Vakbonden en immigranten in Nederland (1960-1997)
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Summary

In the period after the Second World War, the Dutch economy recovered fairly swiftly. Reconstruction was so successful that some industrial sectors faced labour shortages. To address this problem, a system for the recruitment and employment of immigrant labour was developed, beginning in the mid-1950s. The Dutch government’s first official agreement regulating recruitment was concluded with Italy in 1960, to be followed by pacts with Spain (1961), Portugal and Turkey (1964), Greece (1966), Morocco (1969) and Tunisia and Yugoslavia (1970). The employers’ associations and the trade unions worked together with the public authorities in recruiting, importing and employing foreign workers to bolster the Dutch economy. Yet each of the three parties also had its own interests to pursue, interests that were to influence their attitudes towards immigration and immigrant workers.

This study focuses on the attitudes of the Dutch trade unions. In the course of the 20th century, trade unions in the Netherlands had grown into influential, powerful institutions that played a crucial role in the national socioeconomic decision-making processes. As such they were obliged to take a stand on labour immigration and to formulate policies relating to the newcomers, who were rapidly entering the workforce the trade unions were to represent. The primary aim of trade unions was to defend the individual and collective interests of workers against actions by employers or other authorities that could adversely affect their socioeconomic status. Since it was in the trade unions’ interest to organise as many workers as possible, the unions seemed the appropriate organisations to promote the interests of immigrant workers. This study analyses whether and how the trade unions indeed promoted those interests. The first main research question is as follows: What was the attitude of the Dutch trade unions towards immigration and immigrant workers in the period since the Second World War (with emphasis on 1960-1997)? To address this question I analyse and compare trade union policies on three levels: that of the trade union confederations, that of the individual member unions, and that of the shop floor. On the first level I investigate the policies of the three major Dutch trade union confederations — the social-democratically oriented Dutch Federation of Trade Unions (NvV), the Dutch Catholic Trade Union Federation (NKV) and the (Protestant-oriented) National Federation of Christian Trade Unions (CNV). In 1982 the NvV and the NKV merged to form the Federation of Dutch Trade Unions (FNV). For my analysis of the actions of member unions, I focus on the unions in the transport (in particular the railway) sector. Case studies at the shop-floor level were also conducted in that sector.
The second key question is: To what extent did the responses of Dutch trade unions differ from or resemble the policies of unions in other Western European countries? To address this, I compare the results of my analysis with findings from a parallel study comparing the attitudes of trade union confederations in seven countries (Federal Republic of Germany, Sweden, France, United Kingdom, Austria, Switzerland and the Netherlands) over the period 1960-1993 (Penninx & Roosblad 2000a).

Three major trade union dilemmas

To make systematic comparisons between the three levels of analysis and between the Dutch and Europe-wide findings, three major dilemmas that trade unions came up against in responding to the issue of immigration and immigrant workers were articulated (see also Penninx & Roosblad 2000b).

The immigration dilemma

A first dilemma was whether to resist the moves of employers to recruit immigrant workers to fill vacancies, or whether to cooperate. In some ways, unions feared that an influx of immigrant labour might damage the interests of indigenous workers by keeping wages low and propping up obsolete industrial sectors. They also feared the creation of a surplus labour force to which employers could turn during industrial disputes. In other respects, though, the unions realised that immigrant labour was needed to keep production going in certain sectors, at least in times of economic expansion. Moreover, trade unions had always upheld a tradition of international solidarity (at least verbally); overt resistance to immigrant workers (if such a policy were to be adopted) would betray that ideology.

The inclusion dilemma

A second dilemma arose after the immigrants had arrived and settled into society: should such (officially temporary) workers be regarded as an integral part of the trade union rank and file and be actively recruited as members, or should they be wholly or partly excluded from union representation? This question had both an ideological and a strategic component. Trade unions were well aware of the crucial importance of incorporating migrant workers into the unions. Excluding them would open a rift in the labour movement and that would weaken the unions’ negotiating position. Despite this, certain factions within the unions might still feel that incorporating migrant workers would threaten or clash with the interests of indigenous members.
The interests dilemma

If trade unions resolved the second dilemma in favour of incorporating migrant workers, thus acknowledging that indigenous and migrant workers share the same rights, a new dilemma then arose: should trade unions concentrate solely on the common interests of indigenous and migrant workers together and pursue general policies for all workers, or should they also stand up for the specific interests and needs of their migrant members, devising targeted policies to achieve material equality? In the former case, a union would risk acting unjustly by failing to make distinctions in cases that were not equivalent. Many migrant workers were in an unfavourable starting position, and if accorded the same treatment as indigenous workers their disadvantage might never be resolved. On the other hand, if a union undertook special efforts on behalf of its migrant members, the indigenous workers might feel slighted, or might even actively resist the special treatment of the migrants. The trade unions were faced with two alternatives, each of which entailed some negative consequences.

