Makers en stakers. Amsterdamse bouwvakarbeiders en hun bestaansstrategieen in het eerste kwart van de twintigste eeuw
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Summary

According to Charles Tilly, the purpose of social history is to study the links between large structural changes and alterations in the character of routine social life, and this is what I have tried to do. The Amsterdam building trade had a lot to offer here, albeit we are concerned, of course, with a concentration of male workers. A major structural change in the industry occurred in the 1870s, when capital, competition and the market principle came in. This had a series of effects which interacted rather like cogs in a machine. The work itself changed, as did the remuneration basis. Unemployment was now a constant threat, and the self-respect of some categories of building workers was endangered. The relationship between masters and journeymen changed, and trade unions and employers' associations came into being. Against this background, workers and their families had to make choices. How were they to provide themselves with a livelihood and how would they cope with risks such as unemployment and sickness? Would they join a trade union, and if so, which? The family budget played a major role in these decisions, but aspects such as honour and self-respect were also at stake, and this is why particular occupational groups made different choices. Below I look at the machinery outlined above in more detail: I hope this will make the picture clear.

The building industry and the rise of the market economy

Before the 1870s houses were usually built to order. A master carpenter and his journeymen set to work, hiring bricklayers, plasterers and painters and charging by the day. This resulted in good products but also in high costs for clients, who furthermore had no idea of what they were letting themselves in for.

It was because of this that a different system had been used since at least the seventeenth century for road-building and civil engineering, which usually involved large-scale public sector projects. Here a competitive tender system was used. Contractors had to tender a price for the work in advance, and the client usually selected the one with the lowest tender, who undertook to do the work for the agreed price. This shifted the risk from the client to the contractor, and competition ensured that

the price was kept to a minimum. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries tendering was increasingly used for large buildings as well.

House-building, however, was the largest sector, and there the tender system was rarely used in the mid-nineteenth century. But there was a more fundamental change on the way: speculative building. An important prerequisite for this was met in the 1850s with the advent of the mortgage system. Once that was in place someone could build a property without having capital of their own.

Speculative building is only worthwhile, however, if there is sufficient demand, and this was the case in the 1870s, when there was a population explosion in Amsterdam and the newcomers needed houses to live in. The result was a building boom. Speculative builders put up whole blocks of houses, which with a bit of luck were sold at a profit. The new entrepreneurs usually built with borrowed money. Land speculators and mortgage companies often took the initiative and employed building firms to do the work. This was the beginning of the speculative or jerry-building boom, with houses being built by firms which had no capital behind them and were constantly on the verge of bankruptcy. In the resulting competitive, commercial atmosphere, the remainder of the industry switched over almost entirely to the tender system.

All this had far-reaching consequences for the industry. Because of the competition and the low margins there was a tendency to keep costs down as far as possible, and this had a number of effects:

- Both contractors and speculative builders had an interest in keeping wages as low as possible: the lower they were, the more chance the firm had of surviving and making a profit.
- The bosses tried to maximize the amount of work done by their workers in two ways, by paying them on a piecework basis and imposing tighter discipline. It worked: the workers did indeed work much harder.
- Builders sought ways of increasing efficiency, resulting in mechanization and division of labour. Carpentry factories and sweatshops were set up to manufacture prefabricated elements. There was also a financial benefit to be had by separating easy and difficult work so that lower wages could be paid for the less skilled work. The result was an increasing number of trades and specializations.
- As soon as they had finished work on a project the workers were dismissed. The trades that earned their living mainly from new building, e.g. bricklayers, hodmen, plasterers and navvies, generally worked for their employers on a casual basis. Other trades, e.g. carpenters and painters, did repair and maintenance work as well as new building, and were often permanently employed by carpenters’ or painters’ workshops, so they were less affected by the hard conditions obtaining in speculative building.

The connection with the money market made the building industry cyclical, as building workers were constantly reminded. The ups and downs of the economy meant that there were good times and bad times in daily life. Piecework could produce excellent earnings in good times, as in the 1870s and the immediate aftermath of the First World War. At such times, if a building worker wanted to earn a lot of money he worked
hard, and if he didn’t need so much money he didn’t work so hard. Some workers could afford to work only three days a week in the 1870s, for instance. In periods of boom workers had an effective weapon against employers, shortage of labour, which enabled them to have things their own way to a large extent in wage negotiations and on site.

