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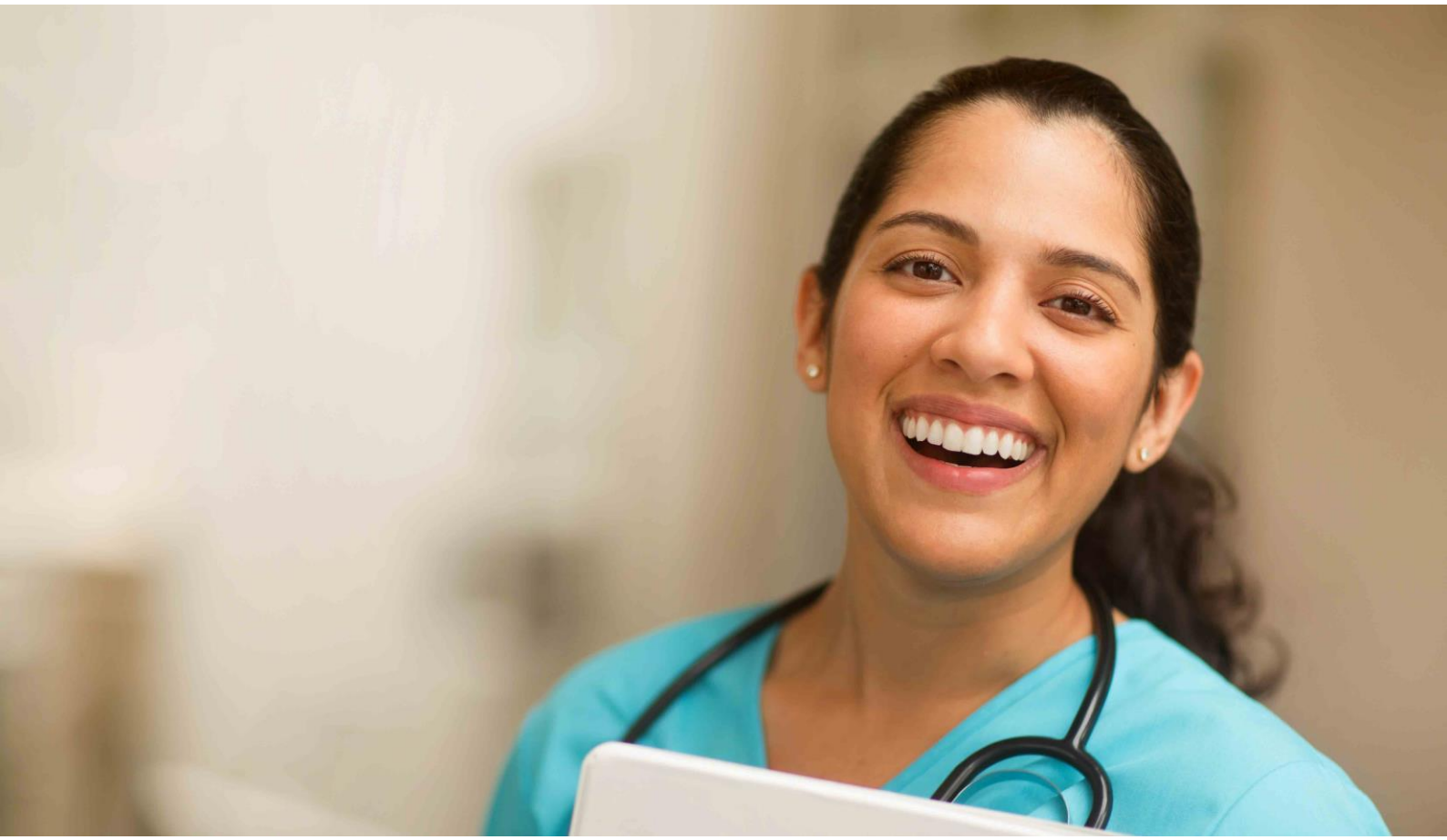

Collective Bargaining in the Netherlands during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Evidence from a Negotiator Survey

Country Report

June 2023

BARCOVID

AIAS HSI

WageIndicator

CELSI Central European Labour Studies Institute

Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies – Pisa

BARCOVID

The BARCOVID project aims to improve knowledge about the content of collective agreements in Europe and to undertake research activities to enhance the collection of comparative information on collective bargaining outcomes. The project takes in account the Covid-19 impact on industrial relations in Europe, which is approached from different angles, such as government measures and occupational health and safety. Lead partner is the University of Amsterdam/AIAS. The Central European Labour Studies Institute (CELSI), Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies and WageIndicator Foundation are the project's key actors.

University of Amsterdam/AIAS-HSI

AIAS-HSI is an institute for multidisciplinary research and teaching at the University of Amsterdam (UvA), the largest university in the Netherlands. AIAS-HSI has as its objective the coordination, implementation and stimulation of interdisciplinary research into the practice of labour law and social security law. Therefore it combines insights from the social sciences, legal dogmas and legal theories in its research.

Central European Labour Studies Institute (CELSI)

Central European Labour Studies Institute (CELSI) is a non-profit research institute based in Bratislava, Slovakia. It fosters multidisciplinary research about the functioning of labour markets and institutions, work and organizations, business and society, and ethnicity and migration in the economic, social, and political life of modern societies. CELSI strives to make a contribution to the cutting-edge international scientific discourse.

Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies

Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies is a public university institute - with special autonomy - working in the field of applied sciences: Economics and Management, Law, Political Sciences, Agricultural Sciences and Plant Biotechnology, Medicine, and Industrial and Information Engineering. The School promotes the internationalization of didactics and research with innovative paths in the fields of university education, scientific research and advanced training.

