in the category with the most job security.

The employment relations in the Rotterdam port in this period can be typified as 'continued polarisation'. The polarisation that had characterised the political landscape and industrial relations in the Netherlands during the 1970s was followed by the milder climate of the polder model, after the ‘Wassenaar Agreement’ between the social partners at national level in 1982. The climate in the ports also grew somewhat milder in the 1980s, albeit just a little. During the wildcat strikes of the 1970s, the syndicalist undercurrent had reared its head again – with ample encouragement from (Maoist) action groups. The FNV Transport union could only overcome the subsequent existential crisis by persuading the campaigners to join their ranks and pursuing an activist course – which is reflected in the above-mentioned strike actions in the 1980s.

In the last period (1990-2009), the strike volume fell considerably; there were hardly any long-term or extensive strikes. At the same time, the number of stoppages of work – the strike frequency – compared to the previous period remained constant. It cannot, therefore, be unequivocally said that the dockworkers' willingness to strike declined during these years. The number of wildcat strikes did fall, however. In other words, the union reverted to strikes more frequently, but they had a smaller impact.

Just as in the previous years, casual labour cannot be indicated as the cause of the (to a certain extent) continuing strike pattern. Moreover,
the labour pool continued to shrink and, in 1995, the government ended its contribution to the financing of the SHB, which eventually led to its bankruptcy in 2009. A clarification on the basis of the inability to apply Taylorist organisational principles to general cargo transhipment also falls short. As a consequence of the advance of the container, the role of general cargo transhipment was marginalised and the technology of container handling became normative in the design of the labour process.

A first explanation for the continuity of the strike frequency lies in the dockworkers’ culture. This culture had historically developed, was used by informal leaders to create solidarity in order to mobilise for action, and was now embraced and further developed by the union. In line with the activist course in the 1980s, the ‘FNV Ports’ union developed a new type of union strategy, an American style business unionism, in which the militant tradition of the port was cultivated or, if you prefer, mythologised under the Proud to be a docker slogan. The union also became increasingly aware of the fact that the dockworkers held a great structural power in a globalising world, given the port’s pivotal role in international logistic chains.

A second explanation lies in the dynamics of industrial relations. The employers, who had always formed a stronghold against which the dockworkers could make a collective stand, strategically decided in 1996 to disband the SVZ as an employers’ organisation. This led to a strong fragmentation of the bargaining structure. This development was one of the last things the unions wanted and was the paradoxical effect of their own power. However, this fragmentation in turn had an unintended and undesired consequence for the employers: a practice of pattern bargaining arose, with local negotiations and conflicts, not at shop floor this time, but at the company level – a kind of ‘neo-liberal industrial relations’ that was new to the Netherlands, in which a result-oriented but limited deployment of strikes was one of the union’s means to an end.

Strikes in the Rotterdam port in comparison

In Chapter 8, the employment relations in the Rotterdam port are placed in comparative perspective. In many other countries too, the ports with their relatively great strike activity are the outsiders in the national pattern of employment relations. The specific characteristics of that activity are strongly dependent on the model of industrial relations, legislation, and cultural traditions prevailing in each country.

The comparison with Antwerp and Hamburg, the strongest competitors of the Rotterdam port, reveals that the strike pattern up to the Second World War and in the post-war years had more or less the same characteristics in all three ports. It was during the 1950s that the patterns strongly diverged. Whereas in the 1970s and 1980s the Rotterdam port was faced
with great strike activity, the ports of Antwerp and Hamburg knew a large
degree of industrial peace. This is striking, since these three ports are
usually put together in one box as north-western European ports (Hanse-
atic ports). The most important explanation for the difference is the legal
basis of the institutionalisation of the labour market in the ports of Bel-
gium and Germany, whereby, in contrast to Rotterdam, the unions are
co-responsible for the management of the labour pool.