If the economy was not flourishing, however, the less agreeable aspects of the new era came to light. There was a surplus of building workers, so the bosses could more or less impose their will with the old adage ‘people like you are ten a penny’. This affected the piecework rates. The workers had to work long and hard to earn an acceptable weekly wage. They also had to obey the rules increasingly being laid down by the employers: fixed working hours, no drinking on the job, no ‘natural breaks’ etc. Skilled workers sometimes had to swallow their pride and make do with unskilled work. Even a small increase in interest rates could make speculative building unprofitable, as happened e.g. in 1907 and 1908. That meant unemployment and increasing financial insecurity across the board.

On the other hand, the expansion of Amsterdam in the 1870s and later created more work than the local workforce could handle, with the result that many building workers were migrants, often from Brabant or Friesland. Generally from small, well-organized communities, they now found themselves in a completely different situation. They compensated for their feeling of rootlessness by forming fresh ties among their neighbours and fellow workers, the latter sometimes in the form of official organizations. Groupings and group cultures formed in the new world of the building workers, determined mainly by the specific circumstances of the trade. Casual jobs, periodic unemployment and a low level of education sometimes seem to have given rise to a ‘resistance culture’. Some workers felt the need to oppose the status quo, and this sometimes went hand in hand with noisy meetings and violence, but also with drinking and other irregularities at work. It was mainly the casual, unskilled workers who took Saint Monday off, and these were the ones who felt attracted to the syndicalist trade union movement as a resistance movement. Skilled workers with permanent jobs are more commonly found in the social democratic unions: they seem to have more of a ‘culture of adaptation’, which resulted in their embracing the value system of the upper strata of society. Most workers distrusted all trade unions, however, and remained unorganized.

The choices they made often had to do with a sense of ‘honour’ or ‘respectability’—a motive in the lives of male workers that should not be underestimated, in our opinion. The skilled workers with permanent jobs had more opportunity to maintain their self-respect than their casually employed, less skilled fellows. They had less unemployment, for example. Being jobless was a far from enviable situation: not being able to earn your family’s daily bread with your own hands detracted painfully from a man’s feeling of self-respect. No man liked to be seen at the pawnbroker’s, let alone be visited by the poor relief. For the wife often the only real option was to go out to work herself, which both spouses felt to be shameful: it just wasn’t right, and this feeling became even stronger in the 1910s and 1920s.
Also, workers in new building were generally treated with less respect than staff of the carpenters' and painters' workshops. Foremen used verbal aggression to spur them on. Piecework offered little opportunity to produce good-quality work, even where the worker was skilled enough to do so. Toilets and drinking water were often not supplied, let alone site huts. For the carpenters and painters it was different, at least for some of them. They were close to their bosses and sometimes worked their way up the ladder with them. When doing repair or maintenance work they would themselves visit customers and had to behave nicely. Their skilled work was valued, and they had opportunities for social climbing: not a few carpenters eventually made it to the level of boss, draughtsman or site foreman. In new building carpenters thus played a leading role: they read the plans and — literally — drew the lines for the bricklayers to follow. Such things yielded job satisfaction and pride, at least among the carpenters; the bricklayers were sometimes not so happy about working 'under' a carpenter.

Those whose work and home lives gave little cause for self-respect had to preserve it in other ways. Resisting the bosses and the status quo was one way, for instance by joining a revolutionary trade union or going on strike: bricklayers, hodmen and navvies did this a lot more than carpenters and painters. There were also less obvious, more unconscious forms of resistance, such as drinking on the job, cutting corners wherever possible, or behaving aggressively towards the boss, and here again we find the unskilled casual workers in the lead.