WageIndicator Foundation

WageIndicator Foundation collects, compares and shares labour market information through online and offline surveys and research. Its national websites serve as always up-to-date online libraries featuring (living) wage information, labour law and career advice, for employees, employers and social partners. In this way, WageIndicator is a life changer for millions of people around the world.

Funding

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Bibliographical information

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1.Introduction:

This research report is intended to examine the degree to which the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced the negotiation process concerning collective labor agreements in The Netherlands. Like many other countries in Europe and worldwide, the Netherlands saw significant disruption in economic activity due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent periods of lockdowns from 2020 to 2022. This crisis situation, particularly in the early stages of the pandemic, often complicated the process of renewing collective agreements, occasionally stalling negotiations.

In addition to changes in the content of the agreements, as discussed in the accompanying report that compares specific clauses before and after the pandemic (see Jansen, 2023), this report will address whether the COVID-19 pandemic has also affected the process of renewing Collective Bargaining Agreements (CBAs) and the broader climate of social dialogue.

This report conducts a thorough investigation into the renewal process of collective agreements in The Netherlands, utilizing survey data collected from negotiators. In total, the research encompassed 93 negotiators involved in 63 different agreements. The respondents present a balanced representation of negotiation parties in the Dutch labor market. Approximately half of the Dutch respondents were affiliated with a trade union or another organization representing employees. In contrast, the remaining half were associated with employer organizations or independent businesss.

The results from the survey provide significant insights into the renewal process of CBAs during the pandemic, revealing the impacts of COVID-19 on labor negotiation dynamics. The findings reveal that the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the negotiation process for collective agreements in the Netherlands, with about half of the surveyed negotiators reporting that it made negotiations more challenging. However, the majority considered the pandemic a significant, yet not the sole factor affecting negotiations. Quarantine measures were also seen as an impediment to negotiator availability, potentially increasing negotiation difficulty. Moreover, the pandemic's economic fallout, characterized by decreased revenue and disruptions in production or service delivery, influenced the negotiation context. However, negotiators' perceptions of these economic changes and governmental support packages did not significantly impact the perceived ease or difficulty of negotiations. The most vital negotiation topics were wages, followed by working hours/schedules, and work-life balance arrangements.

2. Collective Bargaining and Industrial Relations during the Pandemic: Evidence from the Barcovid Negotiator Survey

2.1 Data Collection: Negotiator Survey

We collected the data for this study through the *Barcovid Negotiator Survey*, which is an international survey conducted among negotiators and signatories of collective bargaining agreements in five European countries. The survey was conducted to investigate the impact of the Covid19 pandemic on industrial relations. We used an online questionnaire created using Qualtrics, and fieldwork was conducted between January 16 and March 10 2023. The survey questions were designed to understand the renewal process of CBAs during the pandemic and the wider implications of the pandemic on relations between social partners.

To recruit respondents, we identified signatory parties (employee and employer organizations) for all collective agreements in the CBA Database for Austria, France, Italy, The Netherlands, and Spain, and collected their email addresses via web search. If possible, information on individual negotiators (name and professional email address) was retrieved. We sent invitations to these organizations/individuals between in January 2023, and we also sent two reminders in February and March. Invitations were sent to only the first five signatory parties involved with a CBA, and only one negotiator was contacted in case multiple signatories/negotiators were listed for one organization.

For the Netherlands, we sent invitations to 312 signatories (or other negotiators or officials involved with the collective agreement) of 80 CBAs. In total, we received 93 completed responses (response rate 29.8%), with respondents involved in 63 different CBAs. About half of the Dutch respondents (50.5%) were affiliated with a trade union or other organization representing employees, while the other half (49.5%) were affiliated with an employer or employer organization. Additionally, most respondents filled out the questionnaire for a sector-level CBA (82.8%) instead of a company-level CBA (17.2%). Out of the 68 CBAs reported in the survey, 37 were renewed once since the start of the Covid19 pandemic, 24 were renewed more than once, and 2 were not renewed.

The invitation emails and questionnaires were presented to respondents in their own language (German, French, Italian, Dutch or Spanish). More details about the data collection and the questionnaire can be found in the overarching report and the questionnaire appendix (cf. Jansen, Cetrulo and Szüdi 2023).

2.2 The overall impact of the Covid19 pandemic on collective negotiations

This section looks back at the at the negotiations for renewing agreements during the Covid19 pandemic. We start with the overall assessment of negotiators of the extent to which the pandemic made it more or less difficult to reach an agreement. As shown in Figure 1, about half of the negotiators thought that the covid19 pandemic made it (much) more difficult to

reach collective agreements. A small minority (7.7%) indicated that reaching an agreement was (much) easier due to the pandemic. There was also a substantial group (37.4%) who thought that the covid crisis did neither make negotiations more difficult nor eased them.

We also asked respondents how important the Covid19 pandemic was compared to other factors that affected the negotiation process. The results in Figure 2 showed that the majority of the negotiators indicated that the pandemic was important, and this group broke down into negotiators indicating that while covid19 was important, other factors were more important (37%), and a group indicating that Covid19 was the most important factor influencing the negotiations (25%). Furthermore, about 20% of the negotiators thought that the pandemic only played a minor role in the negotiation process, and only 3.3 per cent indicated that covid19 was not important at all.

