

"No more being ground down for us"

Dutch cleaners up in arms

Dutch cleaners have been striking for over nine weeks to get a new collective agreement. Never in the Netherlands have so many cleaners been moved to direct action – apparently all thanks to unionization.

Pien Heuts
Journalist

A real parliament.
Dutch trade unions
have managed to free
cleaning workers from
isolation.
Image: © Rob Nelisse



1. A slogan created from the words "schoon" – Dutch for "clean" – and "genoeg" – Dutch for "enough", as in "enough is enough!".

It is May 2010, and 80-odd cleaners are contemplating their new collective agreement (CA) with pride and satisfaction. For the past two days, the small coastal town of Renesse-aan-zee in Zeeland (southern Netherlands) has been hosting the mould-breaking "cleaners' parliament". It is a victory celebration, obviously, but especially a gathering to map the way forward for the future. After months of labour action, they went on strike for nine weeks, finally winning their agreement at the end of April. "We fought hard for this victory", said a train cleaner member of the parliament. "It isn't just about the money; the main thing is that we have become visible, and we deserve the same respect and dignity as any other human being. We clean up other people's mess, but we won't be treated like dogs."

The cleaning workers grabbed the Dutch headlines earlier this year with TV news reports showing cleaners using cherry pickers to assault the headquarters of the cleaning giant CSU. Elsewhere, they brought Utrecht station, the main railway junction of Dutch Railways (NS), to a halt. For six days, 400-odd cleaners lived day and night in the concourse. When one striker was threatened with the sack, his colleagues mounted a media stunt, occupying the headquarters of a major publishing house, the Telegraaf Media Groep. The royal palace also had a visit from the cleaners.

The campaigners have found a surprisingly strong resonance with the Dutch population. Volunteers have been out collecting signatures and testimonials of support. Many politicians, footballers like former Barcelona star Frank de Boer, and Dutch celebrities have championed their demands for better

pay, respect, reimbursed travel costs, language training and implementation of the compulsory vocational training that was agreed in 2008. The ones losing face now that the public is taking up the cause of these people on the bottom rungs of the job ladder are mainly the big customers - the railways, the government and Schiphol Airport have all been named and shamed by the unions.

Frontline soldiers

Different nationalities, thousands of workplaces scattered nationwide, language barriers, temporary contracts and no tradition of labour withdrawal - hardly the best ingredients for mass labour action. But still, a group of 1400 activists managed to get grassroots action going. Unionization seems to be the key to it all (see inset, *Justice for Janitors*). FNV

confederation union leader Ron Meyer is in charge of the *Schoon Genoeg*¹ union membership drive. After a string of small-scale protest stunts, negotiations on the CA started in late 2009. Preferring a backseat role, Meyer gives full credit to the cleaning sector union members for a much improved CA. He keeps hammering home the point that the frontline soldiers are the ones who did all the work; and there he puts his finger on what unionization is all about – not the union as a problem-defining and –solving organization but the membership setting the course to take. Meyer has a very firm vision of union action: "For too long the union has viewed its members as consumers, and that hasn't encouraged them to get involved. In my view, the image of the union leader shepherding his flock is dead and gone. People have to be clued up on their situation, because they are the only ones who can get things done. Only they can stick up for their rights and go on the

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Worker-driven action forced employers to cave in after several weeks of strikes.
Image: © Rob Nelisse



front foot. You could liken the union to a sports centre. We supply the fitness equipment, but it's up to the individual to build up the muscles."

Muscles that are desperately needed. Working conditions in the cleaning sector are poor (see inset, *Modern slavery*). Cleaning workers in the Netherlands can join the FNV Bondgenoten, the biggest union of private sector industrial and service workers with over 480,000 members, including 15,000 in the cleaning sector. Since the strike, 1,000 cleaning workers have joined the union. The FNV is confident that its Decent work campaign will secure fixed contracts, decent pay and good working conditions for the 1.5 million workers who are on the bottom rungs of the job ladder. Last year, the cleaning sector spearheaded the *Schoon Genoeg* campaign, into which the union put millions in funding and a score of organizers.