The advent and development of organized labour and employers' associations

Whereas the supply of and demand for building workers had been more or less balanced in the past, now there was an imbalance with every cyclical change in the economy: one time labour was a scarce commodity, another time there was a surplus. Also, the tendency of employers to keep wages down was increasingly apparent. The obvious solution was to form a 'cartel': joining forces enables those selling their labour to command better prices. By creating an artificial shortage in a firm, for instance, they could drive the price up. In other words, by striking or threatening to strike, workers were in a position to force employers to improve terms of employment. This, however, requires organization, informal or formal. Over the years the formal variety — the trade union — turned out to have its advantages.

But trade unions were more than just sales cartels for labour; they had at least two other functions, depending on the union in question. The first was to act as a resistance organization. The second was to provide insurance so as to reduce the financial insecurity of their members. Two movements developed in the early part of the twentieth century, the syndicalist movement, where the resistance function predominated, and a new social democratic wing, whose main aim was to represent members' interests. There were also the religious-based trade unions, but these were not numerically significant in Amsterdam, and they really only differed from the social
democratic unions in their religious leanings and a somewhat more reticent attitude when it came to making demands on employers.

The social democratic unions' aim was to be pragmatic, professional and efficient. They saw it as their main function to improve terms of employment, and this was best achieved by negotiating with the employers; the strike weapon was available as a threat, but they preferred not to use it. If necessary, however, they had to be able to fight and win, which is why they set up strike funds to provide their members with income during a strike. Another aim was to reduce their members' financial insecurity: they set up funds for this purpose which guaranteed their members benefits in the event of sickness, unemployment and death. The insurance schemes also served to encourage loyalty, to avoid excessive membership turnover. Wherever possible the social democratic unions had salaried administrators and a central management, whom the members were expected to follow without too much protestation.

The syndicalist movement, according to its ideology, was supposed to work towards a general strike with the aim of overthrowing the current regime. A new society would then be established in which the unions would own the labour resources and control production. To achieve this, workers needed to practice by going on strike a lot, and it was important that they should hand over as little power as possible to representatives and administrators. Although most members will have been oblivious of the finer nuances of syndicalist theory, there was a clear spirit of resistance in the syndicalist unions. They struck whenever they could, not only to gain some small benefit but also to enjoy the 'wonderful comradely feeling of struggle'. It was left to the members to take the initiative, as an offshoot of the 'direct action' strategy. Over the years syndicalist theory and day-to-day practice came into conflict to some extent, because of the following.

The first time the unions went into action to negotiate an improvement in terms of employment this was seen as the starting signal for a race between workers and employers to organize which did not finish—for the time being, at least—until the early 1920s. The movement 'towards greater unity' proudly described in many trade union histories was not an independent phenomenon: union mergers and partnerships need to be seen in the context of growing cooperation between employers and the rise of employers' federations, as developments in the Amsterdam building trade between 1890 and 1920 convincingly show. In fact there were two shifts taking place, from occupation-based to industry-based and from local to national. It all started when the unions and ad hoc groupings of workers in various companies began to act, as we have said, as 'sales cartels for labour'. Various groups of workers made worthwhile gains by putting a knife to the boss's throat, as it were, in individual firms. The employers had only one way of countering this threat, by setting up an association of bosses which agreed terms of employment and could respond to any strike, in theory, with a lock-out. This resulted in the creation of an organizational system able to reach collective agreements at local level. After the introduction of the Contracts of Employment Act of 1907, collective agreements soon became the approved way of getting together to lay down terms of employment for a particular period.
The increased power of the employers’ associations then led to partnerships between trade unions at local level and mergers between unions representing different occupations, since if one occupational group took action, they faced the bosses from the whole of the building industry. The bosses in turn responded with more far-reaching partnerships, such as those between contractors and employers in a particular branch of the building trade, e.g. painting or bricklaying. Meanwhile, on the workers’ side most of the national organizations had come into being: one of their aims was to prevent employers involved in local disputes bringing in strike-breaking labour from outside. The result, of course, was that the bosses started collaborating at national level. They even came up with the idea of national collective agreements, and achieved this aim in 1920, thus putting an end, for the time being, to the race to organize.