Figure 1. To what extent did the covid19 pandemic make it more difficult to reach an agreement (N=91)

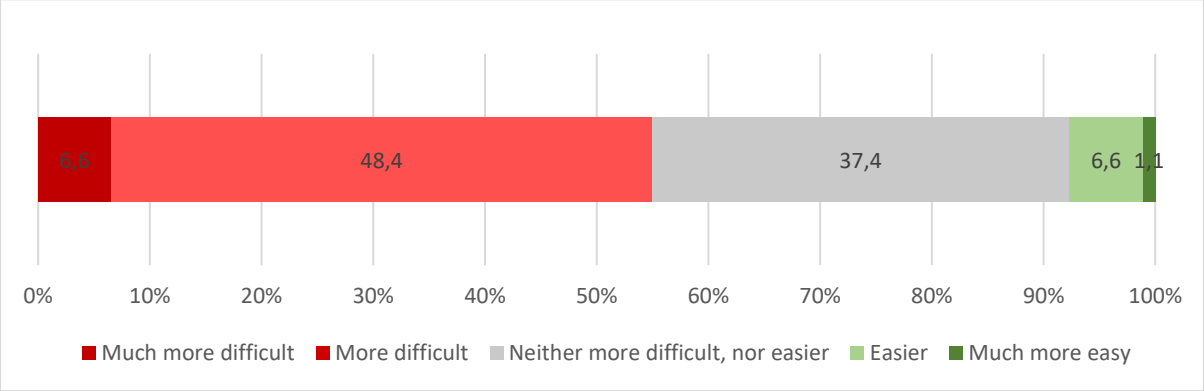
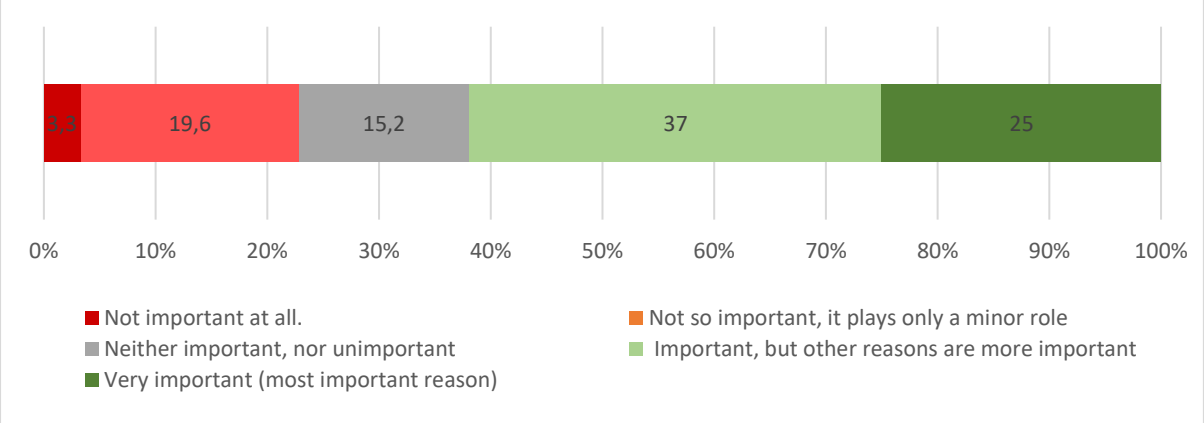


Figure 2. How important was the covid19 pandemic compared to other factors that affected the negotiation process (N=91)



To shed some light on the reasons why the covid19 pandemic made it more difficult to reach on agreement, a follow-up open question was asked. Table 1 lists some some of the effects of the covid pandemic mentioned by the respondents. In the open answers three main reasons emerged for why the pandemic made collective negotiations more difficult. First and foremost, the shift from physical face-to-face negotiations to online negotiations was mentioned as an complicating factor by many respondents. Also, multiple respondents mention the increased uncertainty – especially at the early stages of the pandemic – as a factor hindering the negotiations. Related to these factors, the covid pandemic hindered negotiations by delaying them. Yet, delay also has positive side effects, as the changed economic conditions in the aftermath of the pandemic (such as labor shortages) allegedly made negotiations also easier once started. Another reason – although mentioned by only a few respondents – for easier negotiations, is that the pandemic lead to thinner agreements only covering key issues (such as wages).

Table 1 Reasons why the pandemic made it easier or more difficult to reach an agreement, examples of open answers

Effect of the pandemic	**Example text fragment (translated to English)**
Online negotiations (more difficult)	"Negotiations were largely via videocalls, which made informal discussion and back-and-forth consultation with the other unions and employers more difficult."
Uncertainty (more difficult)	"Long uncertainty about development of economy and thus [uncertainty about] financial space"
Delayed negatiations (more difficult)	"Negotiating is more than exchanging information with each other. In the pandemic, we had a bigger room and sound amplification, this comes at the expense of the group feeling where your goal as parties together is to settle the terms of employment for the coming year. We renegotiated a collective agreement in autumn 2022. At that time, there were no restrictive measures in place"
Delayed negotiations (easier)	"Because in [late 2021] the Corona pandemic had been going on for a while and the economy was already bouncing back considerably, there was a shortage of staff. That made negotiating pay very easy, because of shared interest. Direct cause was staff shortage, which was caused - indirectly - by Coronapandemic".
Thin agreements (easier)	"[We] opted for a low-policy CBA in order to still be able to reach an agreement. This was mainly about the wage paragraph and reserving part of the available wage space to cover Covid consequences for our population. This went relatively quickly and easily because everyone at the negotiation table felt it was important to still reach a quick agreement in Corona time"
Common interest (easier)	"There was little room, the sector was doing badly so everyone understood that we had to reach a collective agreement with limited resources"

The impact of online negotiations on the renewal process of collective agreements during the Covid19 pandemic in the Netherlands is further explored in Table 2. It should be noted, however, that negotiations talks were not strongly affected in terms of frequency. About two-thirds of negotiators reported that talks were held either monthly (46%) or weekly (19%), and most negotiators (78%) indicated that this frequency did not change compared to pre-Covid. While most negotiations had at least some online meetings, more than half of respondents reported that negotiations were either held fully offline as in-person meetings (27%) or mostly offline with occasional online sessions (28%). The other half of respondents reported that online negotiations were more prevalent, with varying degrees of online/offline meetings. Only 9% reported meetings to have taken place fully online.

