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The Leiden rent strikes of the 1970s: national politics, Middletown Maoism and the rise of the Socialist Party in the Netherlands

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The 1970s were a turning point in the history of Dutch cities. Dutch national and local governments co-ordinated urban renewal policies to tackle the double crisis of poor housing quality and housing shortage.¹ In part, these policies were designed to respond to housing protests at both local and national levels. As these protests continued, they significantly influenced urban renewal and housing policies. Furthermore, housing protests in various Dutch cities allowed new political actors to mobilise and build a support base. This chapter investigates how conflicts over urban renewal and rent increases in the Dutch city of Leiden provided political space for the Maoist Socialist Party (SP) to mobilise renters and pressure authorities, and how these actions subsequently influenced the politics and activism of the SP.

In Leiden (100,000 inhabitants, 40 km from Amsterdam), all of the above-mentioned developments coincided to spark a rent strike movement that influenced both local and national politics and paved the way for the SP to become a significant political actor – first locally and later on a national level. After a national measure in 1970 resulted in rent increases for poor-quality pre-war housing, Leiden renters mobilised and set up a rent strike campaign. Backed by the SP, the movement soon gained support from renters and the city government; it ultimately caused the national government to yield, annul two annual rent increases and allocate sizeable sums for Leiden's urban renewal projects.²

Leiden Maoists played an important role in the rent strike movement, but the latter also influenced the former. Successful rent activism led Leiden Maoists to downplay their radical roots and militant

anticapitalism in favour of more issue-focused community organising. References to the Cultural Revolution and a violent overthrow of capitalism were shelved; instead the Maoist slogan 'serve the people' was translated into neighbourhood activism. This switch from hard-line Maoism to a more pragmatic politics of 'soft' Maoism took place in the 1970s, particularly in medium-sized cities where the SP's community organising campaigns were most successful.³ Because their development proved crucial for the SP's ultimate success, they are here referred to as 'Middletown Maoists'.

Leiden rent activism and its influence have received little attention from scholars, as is also the case for the development of the SP.⁴ Moreover, most of the existing literature has a local focus and has not yet become part of international historiographical debates, for example, on urban renewal conflicts, rent strikes or Western Maoism (i.e. Maoism in industrialised, liberal democratic countries, in Western Europe and North America). This chapter is based on the extensive archive of the Leiden SP, interviews with party activists and a systematic review of news reports on rent activism in the 1970s from digitised Leiden newspapers.⁵

A short history of rent strikes in the Netherlands

During the 1970s Leiden members of the SP played an important role in the city's rent strike movement. They set up the local chapter of the BHW (*Bond van Huurders en Woningzoekenden*, League of Renters and Home Seekers), which at its height consisted of about 1,000 members in a dozen neighbourhood committees. The BHW organised various actions, but the most spectacular – and effective – were their rent strike campaigns. During these campaigns households collectively refused to pay rent increases and demanded rent freezes and the realisation of overdue repair and renovation works.

Although the dynamics and outcomes of these conflicts were heavily influenced by their local context, the Leiden rent strike movement did not unfold in a vacuum. Instead it built on a longer history of rent activism in the Netherlands – a history characterised by a continuous interaction between local protests and national governmental policy. A brief historical overview highlights similarities between the 1970s rent activism and earlier rent campaigns.

Throughout the twentieth century governmental rent policy was influenced by local protests. In 1917 rising prices and shortages caused by the First World War became the catalyst for fierce working-class protests

in various cities. In Amsterdam, protests against the shipping of potatoes to army bases – rather than distributing them among city dwellers – led to days of rioting. The government responded with various initiatives, including rent control laws and subsidies for local social housing corporations.⁶ Rent increases were one of the major problems facing working-class families, and Leiden had witnessed protests and even rent strikes in the years before 1917.⁷ As in other cities, many housing corporations in Leiden – inspired by social democratic, catholic, protestant or social liberal thought – used national funds to build affordable housing for working families.⁸

However, in the 1920s the liberal-conservative national government cut back on rent control and housing subsidies until both were completely abolished by 1927. Construction of social housing came to a standstill and housing shortages and rising rents coincided with an economic crisis, leading to a new wave of local rent activism. This wave peaked in 1932–3 when hundreds of households in cities such as Rotterdam and Amsterdam refused to pay rent increases, or even the entire rent.⁹ Although these rent conflicts were caused by failing national policies the responses were local, and rent strikes unfolded mainly in large cities with a strong communist presence. The Communist Party could to some degree co-ordinate actions by sharing information through its cadre and party press, but it was never able to spark a national wave of rent strikes. The responses to the rent strikes were mainly local as well, with private owners in Amsterdam co-ordinating with the local government to counter the rent strikes. Leiden did not witness any rent strikes, although they did occur in the nearby village of Noordwijk.¹⁰