Outcomes of the dilemmas

Immigration dilemma

Through the first half of the 1960s, neither the trade unions nor the confederations opposed the recruitment and employment of foreign workers. They held that recruitment of foreign labour was a necessity to sustain maximum production. They did, however, voice concerns about the material interests of their 'own rank and file'. Hence, to prevent 'unfair competition' between immigrant and indigenous workers, they demanded equal wages for all. This policy of equality did, however, work to limit recruitment, since it increased the costs of employing foreign workers.

The initially positive attitude towards labour immigration began to alter as a result of the brief recession of 1966-1967. Prompted by this mini-crisis, the confederations pressed the government to restrict the numbers of immigrant workers. In the years that followed, the government introduced a series of measures to deter immigrants from entering the country without prior authorisation. During the 1973 oil crisis, the Dutch government spoke openly for the first time of the need to restrict labour immigration. Recruitment was curbed, and in 1974 it virtually came to a halt. This was to have little effect on the numbers of immigrants entering the country, though, given the continued influx of non-working dependants through family unification.

Inclusion dilemma

Although trade unions in the Netherlands and the other Western European countries have never formally excluded immigrants, that does not necessarily imply real inclusion. Indicators to assess the inclusion of immigrant workers are the degree of immi-
grant union membership, the numbers of immigrant representatives within the unions, and the extent to which immigrant interests were actually promoted. Although no fully reliable figures are available on immigrant membership in the Netherlands, it is estimated that only 10 to 15 per cent of all immigrant workers are unionised. Though this is lower than the overall rate of unionisation, union membership in the Netherlands as a whole is comparatively low (40 per cent in 1960 and 26 per cent in 1993). The study by Penninx and Roosblad (2000a) has suggested that degree of unionisation is not an adequate indicator of inclusion. It seems that in countries with a high general membership density, the rate of immigrant unionisation is high too, whereas countries with low overall membership exhibit low immigrant unionisation. This is irrespective of whether the unions in the countries in question have pursued inclusive policies. Unionisation thus seems more strongly determined by structural factors such as the sectors where immigrants work, the existence of compulsory membership arrangements (closed-shop systems) or unemployment benefit eligibility tied to union membership.

A more effective indicator of inclusion is the number of immigrant representatives within the trade unions. I found the numbers of immigrants in positions of power within unions (such as union officials) to be extremely low. During the 1990s, the FNV decided on special measures to improve the position of immigrants in the organisation. Although the numbers of immigrant trade union officials have grown slightly since then, immigrant representation is still nowhere near proportionate.

As regards the actual promotion of immigrant interests by trade unions, three domains can be distinguished: government policies, the labour market and the internal organisation of the unions. In the first domain, the Dutch trade union confederations took firm stands against proposed government regulations that were seen to violate the rights of immigrants, such as the 1975 Foreign Workers’ Bill (Wet Arbeid Buitenlandse Werknemers, WABW) — although this seldom led to a rift between government and unions. The confederations also strongly opposed xenophobia and rightwing extremism, often working with protest and action groups to combat discrimination and racism. In this way the trade unions manifested themselves as part of wider social movements.

As for promoting immigrant interests on the labour market, the second domain, the actions of trade unions were more nebulous and ambivalent. When the FNV and CNV first formulated their minority policies in the early 1980s, they devoted little attention to improving the labour market position of immigrants, despite their high rate of unemployment. It was not until the late 1980s that the trade union confederations began promulgating measures to boost immigrant employment. In 1990, labour and industry representatives forged an agreement in the Labour Foundation (Stichting van de Arbeid, or STAR) aimed at reducing the level of unemployment among immigrants to that of indigenous workers within five years. Two years later it was already clear that the plan was not being taken seriously by either employers or unions. Many employers failed to comply with its prescriptions, and in the collective bargaining process, unions gave far less priority to the agreements on ethnic minor-
ities than they did to their wage claims and to other primary employment conditions. As a result, many collective bargaining agreements on ethnic minorities were no more than vague declarations of intent. In this sense, the minority policies of the trade unions remained largely on paper.

In the third domain, the incorporation of immigrants in the organisational structures of trade unions, it emerged that although trade unions and confederations did create special facilities, such as advisory committees, to involve immigrants in their organisations, the minority groups still remained seriously underrepresented, both in the rank-and-file membership and even more so at executive levels and in other influential positions.