In addition, respondents were asked whether quarantine measures affected the availability of negotiators during negotiations (For example, because individual negotiators were unable to attend, or due to changes in negotiation delegates). More than half of respondents reported that this was either never (18%) or seldomly (39%) the case. However, some negotiation processes were affected by quarantine measures, with over 40% of respondents reporting changes in negotiation delegates/teams to occur sometimes (32%) or often (11%).

Table 2 also shows how the characteristics of negotiation talks correspond to the mean perception about the ease of negotiations. More frequent negotiations were perceived to be less easy due to Covid19. However, neither changes in negotiation frequency nor the online/offline nature of negotiations were significantly associated with the perceived ease of reaching an agreement. Quarantine measures, on the other hand, which hindered the availability of negotiators, did seem to hinder successful negotiations. Negotiators who reported that quarantine measures often affected the availability of negotiators, on average, found it more difficult to reach an agreement than negotiators who reported that quarantine measures never hindered the availability of delegates.

Table 2. Characteristics of negotiation talks during the covid19 pandemic, and mean values for the ease of negotiations (N=90).

Frequency of negotiations	**%**	**M[1]**	**Online or offline negotiations**	%	M
Weekly	18,9	**2.1**	Fully offline	26,7	2.5
Monthly	45,6	**2.4**	Mostly offline, sometimes online	27,8	2.4
Incidental	35,6	**2.8**	Both offline/online (about equally)	14,4	2.2
			Mostly online, sometimes offline	22.2	2.5
			Fully online	8,9	2.9
Change in negotiation freqency (vs. before the pandemic)			**Changes due to quarantine[2]**		
			Never	17,8	**2.8**
Decreased	12,4	2.6	Seldom	38,9	**2.6**
Stayed the same	78,2	2.5	Sometimes	32,2	**2.4**
Increased	9,0	2.4	Often	11,1	**1.9**

[1] Mean values on the statement "*To what extent did the covid19 pandemic make it more difficult to reach an agreement*" (1 Much more difficult – 5 more more easier). Significant at 90% CI in bold.

[2] Responses to the questions "*To what extent did Covid19 or quarantine measures affect the availability of negotiators during the negotiations for this agreement? (For example, individual negotiators who were unable to attend, or changes in negotiation delegates)*"

2.3. The impact of the Covid19 pandemic on the economic context of negotiations

This section investigates the extent to which the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns affected the economic context of negotiations. Negotiators were asked to reflect on four statements concerning the impact of the pandemic on the sector or organization covered by the CBA. The statements were about the interruption of production/service delivery, decrease of revenue, decrease of employment, and interruptions in payment of wages. Figure 3 shows that 51% of negotiators reported a decrease in revenue, 44% reported an interruption in production or service delivery, 29% reported decreases in employment, and only 2% reported interruptions in wage payments.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Dutch government supported trade and industry with comprehensive support packages (Rijksoverheid 2023). Analyses by the Dutch National Bank concluded that these measures helped businesses compensate for turnover losses in sectors that were hit hardest by the pandemic. However, generic measures were criticized because some support reached sectors that were less affected by the crisis (DNB 2022). Figure 4 investigates the perceptions of negotiators regarding the impact of support packages. Once again, four potential outcomes are examined, namely, the extent to which support packages helped to a) sustain production/service delivery, b) revenue, c) employment, and d) wage payments. For all four outcomes, negotiators' perceptions paint a similar picture: about 20-30% (strongly) disagree that support packages were helpful, around 40% neither agree nor disagree, and between 30-40% (strongly) agree that support packages were helpful.

To explore whether the economic disruption complicated and support packages eased the negotiations, correlations coefficients (not shown) were calculated between the general attitude regarding the covid19 impact ("*To what extent did the covid19 pandemic make it more difficult to reach an agreement*"), and items in Figure 3 and Figure 4. Bearing in mind that results should be interpreted with caution given the low number of observations (N_{max}=92), the correlations indicate that there generally is no (strong) linear relationship between perceptions of economic changes/support packages and the ease or difficulty of negotiations.

Figure 3. Covid19 impact on economy in the sector/organization of the CBA (N=92)