Virgin soil

Ron Meyer tells how the campaign was developed, how contacts have been struck up in recent years with cleaners at hundreds of different locations. "We had to win them over. These people are fearful and suspicious, browbeaten by their employer, and may not want anything to do with the union. On the other hand, it's a good thing to sow seed in virgin soil. You can start out on a sound footing, and not be held back by a traditional union structure."

For the previous CA, Meyer had already noted that union activists could have free access to all workplaces. There was no record

Modern slavery

More than 150,000 people work in the cleaning sector in the Netherlands. They are a diverse mix of nationalities, men and women, young and old. Wages are low, so many people need two jobs. Working full-time, they earn barely more than basic welfare benefit, i.e., about what it takes to just keep body and soul together. Work hard and don't complain is the motto at the bottom of the job ladder. Employers are well-versed in how to take advantage of the vulnerability of cleaners who are often happy just to have work, fear being fired or losing their temporary contracts, or don't speak the language well enough to be able to fight back. The Dutch cleaning market is in the hands of five big firms – mostly multinational: Asito, ISS, Hago, CSU and Gom. An all-out price war has been raging since big accounts like Dutch Railways, Schiphol Airport,

government departments, banks and other big companies contracted-out their cleaning. Cleaning firms bid rock-bottom prices to win contracts, often below cost. If the normal hourly rate is 21 euros, the bid will show just 16 euros. A number of employers openly admit to being unable to actually carry out the tasks offered in the contract, which is why the number of hours' cleaning done is less than the number of hours agreed. Because the millions in annual profits have to be assured, and as labour costs make up 90% of a cleaning firm's costs, this is where the biggest savings are made. Whenever the contract changes, the cleaners have to do more work with fewer staff and for lower pay. For example: it used to be that an office of 300 square metres was the norm; today, a cleaner has to do double that. A Dutch cleaner has less than two minutes to clean a train toilet. A cleaning crew has ten minutes for an entire train.

Justice for Janitors

The Dutch campaign to unionize cleaning workers is based on a union strategy imported from the United States. In the 1980s, the SEIU union (Service Employees International Union) mobilised as many as 225,000 cleaning workers in thirty cities to get better pay and health insurance. Like the US union, the FNV confederation is having problems recruiting workers generally, and cleaners in particular. Increasing membership is not just a strategy for union survival, it is more a way of doing something about poor working conditions. But for that, the union needs a representative membership.

The organizing campaign means constantly being out in the field to identify problems, unacceptable situations, issues and questions raised by workers. The campaigners are also looking for potential members in mosques, churches and community centres. It is a strategy in which the union has to become an abiding feature of the worker's life.

The other idea with this very clear direct action aspect is to get an objective detailed picture of the sector: the number of workers, the problems, customers, businesses, shareholders, turnover, and so on. The aim is to give workers the responsibilities, resources and support they need to deal with the issues themselves. Natural leaders capable of carrying a campaign emerge at the different

organizing sites. They are the backbone of the movement and meet regularly in the "cleaners' parliament". The organizing strategy also puts a big focus on international contacts. Light-hearted protest stunts designed to catch media and public attention are vital to achieving the aims. Organizing is an ongoing process. The job is never done. In the United States, the organizing campaign met with a union-busting response, as union members were laid off, injured and intimidated. This is unlikely to happen in the Netherlands, where workers are in a stronger legal position and there is a culture of consultation between employers and workers. But the strike has had after-effects, both during and after, such as contracts not being extended for example.