The social democratic unions were quite happy to play this game, even if some occupational groups, in particular the carpenters, were initially not so keen on merging for reasons of status. The syndicalist movement had problems of a different kind. Its principles were increasingly coming into conflict with day-to-day practice. In effect, the rise of the employers’ associations killed off the syndicalist movement, whose main weapon, the direct-action strike, became less and less effective against the organized employers. Nor were they properly equipped for a longer, larger-scale conflict with the bosses: they had to support their strikers with ad hoc fund-raising campaigns, since a strike fund went against their principles. Their fund-raising efforts were not very successful as a rule, and the strikers got into difficulty after a while, making a general strike an increasingly nebulous prospect.

On top of this, the rise of the employers’ associations cleared the way for collective agreements, facing the syndicalist unions with the problem of how to approach this system, which, again, went against their principles. Should they ignore it, and thus render themselves impotent, or join in and let their influence be felt at the negotiating table? The problem was, once a collective agreement had been entered into with the backing of a syndicalist union, there was not much point in supporting strikes against the employer, and this was a big drawback for an organization whose raison d’être was conflict.

The syndicalist movement struggled with another problem, too, whether to offer their members insurance. With unemployment a regular occurrence there was a demand for it, but on the other hand it was not very conducive to the organization’s militancy. Also, the funds would have to be managed centrally, which was against the principle of self-help. This principle was coming under pressure anyway as the organizational problems gradually called for professional administrators. During the First World War, however, when the government showed itself willing to contribute to the unions’ unemployment funds, the pressure to introduce insurance became very great.

In a word, the syndicalist unions had to choose between watering down their principles and being marginalized. To begin with they opted for the former: in the 1910s they appointed salaried administrators and brought in insurance, and the National Federation of Building Workers (LFB) participated in collective agreement negotiations. The LFB thus went a long way in the direction of the social democratic trade union movement and lost a lot of its syndicalist character. Around 1922 it returned to its radical
roots, but at the expense of a dramatic fall in membership and relegation to the margins of the labour movement. In the long run the resistance aspect as such did not appeal to many workers.

Individual survival strategies

Most building workers lived in families and earned their livelihoods and consumed in this context. The man was the principal breadwinner and the family had to get by on his earnings if at all possible. Children, however, provided additional income from about the age of fourteen. The wife only went out to work in an emergency, as a rule. As time went by this happened less and less: by the 1920s working-class wives working outside the home had become relatively rare.

When the economy was going through a difficult period a building worker’s earnings were just enough to provide the basic needs of a family, shelter and food, but homes were not exactly luxurious and meals consisted of not much more than bread and potatoes. In good times the family could afford meat, eggs and dairy produce, perhaps not every day, but regularly nevertheless. The general trend was upward: families were a little better off after each fluctuation in the economic cycle. In the early twenties most building workers were decidedly well-off compared with most other workers, but this was an unusual situation.

Clearly, family budgets on the whole did not permit any extravagances. Families were rarely able to save, for instance. They lived on the verge of poverty, constantly having to make choices: trade union membership, for example, could mean there was no meat on the table, and vice versa. Analysis of family budgets shows why strikes were regarded with fear and trepidation in many families, since any loss of income meant misery. The constant financial insecurity was a very disagreeable aspect of working-class life. True, families had a repertoire of emergency measures they could take if the breadwinner lost his job, but the effects were none too pleasant. The wife went out to work, usually as a cleaner. They borrowed money from relatives and friends, where this was possible. Neighbours and relatives helped in other ways, for instance by donating some of their own food. The family bought on credit if the shopkeeper would let them. And if things got really bad, they would pawn household effects or jewellery. As a last resort there was poor relief, but the administrators saw to it that every other possibility had been exploited first. The poor relief visitors would ask relatives whether they could help and check with the neighbours whether members of the family were breaking the rules by going out to work. This was not exactly calculated to raise one’s spirits. Thus unemployment meant spiritual anguish as well as material misery. The family’s self-respect was affected in all sorts of ways.

The risk could be alleviated somewhat by taking out insurance with the trade union, but this meant paying premiums and dues, which had to come out of the family budget. Nor were the benefits exactly generous: they were just enough to keep body and soul together, certainly no more. Most building workers consequently opted not to insure against unemployment unless the terms were particularly good. And this could only
be the case if the government contributed. Government intervention was important to the living conditions of the building workers, in fact. The Municipality of Amsterdam exerted positive pressure on terms of employment from as early as the 1890s. Central government introduced more and more social legislation, gradually reducing the financial insecurity.