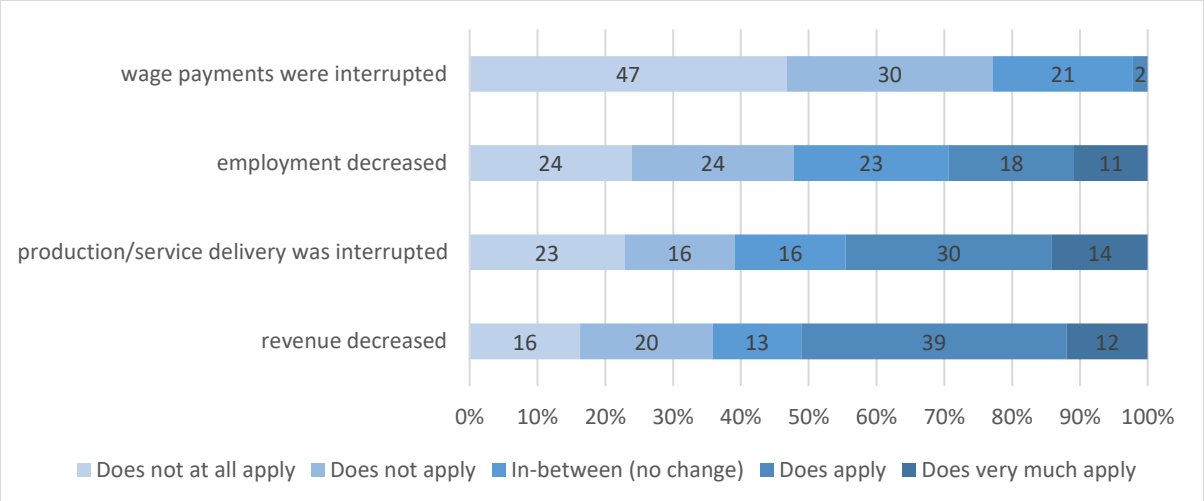
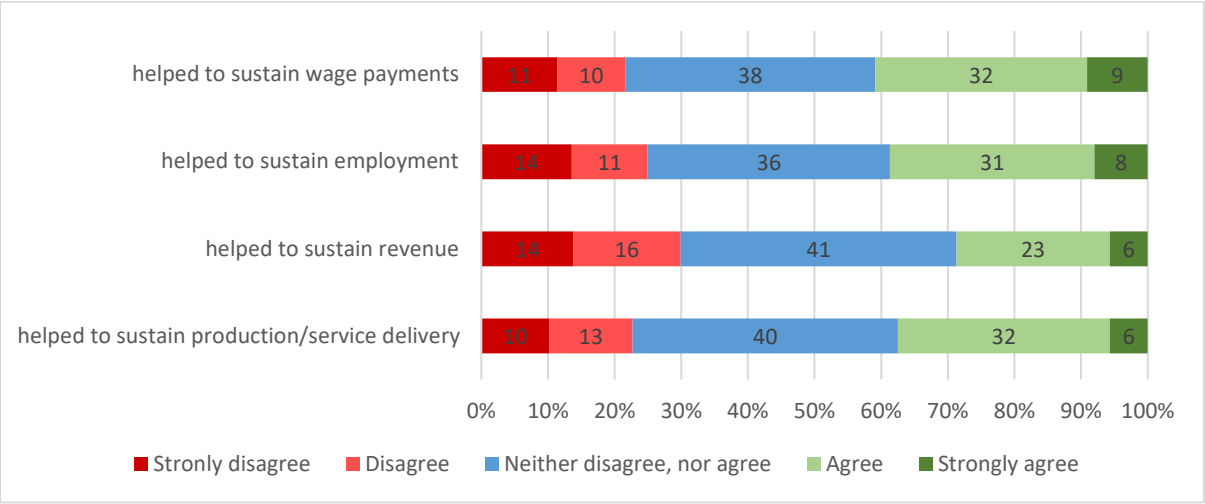


Figure 4. Impact of support packages in the sector or organization of the CBA (N=92)



3.4 Most important topics during the negotiations

This section investigates which topics were most prevalent during collective negotiations at the time of the covid19 pandemic. To this end, negotiators were asked to list (up to) three topics that they considered most important during the negotiations. The list of topics was derived from the thematic clustering in the Collective Agreement Database (Ceccon and Medas 2022), although respondents had the opportunity to mention another topic in an open field. Figure 5 shows that, nearly all negotiators (96 per cent) considered wages to be most important, followed by working hours/schedules (38 per cent), and work-life balance arrangement (31 per cent). Remote working – a more prevalent form of work due to lockdown during the pandemic – was listed as of the most important topics by 20 per cent of the negotiators under study. Asked about the topics where they disagreed on, Figure 6 confirms that wages are indeed the greatest source of disagreement among negotiators. Yet, this is not the case in all agreements: Figure 7 shows the topics were negotiators think they agreed upon the most. Here, there is greater variation. Still, wages are mentioned most often (40 per cent) – here as a source of common interest, followed by – again – working hours/schedules (28 per cent), and training and apprenticeships (24 per cent).

Figure 5. Most important topics during the negotiations (N=91)

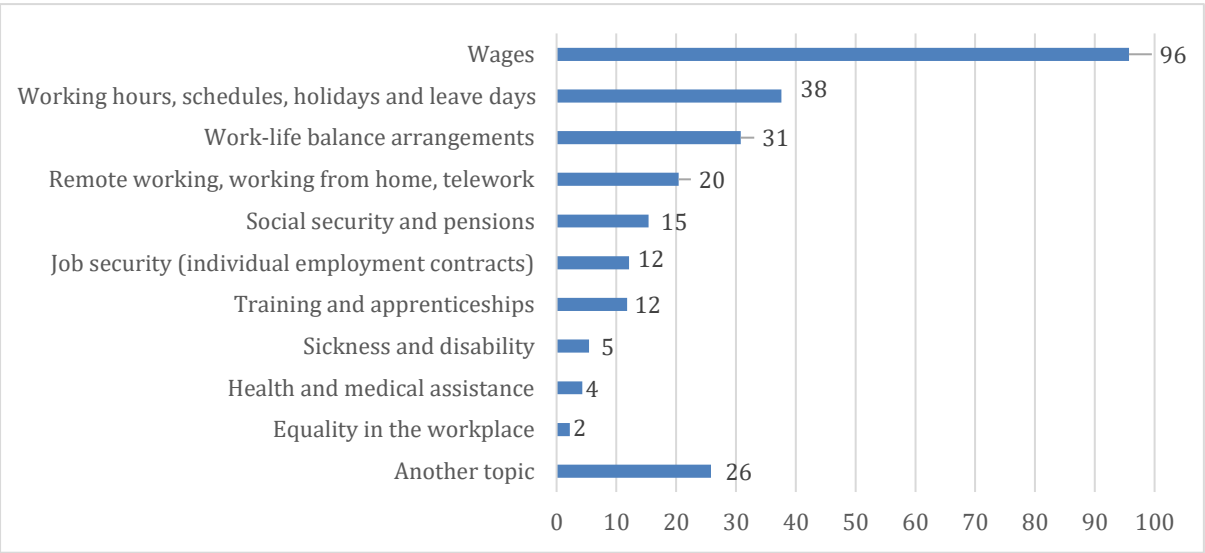


Figure 6. Topics where negotiators disagreed upon most (N=91).