The most spectacular rent strike of 1933 unfolded in Amsterdam West. It took place in a neighbourhood of newly built houses intended for working families, but infamous for high rents and poor-quality housing. No less than 650 renters were involved, but they were ultimately defeated through a combination of evictions and the seizing of the solidarity fund by the authorities and judges, enabling owners to claim rent directly from salaries or benefits.¹¹ The following ebb of rent activism lasted for almost 40 years. The Second World War and the subsequent housing shortage and political conformism brought about by the Cold War left little political space for rent activism.

The other side of the coin, however, was that the national government retook the lead in housing policy, co-ordinating the construction of two million houses between 1950 and 1971.¹² Housing corporations built the majority of them and ended up controlling one-third of the entire national housing stock. The resulting Dutch housing system

equalled that of Sweden;¹³ in other nearby countries housing corporations rarely managed more than one-fifth of the housing stock.¹⁴ As a result, the national housing minister announced in 1964 that the quantitative housing crisis had largely been resolved and that the focus should shift to improving housing quality. However, this was not the case for Leiden. While surrounding villages had largely overcome the quantitative housing shortage, Leiden's particular situation as an industrial city with a bad housing stock and a large percentage of low-income families caused it to face a 'double crisis': housing shortage and poor-quality housing.¹⁵

Despite the significant time gap, the similarities between the rent strikes of the 1930s and 1970s are remarkable. In both eras, rent conflicts were concentrated in old, nineteenth-century, working-class boroughs, where renters decried rent increases for deprecated houses, and new estates, where renters protested against high rents for poor-quality housing; in fact rent *decreases* were often demanded. Furthermore, rent activists in the 1970s followed the same method as their 1930s counterparts: organising renters in housing blocks or neighbourhoods, stimulating them to strike and collecting the withheld sums in solidarity funds. The last served as a safety measure in case rent strikes were lost, but they could also be used to co-ordinate activism. Finally, rent activists in both eras were political outsiders, facing established social democrats as their main opponents. While social democrats headed municipal governments and presided over an array of local housing corporations, 1930s communists and 1970s rent activists had no direct access to such political bodies. This situation both enabled *and* necessitated them to commit to contentious actions such as rent strikes in order to build up a support base and compete for political influence. To a certain extent, both actors appreciated their excluded position; when local rent activists started to organise nationally in 1972–3, thus gaining access to national funding and representation at the Ministry of Housing, the BHW insisted on remaining a 'non-co-opted', direct-action grass-roots organisation.¹⁶ Like the Communist Party of the 1930s, the BHW had its national organisation. However, in reality it acted as a 'federation of local chapters'; it could co-ordinate actions across cities, but not inspire or drive national campaigns.

A link between the two eras may even have been the SP's communist origins. Founded by dissident communists in the 1960s, the SP cadre may have been able to tap into the collective memory of the communist involvement in 1930s rent strikes. However, there were also major differences. The most important of these was that by the 1970s the

(socialist-led) national government had become far more responsive to the demands of social movements.

The Leiden rent strikes in a global context

In [Chapter 1](#), the Introduction to this volume, Poy and Rolf show that rent strikes historically came in two waves. The first occurred around the First World War and the second in the 1960s and 1970s, when ‘a new period of increased collective action among tenants began’. In [Chapter 14](#), the Conclusion to this volume, Poy and Rolf describe how the Leiden wave of 1970s rent activism, just as in other countries, was:

interwoven with broader layers of activism and resistance, in the context of the emergence of the ‘new left’, radical student movements, anti-war protests and anti-colonial movements.

In [Chapter 9](#), which discusses housing activism in Berlin, Vollmer explains the increased rent activism that arose in the 1970s as a result of the crisis of Fordist urbanism. This crisis came to a head in the 1970s, when pre-war housing stock suffered from decay and dilapidation, while newly built projects proved too expensive for many working-class families. As Rolf shows in [Chapter 6](#), a similar situation developed in Sweden. Here older housing stock was in need of renovation and improvement, while newly built projects proved beyond the reach of many and suffered from inadequate services. This caused the government and housing corporations to re-orient themselves and to draw up urban renewal plans and individual housing subsidies. However, as Vollmer has argued, such ‘periods of transition are also phases of increased social movement activity’. As will be shown later, the Netherlands in general, and Leiden in particular, seem to fit this international model – not least because protests were strongest in rental houses that were owned by (semi-) governmental organisations.