More about labour action inspired by *Justice for Janitors*:

- Scandella, F. (2010) The cleaners revolt: new trade union strategies on behalf of the working poor in England, in Chabanet, D., Royall, F. (Eds) *Mobilising against marginalisation in Europe*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, p. 195-211.
- Waldinger, R. et al., *Helots No more: A case study of the Justice for Janitors Campaign in Los Angeles*, Working Paper Series of the Ralph and Goldy Lewis Centre for Regional Policy Studies, n° 15, University of California, Los Angeles, p. 1-25.
- Fantasia, R. et al. (2003) *Des syndicats domestiques : répression patronale et résistance syndicale aux Etats-Unis*, Raisons d'agir, Paris, 2003, 175 p.

of participants at such meetings. "That enabled us to keep up intensive contacts with the rank-and-file", he said, "but we also reach out to people through local community centres, churches and mosques. We want to get imams, pastors and priests actively involved in the next campaign. We have to form a broad social coalition where the struggle of cleaners and other low-income workers will occupy the foreground."

In late February, after light-hearted stunts that failed to get the employers at the negotiating table to improve their pay offer, the cleaners turned to the only means left to them: a strike. At that time, the plight of cleaners was known partly through a serious study done by the union, and it was also known that the employers were having a knife held to their throats by their customers, the result being contracts at bargain prices. The FNV opened a strike fund and 1400 strikers signed up.

"Like a big family, we roamed the country for nine weeks", says Judy Lock, an activist and cleaner at Schiphol. "We reacted

immediately to reprisals like summary dismissals or contracts that suddenly didn't get renewed, and in the evening, we were on the TV news again. We are immensely united, nobody can divide us. Every time we went back into negotiations, everyone seemed even more determined to keep on fighting. The employers were beside themselves."

Judy explains the cleaners' commitment to labour action by the fact that they understood that they could win by fighting, and because the activists made sure that the union was again visible on the ground. "People won't stand for being exploited in this way any more. Every human being wants to be respected. The cleaning sector is a form of modern slavery, but we have ourselves to blame for that. We have to stick up for what we want. In the past, we let the union do that. With this unionization strategy, I see the union more as a football club. To win, you have to work together flat out. It is a process that has to develop. In the upcoming negotiations for the CA in 2011, I'm expecting at least 4,000 workers out on the barricades."

Lively characters

Ron Meyer argues that one good thing about unionization is the realization that a union is a winning organization, composed of ordinary people on the ground. People who are not pigeonholed as working poor and disadvantaged, but as lively, impassioned, cheeky and characterful. "We knew it was a David and Goliath battle, so it was important to spread our forces around. With a vanguard of 1,400 cleaners, it worked very well. Whether on the radio, on TV, in newspapers or on the Internet, each cleaner told their story to the media persuasively, and calmly explained why they had had enough of being exploited. We were fighting like blindfolded boxers; fortunately, our opponent was weak and blind."

It took a nine-week strike for the negotiations to finally end up on 24 April 2010 in a new two-year CA, with the offer of a structural wage increase of 3.5%, whereas the employers had gone into the negotiations categorically refusing to discuss any pay rise. Workers can also take Dutch lessons during

their working hours, with a 750 euro completion bonus. The travel allowance issue was not resolved. It was planned to set discussions going in summer on a charter of good practices to be applied by employers and customers.

Hans Simons, who has headed the cleaning and business services employers' organization for the past year, is satisfied that a good outcome has been achieved on the CA. He stresses the importance of keeping workers in the cleaning sector by providing good working conditions given the future labour market shortage. When asked, he voices a belief in the importance of a stronger union. Simons is and remains a social democrat. He feels that the reason the dispute dragged on for so long was the gap between the pay offer and demands, the travel allowance which the union subsequently stepped back from, price competition in the sector and the change in union strategy.

"The traditional system of the top employers negotiating with the union has receded into the background. The unions have handed over power to the cleaners themselves, which is unusual in Dutch labour relations. That also has a drawback: it is questionable whether such a small group of strikers is really representative of the entire industry", says the employers' representative. But he still managed to give credit to the unions: "It is very important that they pointed out the workload and lack of social recognition of 1.5 million workers on the lower rungs of the job ladder. Before long, we will be getting around a table with unions and customers to draw up a charter of good practices for employers and customers. I think respect and consideration count for more than a quarter percent either way."