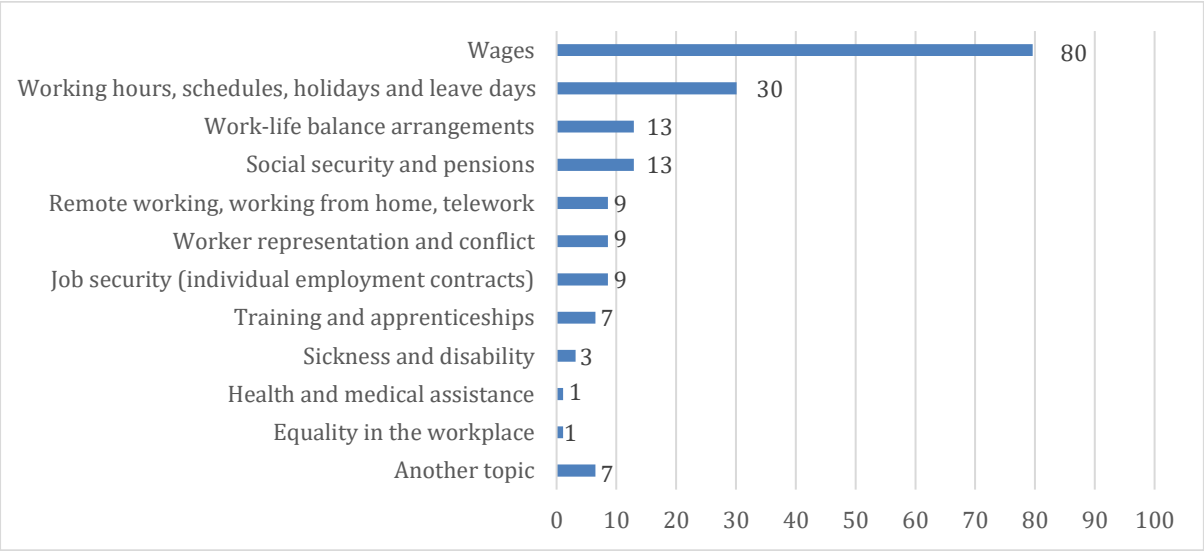
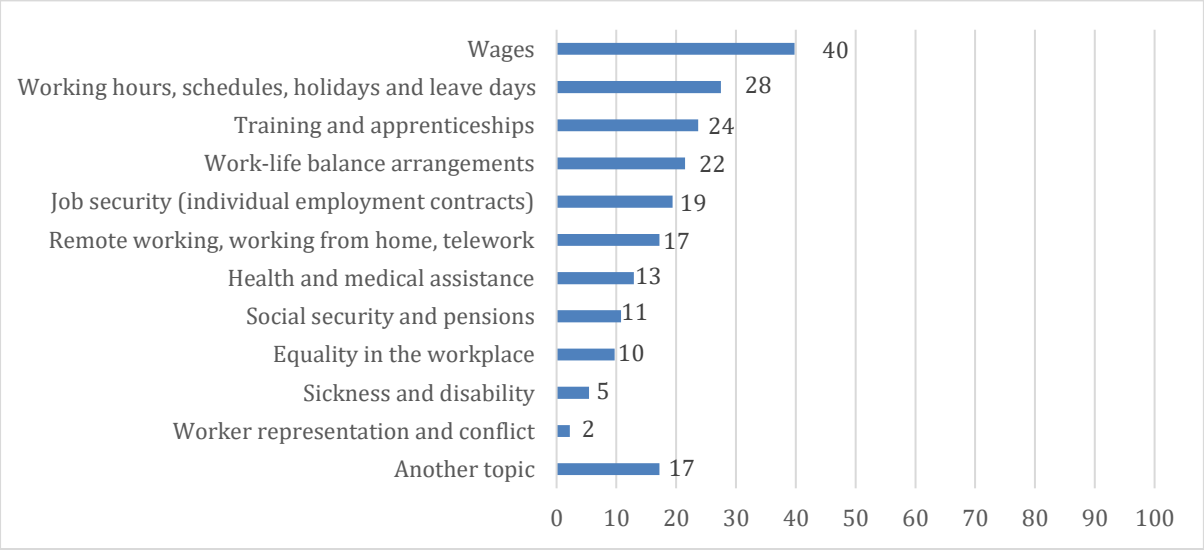


Figure 7. Topics where negotiators agreed upon most (N=91).



2.5 Perceptions of changes in CBAs

In this section we report on changes in the characteristics of renewed CBAs, as reported by negotiators. As such, this section the supplements the accompanying country report on the Netherlands with before and after comparisons of the content of CBAs (see Jansen 2023). For nearly all CBAs (94 per cent) negotiators report high wages compared to the previous agreement. Coverage – in terms of organizations/number of employees – has generally perceived to have stayed about the same (by 62 per cent of the negotiators). That is, only 19 per cent report the coverage rate to have increased, and even fewer negotiators (10 per cent) report coverage to have decreased. Also the number of signatories is perceived to be rather stable (by 88 per cent) during the covid19 pandemic. To explore whether more complicated negotiations ("*To what extent did the covid19 pandemic make it more difficult to reach an agreement*"), are associated with disparate renewal outcomes, the mean values (not shown) for the ease of negotiation were compared across the categories of the items in Table 2, but no statistically significant (i.e., $p<0.5$) differences were found.