Moreover, rent strikes in the Netherlands and Leiden shared the characteristics of rent strikes elsewhere. Their repertoire focused on refusing to pay rent increases or withholding part of the rent and they emphasised the moral economy of paying a ‘just’ rent: activists demanded repairs and maintenance, while denouncing ‘profiteering’ by housing corporations and emphasising the importance of a ‘fair’ rent price. Furthermore, they petitioned governments and organised public demonstrations, thus positioning rent activism in a broader array of

leftist activism. After all, for the SP activists, the rent strikes were part of a grander anticapitalist strategy.

When it came to the social composition of the rent strike movement, some interesting features stand out. Poy and Rolf justly state that ‘women, and often also children, have played a crucial role’ in rent strikes and rent activism. This was also true in Leiden – but it did not mean *per se* that all men and women were given an equal role within the rent strike movement. For example, the BHW was mainly active in impoverished working-class boroughs, where traditional ideas about family and gender roles prevailed. On the one hand, this meant that women often played a central role in rent strikes, since they were the homemakers and in charge of the family budget. However, their role in the strike movement did not automatically place them on an equal footing with their male partners, who were often still seen (not least in legal terms) as the ‘head of the family’. SP-activists, who often moved into working-class neighbourhoods, tried to copy what they considered to be working-class behaviour – in speech, attitude and ways of working – instead of challenging, for example, outdated gender roles.

When it comes to the ethnic composition of the Leiden rent strike movement, the image differs from metropolitan Berlin, as studied by Vollmer in [Chapter 9](#), where people with local and migrant backgrounds joined in the same struggle. Although Leiden was home to a few hundred migrant workers from Morocco and Turkey, who generally suffered from poor housing conditions and occasionally challenged these conditions through activism, these actions rarely intersected with the rent strike movement, which was overall an affair of local city dwellers. In Leiden working-class participation dominated; a colourful coalition of ‘the poorer working class, otherwise marginalised groups, and the middle class seeking alternative lifestyles’, as in Berlin, did not come to life. Yet this did not mean that antiracism was not important for the rent strike activists, nor for the SP. Indeed, the SP protested not only against apartheid in South Africa, but also against the violent eviction of Moroccan rent strikers, as well as the planned governmental expulsion of migrant workers in the late 1970s.

Leiden and the double housing crisis of the 1970s

By 1970 Leiden was experiencing a double housing crisis, a large housing shortage going hand in hand with the poor quality of the available stock. In 1970 as much as 13.6 per cent of Leiden’s population was registered as

being in need of housing. Most of them were young families who worked in Leiden and were often forced to live with their parents. In 1977 the waiting time for affordable rented housing distributed by the municipality could be as long as four years.¹⁷

Affordable houses in Leiden's inner city were of poor quality. In 1962 a Dutch newspaper dubbed the city the 'second slum champion of the country' because of the 3,000 or so run-down houses in its centre. In 1968 the municipality determined that one-quarter of the 29,000 houses in Leiden were of inferior quality.¹⁸ Hundreds of houses were officially declared uninhabitable, but were nevertheless still rented out. When a journalist researched the housing conditions in the working-class district of Leiden-Noord, she came across families with four children or more living in 'small four-room houses, the living room included'.¹⁹ Most of these houses were not yet connected to modern-day sewage systems, instead discharging their waste into the city's numerous canals.

As dramatic as this sounds, Leiden's situation did not differ greatly from that of nearby cities. When Cor Smit – later to write the history of Leiden's housing corporations – moved in 1972 from Schiedam to Leiden for his studies, he saw that Leiden's inner city was 'a mess' – but not much more of a mess than his native city of Schiedam. A fellow student, who came from Delft, had a similar impression. However, Leiden's city government was slow to improve the situation. When a civil servant came from nearby Haarlem to Leiden in 1969, he noticed that the latter had done much less to resolve the housing crisis, and that the situation was far worse than in his own city.²⁰