The interests dilemma

Once trade unions decide to incorporate immigrants, two strategies can be distinguished in their promotion of immigrant interests. Unions can either focus solely on the general interests of all workers, or they can take more account of the specific interests of immigrants. Little difference could be discerned in this respect between the strategies of the various Dutch trade union confederations. Both FNV and CNV proposed and introduced targeted policies and measures, such as education and training schemes, affirmative action plans or advisory bodies for immigrant members, all aimed at incorporating more immigrants into their activities and at improving immigrants' position on the labour market. More variation was apparent between the individual member unions, especially in the enforcement of confederation policies. The early 1990s, for instance, saw a glaring discrepancy between the civil servants' union (Abvakabo) and the industrial workers' union (Industriebond) within the FNV. Whereas the former introduced targeted minority policies in line with confederation goals, the latter explicitly rejected such measures, arguing that they would stigmatise immigrant workers and would not be opportune given the prevailing economic recession.

Explanatory factors

Four sets of factors are proposed and investigated here to explain the choices trade unions made in their policies towards immigration and immigrants. The first concerns the position of power that the trade unions occupy in society and in the national socioeconomic decision-making process. The assumption is that the more powerful a trade union is, the more effectively it can wield its influence to steer government policies, as well as policies of employers' associations, in directions favourable to the union. I applied several indicators to assess the power of trade unions. Trade unions were considered more powerful (at the national level) if they had a high degree of organisation; if they were not fragmented, but had a strongly centralised and unified union structure; and if they maintained strong ties with governing political parties.
The second factor involves conditions in the economy and the labour market. I presumed that in times of ample supplies of labour at the national level, trade unions would oppose further recruitment of immigrant labour, and that in times of labour shortage, unions would be under pressure to cooperate. Economic and labour market conditions might also have influenced the attitudes of trade unions in addressing the second and third dilemmas. At times of widespread unemployment, the competition (actual or presumed) between indigenous and immigrant workers might increase, making union policies of inclusion more difficult to maintain. In times of economic growth there would presumably be more room for special measures to improve the social and economic position of immigrants, such as language courses, education and training, or affirmative action.

The third factor relates to society as a whole. Social trends may have a strong impact on the attitudes of trade unions (just as such attitudes may strongly influence society). Trade union policies towards immigration and immigrants are influenced by factors such as public discourse, institutional arrangements, legislation, and key institutional actors like national authorities, churches or political parties. The ways such actors respond to immigration and immigrants are important considerations for trade unions to take into account.

The final proposed factor concerns the characteristics and the public perceptions of immigrants. Union acceptance of immigration and immigrants may vary according to the various categories of immigrants. Unions may be more sympathetic to immigrants from former colonies, immigrants from countries where unions hold similar ideologies, or immigrants perceived to be culturally similar to the indigenous population. Immigrants themselves may have characteristics that influence how able or willing they are to unionise. These include experiences with trade unions in their country of origin, their educational level, their legal status and their actual or expected duration of stay.

The above factors proved to account only partially for the variations in trade union attitudes. Attitudes also differed by level of analysis. The evidence for the hypothesis that trade union policies are influenced by economic factors was equivocal, and it appeared to vary by level of analysis: trade union confederations seemed less likely than individual unions or local branches to focus one-sidedly on the state of the economy to the neglect of social trends. In the early 1980s, for example, the confederations drew up their minority policies under the influence of changing government policies and the realisation that immigration would not be a temporary phenomenon. Those policies were introduced in a period of economic recession and rising unemployment. Measures to combat immigrant unemployment in the early 1990s were also adopted during an economic slump, and were initially rejected by the largest FNV union, the Industriebond. One argument was that the recession offered no latitude for such measures.

Comparison with other European trade union confederations showed that although their position of power may be an indicator of their effectiveness in influencing
socioeconomic decision-making processes, it does not predict the content or the direction of their policies on immigrant workers.

Little evidence emerged that immigrant characteristics such as their experiences with trade unions in their country of origin influenced their unionisation rates in the new country. The primary factor explaining variations in overall union membership, and in large part that of immigrant workers too, seems to be the institutional embeddedness of unions in the national context. Despite their widely comparable background experiences, for example, the unionisation rates of Turkish immigrants to the Netherlands appeared to be lower than those of Turkish workers in Germany or Sweden.

Discrepancies were evident between the policies formulated at the trade union and the confederation levels in the 1990s and their implementation on shop floors. The case studies described here give insights into the dilemmas that trade unions face in carrying out the measures they decide upon. Some shop stewards, for instance, perceived affirmative action policies as detrimental to their 'own' indigenous rank and file, especially in times of reorganisations or forced redundancies. Shop stewards who favoured minority policies themselves had a tough time defending and implementing the measures under such circumstances.