Table 2. Perceived changes in renewed CBAs compared to the previous CBAs (N=87).

	Decreased	Stayed the same	Increased	Don't know Don't want to say
Wages	0	2.3	94.3	3.4
Coverage	10.3	62.1	19.5	8.0
Number of Signatories	5.7	88.5	3.4	2.3

3.5 The Industrial Relations Climate

In this section, we delve into the relationships between social partners during the COVID-19 pandemic. We interviewed negotiators about the quality of their relations at the time of negotiations to renew collective bargaining agreements during the crisis. According to Figure 8, the relationships between social partners in the Netherlands are generally considered (very) good, as reported by 64% of negotiators. Only a small minority (9%) indicated that the relations were (very) bad. Furthermore, there is little indication that relationships between social partners worsened during the pandemic. Figure 9 shows that the majority of negotiators in the Netherlands believe that the quality of industrial relations has remained stable since the onset of the COVID-19 crisis. In fact, a larger percentage of negotiators (19%) observed an improvement in relationships compared to those who observed a deterioration (7%)

Figure 8. Quality of relations between social partners at the time of negotiations (N=87)

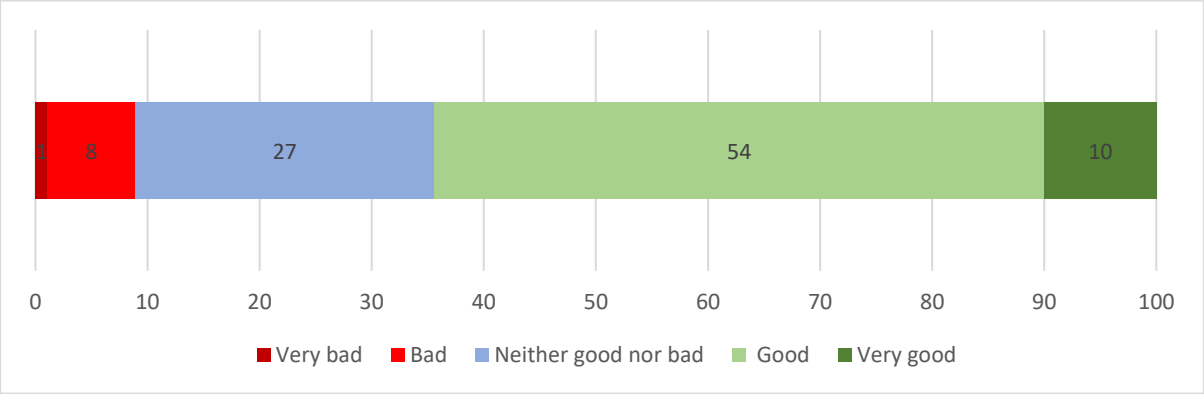
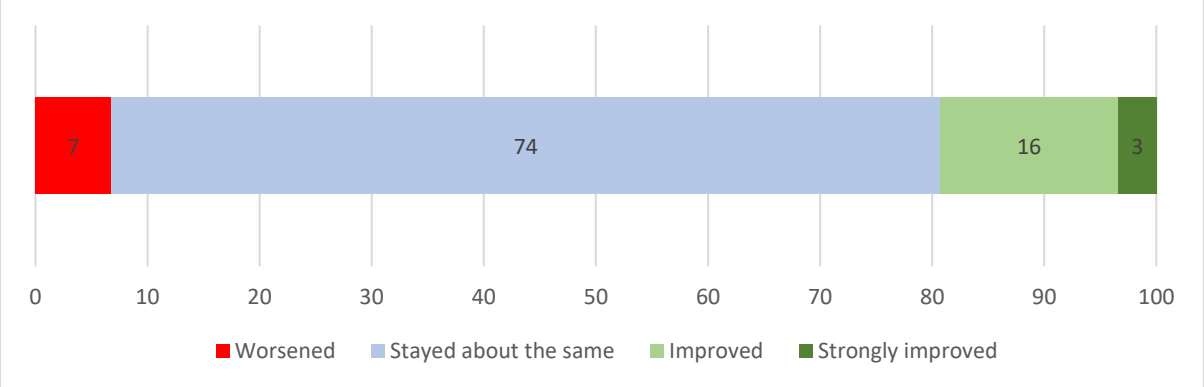


Figure 9 Change in the quality of relations between social partners since the start of the pandemic (N=87)