Collective survival strategies

In our study we focused on trade unions and strikes, the main forms of organization and collective action. As far as the unions were concerned, only a minority of building workers saw some point in them, but from 1909 the total membership did increase. Around 1920 some unions even achieved organization rates of over fifty percent. After this there was a sharp fall again, and the 1920 level was not reached again until the thirties.

Analysis of individual survival strategies helped us to see why the unions had only a moderate appeal: a lot of people thought the money spent on dues could be spent on something more useful. This was particularly the case with wives, who, being responsible for managing the domestic finances, were the ones faced with the problems of budgeting. And there were other good reasons for a lot of women not to be in favour of unions: not only did they deprive wives and children of the valued presence of their husbands and fathers, after union meetings the latter would often arrive home late and inebriated.

There was also cause to doubt the value of the unions. Did they not cause more trouble than they were worth? Take strikes, for instance: if these got out of hand countless working-class families were left without income. Some found the unions too 'socialist': they stirred up rebellion, sowed discontent or were suspect for other reasons. Others simply had no need of them, since they maintained good relations with their bosses and earned a reasonable, regular living. And then, of course, there were those who came along for a free ride, arguing that the unions could do useful work without their membership. To put it in a nutshell, unions were not the way most working-class families chose to improve their living conditions.

Those who did become members of the Amsterdam building unions did so for various reasons, which we can divide into three complexes.

1. They could be acting from rational, political motives, believing that the union was a useful tool for achieving better terms of employment.
2. They could be joining for more emotive reasons, because they felt at home in the culture the union offered – because of the social contacts, the conviviality or other typical traits of social clubs. Others joined a union because they felt the need to oppose their bosses, or society as a whole: these were best served by the syndicalist unions.
3. They could be acting opportunistically, wanting to obtain some concrete benefit from membership, preferably immediately. This caused a large turnover of members. Workers joined when there was a period of unemployment in the offering,
only to leave again once the danger had passed. The attraction exerted by the insurance funds was evident in 1920 and 1921, when the government made a substantial contribution to benefits under the Unemployment Insurance Emergency Act. The syndicalist unions had the largest influx of members because these workers were making a rational choice, opting for the unions with the lowest dues.

Any particular individual may well have had several reasons for joining a union, of course, but it is reasonable to assume that not so many workers were class-conscious in terms of the Marxist terminology. Building workers who joined a union were in the minority and only a proportion of them did so on the basis of reasoned convictions.

The syndicalist and social democratic wings of the movement attracted about equal numbers of members in Amsterdam, but the picture in the various occupational groups varied. Those who worked on a casual basis in new building were most attracted to the syndicalist unions. The casual nature of the work probably played a part in this: rates often had to be negotiated, and the quality of the piecework done was the subject of discussion from time to time, resulting in conflicts which got out of hand. These workers had to act quickly to improve their terms of employment, too, as their time on a project (and thus the length of their jobs) was limited, as a rule. This made the direct-action strike as practised by the syndicalist unions an appropriate form of action.

The syndicalist unions were dominated by the least skilled workers. In 1918, 98% of organized navvies were in syndicalist unions, as against 88% of hodmen. Eighty percent of organized bricklayers were in syndicalist unions: although they were regarded as skilled workers in the trade, they were not exactly known for their literacy. The situation was reversed among the skilled workers (who generally had permanent jobs): 81% of carpenters and 65% of painters were in social democratic unions.

The workers in new building also took a leading role in strikes. Hodmen and bricklayers went on strike about five times more often than carpenters and painters, and plasterers and navvies between three and four times more often. This finding should by now come as no surprise: strikes had more chances of success in the new building sector. The builder had taken on a job he had to complete within a particular time. If there was a large enough margin in the contract price he would be inclined to give in to the demands quickly, since every day that work was at a standstill cost him money. The boss was also relatively remote (literally, not socially) from the workers, so his worries were certainly not those of his employees. This was not the case in a carpenter's or painter's workshop, especially a small one. The master and journeymen knew one another. Hostile action, e.g. striking, was not such an obvious course to take, and the chances of success were less. Profit margins were smaller, and any wage rise was structural since employees had permanent jobs. So the master would think twice before putting wages up, and workers were generally prepared to accept lower wages, since they did not have to cope with periods of unemployment – something which was worth a lot to them.