In the comparison of the two main seaports in the Netherlands, it be-
came apparent that, up to the Second World War, there were more strikes
in the Amsterdam port than in Rotterdam, and they also included more
wildcat strikes. This finding goes against the, among social historians, ac-
cepted notion that Amsterdam was the centre of workers’ organisation in
those days, and Rotterdam the heart of workers’ action. After the war, the
Rotterdam port did become the centre of workers’ action. This conclu-
sion too is in contrast with the general notion, in the ‘modern sociology’
of the 1960s this time, that the Rotterdam dockworkers had become mid-
de-class – as opposed to the class conscious, traditional urban proletariat
of Amsterdam.

The comparison with other industries in the Netherlands shows that
the strike activity in the storage and transhipment industry (largely in the
ports) was extremely high in the 20th century. In three of the five speci-
fied periods, this industry was by far the most sensitive to strikes. During
the period up to the First World War, the ports were only outshone by the
diamond industry. In the last period, 1990-2009, only the building indus-
try scored higher, which was the consequence of some very extensive
collective agreement strikes. The strike frequency in the building indus-
try in those years was, however, remarkably lower than in storage and
transhipment. It is noticeable that the other industries that scored high
on the strike measuring rod only did so during a limited period of time,
related to their rise and fall. In the 1970s and 1980s, for instance, the
ship building industry shrank drastically without this leading to major
strikes, while the great shipyards in Rotterdam and Amsterdam had, of
old, been bastions of workers’ action. However, it would have been a lost
battle, since the work mainly disappeared to low wage countries. Ports
are, by nature, bound by their location and actually benefitted from the
globalisation that hit and hurt the manufacturing industries.

**Conclusions**

The answer to the question into the source of the strike pattern that is
characteristic to Rotterdam is threefold. The original cause lies in the
system of casual labour that, in different variants, dominated the labour
market up to 1955. Casual labour led to irregular income, direct action,
a free-spirited mentality, and support for syndicalist unions. Although
the dockers in the labour pool did get a fixed contract in 1955, they kept on regarding themselves as ‘casual workers’. The contribution of the labour pool to the entire employment rate did, however, strongly decline. A second cause, that got the upper hand in the 1950s, is the fact that conventional general cargo transhipment did not agree with the application of Taylorist management systems. The autonomy in the labour process gave the dockworkers a basis of power that led to non-contractual bargaining at the shop floor, including the conflicts that went with them – direct action with a new look. Once the general cargo handling had been fully replaced by the container, the dockworkers’ culture as a ‘repertoire of collective action’ by the union became the source of the continuity of the strike frequency. The limited size of the strikes reduced costs for the union, but by strategic application the union tried to make them as effective as possible. As a result the strike volume in the last period was significantly lower than in all preceding periods.

In reflection on the theory, it appears that geographical isolation – a key element in the hypothesis of Kerr & Siegel – did not play a role in clarifying the strike pattern of Rotterdam either. Feelings of social isolation did play a part, but as a consequence rather than a cause of the strike pattern. Miller’s theory on a dockworkers’ culture proved to be very useful, but contrary to his prediction, no ‘left-wing political views’ were found. The dockworkers had, in fact, a pragmatic, opportunist, apolitical attitude that accepted the help of extreme left-wing organisations at certain times. The theory was not only useful, but is also up to date – in the sense that the social scientific notion of a ‘dockworkers’ culture’ has become a part of the ‘ideological’ discussion between employers and unions in the employment relations.

As for the causes of the strike pattern, the theoretical foundation of the three elements of the employment relationship offered the strongest explanation. The transaction costs theory underpins the economic exchange relationship and explains the phenomenon of casual labour in the port and the poor management control that went with it. Labour process theory shows the special power relations and shop floor politics in conventional general cargo transhipment. The implicit contract, the third element of the individual employment relationship, can be analysed at the collective level in terms of culture. Together, these three elements form the condition for mobilisation and collective action. The measure and shape of its occurrence depended on the presence of informal leaders, the institutional design of the labour market and the strategic choices of the parties involved in the industrial relations.