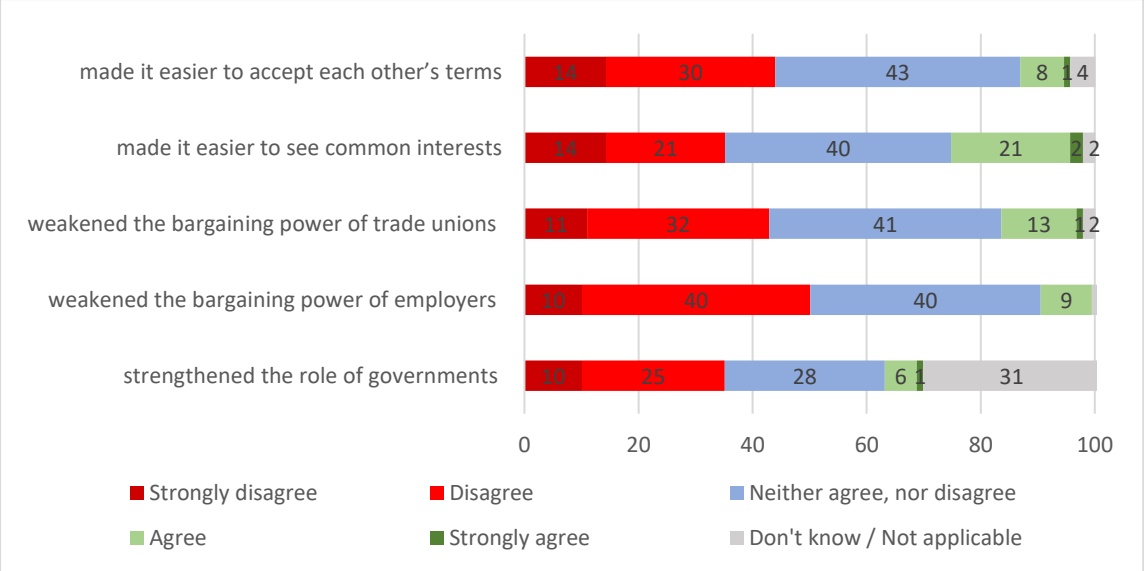


Next, we shift our attention to the wider industrial relations climate in the context of the Covid19 pandemic, rather than specific CBA negotiations. According to the results presented in Figure 10, negotiators did not think that the pandemic made it easier for different parties to accept each other's terms. In fact, a larger proportion of negotiators disagreed (44%) than agreed (9%) with this statement. Similarly, more negotiators disagreed (35%) than agreed (23%) that the pandemic made it easier to see common interests.

Regarding the perceived bargaining power of different social partners, the results show that most negotiators did not think that the pandemic weakened the power of trade unions and other employee representatives. In fact, only 14% of respondents thought that the pandemic had such an effect. Most negotiators either disagreed with this statement (42%) or had a neutral opinion (41%). The same pattern can be observed regarding the perceived bargaining power of employers and employer organizations. Only 9% of negotiators thought that the pandemic weakened the power of employers, whereas half of negotiators (50%) (strongly) disagreed with this statement, or had a neutral opinion (40%).

Finally, respondents did not think that the pandemic strengthened the role of government in negotiations. The group that disagreed with this statement (35%), or had a neutral opinion (28%), was larger than the group that agreed (7%). Additionally, for 31% of respondents, the statement on the role of government was either unapplicable or they did not know.

Figure 10. The covid19 pandemic impact on relations between social partners (N=91)



As part of our assessment of the quality of industrial relations, we included questions about strikes related to the Covid19 pandemic. Respondents were asked if there were any instances of strikes or other forms of industrial action during negotiations, and if so, whether they were directly or indirectly related to the pandemic. In an open field, respondents provided elaborated answers to these questions.

Out of the negotiators involved in renewed CBAs, 21 indicated that strikes or other forms of industrial action occurred during pandemic negotiations across 16 different CBAs. However, it is worth noting that strikes are relatively rare in the Netherlands (Jansen, Sluiter, and

Akkerman 2016), and during the first year of the pandemic, Statistics Netherlands reported only 9 strikes in 2020, which is less than half the number compared to the pre-Covid period.

Of those who reported strikes, only 2 respondents indicated that the strike or action was directly related to the pandemic. Meanwhile, 4 respondents indicated that the strikes or actions were indirectly related to the pandemic. Hence, most reported strikes had no relationship with the pandemic.

Table 3. Industrial actions and the relationships with the pandemic

Relation to the pandemic	Example text fragment
Directly	• ""the pandemic was used as an excuse for not being able to achieve a proper pay rise" (trade union representative, Netherlands)
Indirectly	• "The pandemic made [our sector] into crucial businesses. This made the contrast between employers' wage offer and employee greater and more visible" (trade union representative, Netherlands) • "the pandemic led to financial uncertainty and hence failure to deliver and thus actions" (employer representative, Netherlands)

It is important to consider that as the pandemic is now over, we may see a catch-up effect in strike activity, especially since wages cannot keep up with rising inflation. Such an understanding of the aftermath of the covid19 crisis did not emerge from our survey data, and thus should be studied in future research.

3. Conclusions

This report draws on survey data among trade union and employer negotiators in The Netherlands. The analysis presented aim to shed light on the question whether and to what extent the Covid19 crisis affected the renewal process of collective agreements in the Netherlands. The results show that negotiators in the Netherlands generally believed that the Covid19 pandemic had an impact on the collective agreement negotiation process. About half of them felt that it made negotiations more difficult, while only a small percentage thought it made negotiations easier. The majority of negotiators believed that the pandemic was important, but not the only factor influencing negotiations. Negotiation talks were not strongly affected in terms of frequency, with most talks still being held monthly or weekly, and negotiations were still mostly held offline with occasional online sessions. Yet, quarantine measures hindered the availability of negotiators, which also appear to have made negotiations more difficult.

In this report we also looked at the economic context in which negotiations took place. The economic context of negotiations was affected by the pandemic, with many negotiators reporting a decrease in revenue and interruptions in production or service delivery, which could have made negotiations more difficult. However, the negotiators' perceptions of economic changes and support packages did not significantly affect the ease or difficulty of negotiations.

Wages were considered the most important topic during negotiations, followed by working hours/schedules and work-life balance arrangements.

Also looking at the wider industrial relations climate and power relations between social partners, this report Found that the COVID-19 pandemic did not facilitate easier acceptance of differing terms during negotiations nor did it foster a shared understanding of common interests amongst negotiators. Moreover, there was no perceived shift in the bargaining power of trade unions, employers or governments due to the pandemic.

Hence, overall, negotiators in the Netherlands did not view the impact of the pandemic as overwhelming, but they did acknowledge that it had some effect on the negotiation process. The pandemic may have highlighted the importance of online negotiations and the ability to negotiate effectively under adverse social and economic conditions.

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