Victory or not, for the cleaners, the bell for the next round rang long ago. Programmes have been developed in Renesse. The situation in the four cities will be mapped before long. Activists will make a flying visit to a hundred-odd new buildings and see 2,000 cleaners, the aim being to assess the problems and identify appropriate leaders. Because taking a real stand means adding tens of thousands more members, says Ron Meyer. "We'll never lose the people we went on strike with. They fought and won. Their strength is structural; they are our flag-bearers." And the union members who went on strike and took risks will be rewarded, not only in the form of a bit extra from the social partners' training fund, but also an additional allowance from the union. "The frontline soldiers risk falling in battle", says Meyer. "They took risks to improve working conditions for 150,000 workers. The tide of economic liberalism that helped make work so cheap is turning thanks to these people. They should get a gold medal." ●

In their own words

Christine Monk-Simon (47), born in French Guyana, cleaner at the Erasmus Medical Centre.



"I stayed at home while the children were little. My husband was earning just enough to live on. But the cost of everything's going up: rent, electricity, shopping, the children's education. I like working, and with five children I've no other choice. I work mornings from 6 am to 9 am and evenings from 5.30 pm to 9 pm. I'm up every day at half-past four because I have to get the bus to the hospital. Travel alone costs me 60 euros a month. That's a lot. But I'm ploughing on. It's a choice I made for

the children. I want them to have a better future. They have to be able to get an education. I don't want them ending up as cleaners. I have two jobs. If one employer goes bust, I still have the other.

We're under a lot of pressure at work. We have to work harder and harder. My back and arms hurt. I've already had to be operated on my wrists. But I think it is important for the hospital to be clean. I want to do a good job. The one thing you have to be careful about in a hospital is germs. That's why it's stupid that we get hardly any cleaning products. My boss just tells me not to whinge when I complain. There's no respect for the work we do. Last year, we went on strike with the union. We had to pick up other people's work and do it in the same number of hours. A lot of women daren't speak out. They were really pleased when I went on strike this year. If you strike, we will too, they said. Sixty out of 180 cleaners did. It was a good thing that we finally got seen. Before the strike, we simply didn't exist. I told the other women: 'We're going to do this in a right and proper way. All we're asking for is the end of slavery. To be respected for what we do.' We stood up for ourselves. It feels good. We're not afraid any more."

In their own words

Mame Birame Sow (52), born in Senegal, Schiphol Airport cleaner.



"My dream is to one day have a farm on the little plot of land I own in Senegal. But first I have to earn money for a well, solar panels and a tractor. I work evenings at Schiphol from 2.30-10.30 pm, Wednesday to Sunday. It's hard physical graft. You have to clean the floors, empty the bins and tidy up in the departure and arrival halls. Customers want cheap contracts, so my employer offers the work at cut-price rates. We have to do more work with fewer staff. They even save on cleaning products.

It can sometimes take up to an hour to get all the equipment together. They're profiting on the backs of workers. It's a good thing that people are finally aware of the exploitation and cut-throat competition. The world now knows what's going on in the sector, that the cleaning sector is not as clean as all that. The Netherlands now knows what we can do. It's a good thing to have gone on strike, to get our voice heard. The employers weren't expecting it. They're cowboys who want to grind us down.

I earn 1,300 euros a month. I have another job from noon to 2 pm. I'm shattered when I get home at night. But I need money to provide for my family. I used to work in computing. But my contract didn't get renewed due to all sorts of reorganizations. I'm not typically Dutch, I've got an accent. So I was first out. I've got recognized training credentials and worked as a programmer in Senegal, but I can't find work in IT now. Too old. Too black. I've no opportunity to prove myself. It's frustrating to have to do unskilled work. But it's work. And there is a bright side. If I had stayed in Senegal, I wouldn't have had all the experience I have. I've seen a lot. Life has given me understanding."