Workers who had recourse to strikes were small in number; the bulk of workers rarely if ever went on strike. Most conflicts were direct-action strikes with the aim of making quick gains. More than fifty percent of strikes occurred spontaneously, and in over forty percent no union was involved. There is a clear link between the annual
strike rate and the state of the economy. In good times there was a reasonable chance of being able to improve one's position by making wage demands, as the bosses would usually give in quickly. Sometimes, however, they did not, and then the strikers had to choose whether to continue their action or go back to work. With hindsight we can see that the latter course of action was most sensible, since the longer a strike lasted the greater the likelihood that the workers would come off worse. A typical building strike in the first quarter of the century affected a single new building project and lasted no more than a few days. It was usually started by a small number of workers who saw a chance of forcing the boss to put their wages up.

But every so often a strike of this kind would degenerate into a longer-lasting, larger-scale conflict, as a result of a syndicalist union blacklisting employers or workers being locked out. This kind of strike caused a lot of misery among the workers. Building was a serial process: if the foundations had not been built the carpenters and bricklayers could not start work. Other workers besides the strikers would therefore have to lay down their tools, and no work meant no income. Consequently not all building workers were equally appreciative of strikes and those who caused them. Strikers were playing with fire, thought a lot of people, including the social democratic trade unions. The frequent striking of the syndicalist unions was sharply condemned, and the social democratic unions themselves used strikes only as a last resort.

Conclusion

Let us summarize once more. Producing for the market and obtaining contracts in a competitive environment – the situation that developed from the 1870s – created new relationships between bosses and workers.

The employers had to get their workers to work as hard as possible for the lowest possible wages, so they tightened up on discipline and introduced piecework. At the same time the work was simplified wherever possible, and workers on new building projects were dismissed as soon as their work was finished.

This created worse financial insecurity for workers, and they had to work harder, often in unpleasant conditions. Both developments could affect their self-respect. On the other hand their material circumstances improved, both when the economy boomed and, gradually, in a structural way.

The changed relationships between employers and workers led the latter to feel the need to organize on a formal basis: by presenting a united front to the bosses they found they could extract better terms of employment. Strikes were the weapon they used. They joined existing workers' associations or set up small unions. This development forced the bosses to work together as well, and they set up employers' associations. The result was a race to organize, ending in 1920 in the national collective agreement.

Trade unions served two other purposes: they tried to counter the increased financial insecurity with insurance schemes, and some unions met the need of certain groups of workers to express the frustrations their 'ignoble' lives entailed, a need felt most strongly among the unskilled casual workers. Skilled workers with permanent jobs
were better served by unions that represented their interests as effectively as possible vis-à-vis their employers.

Meanwhile the government was doing more to represent the interests of workers, partly thanks to the efforts of political parties representing labour. The government legislated not only on social security but also on employment and working conditions. Thus the financial insecurity gradually became somewhat less severe and workers were given some legal protection.

Most workers did not join trade unions. Membership cost money and they opted to spend the family budget on other things that gave more immediate satisfaction. Some workers had no need of a union, and others even disliked the way unions acted, partly because of the strikes which were inevitably associated with them: the larger conflicts could cause a lot of misery in working-class families.

This condensed summary is far too schematic and simplistic, of course, but it does allow us to see how a structural change in the production system affects labour relations, types of organization and the day-to-day lives of workers. As far as that is concerned I have to agree with Marx that the ‘foundation’ to a large extent determines the ‘superstructure’ (something building workers were only too well aware of). Conversely we see how developments are influenced by certain elementary human motives, such as satisfying material needs and the desire to be respected.

From all this we can conclude that labour, labour relations, working-class culture, labour organizations and the daily lives of working-class families can only be understood properly as they relate to one another. The task Charles Tilly has set social historians is an extremely worthwhile one.

2. Karl Marx, Zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie (Zurich 1934) 5.