
‘Justice for Janitors’ goes Dutch: Organising and regulation as competing models?

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Introduction

- Context of Project: comparison of Netherlands, Spain and the UK,
 - Organising: Gaps in the literature
 - The Dutch model
 - Organising in the Netherlands: A case study
 - Impact and limitations
 - Organising and union renewal
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Organising: Gaps in the Literature

- Organising model as central feature of trade union renewal – or at least debates on this subject - in countries such as the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States of America
- Since the early 1990s emerged as a strategy for re-connecting the labour movement into its grassroots and into an alternative model of trade union based action
 - For some this represents a new version of trade unionism based on a social movement model which has a strong community dimension: however others have linked to a recruitment and even learning/partnership led model
 - ‘Bottom up’ approach where the link between the unions and workers develops through a new set of organisers and ‘activists’ who are specifically led by the union
- Debate has focused on the subject of what organising is, how it links with other trade union activities and what the outcomes are
- Debate has been relatively less concerned with how organising has developed, how it has been adopted across countries, its political (or indeed non-political features) and what it means in the context of national regulatory systems where trade unions have greater recourse to institutional roles and relations when compared to the Anglo-Saxon countries
- The debate seems fixated with process and form as opposed to content and political ideology

The Dutch Model of Industrial Relations

- 'Polder model': high degree of consensus, cooperation and coordination among responsible 'social partners' of organised capital, organised labour and the democratic state (Hemerijck, 1995) – renewal of corporatism during 1980s/1990s
 - In 2004 breakdown of social dialogue between unions and government over pension reform and early retirement
 - Strike action over reforms: forced government back to the negotiating table
 - After a month of negotiations unions accepted wage freeze for a softening of social security retrenchments
 - State (employer?) led-corporatism: means weakness of union position
 - State 'shadow of hierarchy' (Visser, 1998)
 - Trade union decline: 36.5% (1970) → 23% (2007) undermines representativeness of union federations
 - Weakness of recruitment and organising activities, particularly towards underrepresented groups and those working at the edge of the regulatory process or outside collective agreements
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Organizing goes Dutch

- From 2005 move towards organising as a way of renewing worker engagement and participation in the union movement
 - Unions influenced by success of SEIU and T&G campaigns
 - Role of key links and individuals in engaging with the international organizing debate
 - Emerging networks of activists
 - Gaps and high profile concerns around cleaning and outsourced work in low skill areas
 - Increasing realisation of new forms of migration

 - It has been argued that many engaging with organising and the 'lessons from London' responded to the fact that the 'FNV is facing the need to rethink its involvement at the local level' (Kloosterboer and Göbbels, 2005: 632)
 - The emphasis on 'social, equality' and 'welfare' rights seemed to miss a 'class' dimension (see Connolly et al, 2010)

- ~~But how does organising fit within a (mainly) corporatist or regulated model of IR?~~

Methods

- Paper focuses on the how organising emerged within the Dutch context and why
 - Discusses how a specific campaign brought together a range of new union constituencies and practices
 - Case study of an organising campaign in the cleaning sector drawn from wider research on union responses to migrant workers
 - Leverhulme Trust funded 3 yr project (2008-2011)
 - 50+ interviews with Dutch trade union officials/activists/members
 - Interviews with SEIU activists based in NL
 - Participant observation during organising campaigns
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Organising: A Case Study

- NL service sector union FNV Bondgenoten embraced organising
 - Organising appealed to a group of trade union activists who saw a moral and meaningful – and even dynamic - dimension to it in a context of institutionalised and sometime predictable approaches to employment relations
 - Leadership exchanges with SEIU
 - In 2004 SEIU launched international strategy to develop international links
 - Training of NL activists by SEIU – in US and in NL
 - Campaign to organise cleaners between 2007-2010 modelled on ‘Justice for Janitors’ campaigns in the US
 - Forms of action: shaming clients, direct action, prolonged strikes
 - Won concessions from employers through sectoral level collective agreement covering all cleaning workers in 2010
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Impact of Organising

- Revitalising membership participation and workplace unionism
 - December 2009 FNV Bondgenoten reported an increase in membership of 40,000. Its total membership was then 478.552, the highest number since 2001
- Developing union activism and new forms of activity:
 - mapping workplaces, new forms and spaces of engagement, publicity driven activities, shaming activity, reflecting on gains and involving new migrant activists, etc.
- Renewed focus on organising underrepresented groups
 - Spread of organising to other sectors (domestic workers, agriculture)
- Promoting structural, cultural change in the union movement
- Working alongside new migrant activists and supporting development initiatives
- Paralled – intentionally or not – by national diversity campaigns, female migrant ethnic minority leadership programme, and cultural and publicity campaigns on new issues and types of workers

The dimensions of organizing

- Organising as an **activity space** within which new initiatives and discourses could be developed
- Organising as a **social and political space** where new activist groups and younger individuals could coalesce and set up alternative networks and dialogues
- Organising as a **form of reflection** within the Dutch labour movement and between unions within the FNV
- Organising as a more bottom up driven **international relations** and form of networks and cross-national learning through types of new unionism
- ~~Not as 'engineered from above' as in UK context (apart from the innovative LON initiative) – see Holgate and Simms~~

Limitations/Challenges

- Internal tensions – organising brings in conflictual element (e.g. finance companies and subcontracted cleaning) plus short term and long term gains
 - Concentration around low-wage work – lack of take-up in more traditional sectors (e.g. nurses, ports and chemicals)
 - Sustainability of the approach – focused around deliverables but once achieved the need to establish institutional approaches to police agreements and deepen dialogue
 - The tensions between time frames between traditional social dialogue approaches and organising: the fact that social goods and rights which are institutionalised are the outcome of previous engagements and mobilisations in some cases, whilst the gains and means of organising or mobilising models are not sustainable without eventual forms of institutionalisation in the relation between employers and unions (a current UK debate)
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- Sustainability in terms of expectations generated and the challenge of 'down periods' in organising and explaining need to maintain vigilance of management
 - Issues of gaps between (a) growing racism/xenophobia within society in the light of the Dutch right (similar in part to the UK) and union 'mobilising models' and (b) formalised diversity models in terms of formal leadership/activity inclusion and new forms of organising – similar issues in the UK and Spain on how racism is addressed/engaged with
 - The absence of expansive union networks of migrant and minority ethnic and migrant activists within the labour movement
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Organising and Union Renewal

- The extent to which organising principles will be able to promote organisational changes in terms of structure, culture, and activity as well as the eventual effects of such changes on the Dutch Industrial Relations model, remain open to question
 - Organising as a way of transforming a trade union more broadly in its purpose and objectives is not a given – as a narrative of renewal and reconnection
 - *But* the introduction of the organising approach already constitutes an important novelty in the union debate – FNV affiliated unions increasing support and resources concentrated in organising
 - The SEIU, clusters of motivated activists and officers, and a new generation of leaders appeared to be forming a coalition of interest that is steadily creating a tapestry of cases, struggle and new organisational memories that can assist in broader renewal
 - Dutch unions have traditionally acted as agents of social regulation, with formal and informal agreements reached within corporatist bodies aimed at promoting economic competitiveness and social inclusion
 - Introduction of organising constitutes, using Schmitter and Streeck (1981) categories, a move from the 'logic of influence' to the 'logic of membership'
 - However, challenges emerge in terms of the new politics of organising, the manner in which diversity initiatives may be less mobilising and more managerial in some cases, the question of sustainability, the culture of regulation and reciprocal support between employers/management and unions in relation to organising.
 - This is a generic dilemma between mobilising forms and institutionalised forms (Le Queux, 2005)
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