The city government, tasked with resolving the housing crisis, was seen by many as incompetent.²¹ Declining population numbers had forced the city to reduce its civil service, undermining its effectiveness, while the city's aldermen consisted of a group of elder statesmen, some of whom had held their positions for 20 years. Facing an urban crisis and shrinking funds, and unwilling to relinquish autonomy by requesting additional funding from central government, they proved unable to plot a new way forward. Instead, the city opted for a politics of delayed urban renewal. Working-class neighbourhoods were designated for redevelopment, with houses dispossessed and demolished one at a time. In a process that took years, living quality declined; rows of houses started to resemble 'neglected sets of teeth, where one rotting tooth would infect another and start to fall out one at a time'.²² The situation was especially dramatic in the north of Leiden, where one borough, according to an eyewitness, looked like 'a bomb had exploded. It was clear that the city was failing its citizens.'²³

Next to the city government, local housing corporations were important actors – although they, too, were often seen as incapable of dealing with the housing crisis. Leiden's social housing sector comprised seven housing corporations, managing in total about one-third of Leiden's housing stock. Most of these corporations had been founded in the 1910s and traced their origins to the socialist, protestant or catholic labour movement, although one of them had been founded by the municipality and two had been founded by social-liberal philanthropist societies.²⁴ While these organisations were strictly bound to national and local governments by laws and policy directives, they were nominally independent. In addition, they were governed by unpaid volunteers who had neither the means nor the know-how to take on large-scale renovation works.

Meanwhile, smaller issues could lead to major conflicts. In December 1972 a journalist asked one of the corporation governors about shoddy repair works that had left an elderly woman with a gas pipe running straight through her living room. The governor denied the incident had occurred, whereupon the journalist showed him photos – only to have the governor blame the entire incident on the elderly woman.²⁵ In such circumstances, conflicts between renters and housing corporations could easily escalate.

In 1969 a housing conflict provided the spark that lit the fuse of urban protest.²⁶ Two artists had squatted a house in a dilapidated inner-city borough, but the following day municipal workers started demolition works, assuming that the house had been abandoned. Neighbours and residents mobilised spontaneously, convincing the demolition workers to cease their activities. They then founded a neighbourhood committee, marched to the mayor's residence and organised a protest meeting. When the mayor and the city's aldermen visited the borough a few days later they were horrified by the dilapidated state of the area, but could offer no easy solutions. This motivated the residents to organise on a city-wide scale. They embarked upon a series of rent strikes that would continue far into the 1970s and would have far-reaching consequences.

The Leiden rent strike movement of the 1970s

In 1971 SP members founded the BHW as a vehicle to connect with renters and to campaign with them against rent increases and in favour of renovations and affordable new developments. The SP had

been founded in 1964 as a Leninist cadre party that only accepted members willing to spend large amounts of their free time on party work and adhere (or submit) to the party line. This high bar left the Leiden SP with 20 to 25 highly motivated activists. The BHW functioned as a nominally independent organisation, although SP members held leading positions in it. The BHW had a clear purpose and less demanding membership, making it attractive to large numbers of working-class members and activists. To organise the BHW, SP members went door to door to sell the organisation's newspaper, talk with renters about their issues and set up campaigns together. Soon the BHW organised about 1,000 members, representing more than half of the city's rent activists.

Critics denounced the SP for using renters' problems for their own political gains. They argued that the SP controlled the BHW from behind the scenes, claiming that the SP had no real intention of tackling housing issues truly and constructively. The city's alderman responsible for housing summed up these views in a statement in 1973:

I don't trust the BHW, because it is a Maoist organisation that often uses people's distress for their own purposes.²⁷

In 1971 a renters' committee severed its ties with the BHW because they had found out 'that the BHW is a front for the SP party'.²⁸ Later in the 1970s a rent activist commented that 'Once you marry the BHW, you will inherit the SP as a headstrong mother-in-law'.²⁹ Yet at the same time the BHW's combative attitude and radical action repertoire also inspired renters. In a short time the BHW had grown into one of Leiden's strongest renters' unions.³⁰

The BHW's actions resonated – especially in Leiden, where the housing situation was dire. In 1972 the central government announced that pre-war rental houses would receive an additional annual rent increase, in order to synchronise their rents with those of newly constructed houses and apartments.³¹ Given the appalling state of many pre-war rental houses in Leiden's inner city, this measure inspired fierce protests. One renters' organisation called the rent harmonisation measure 'a sweet-sounding word for a terribly unjust decision'.³² The BHW and other activists started a campaign and organised renters to refuse the rent increase collectively. This was legally allowed if a renter had previously reported defects to the housing corporation that had not yet been fixed. In its newspaper, the BHW explained how they set up their rent strike:

Each month, we went door to door to collect the postal cheques with the increased rent and swapped them for blank cheques, with which renters could pay the original rent. This way, people could pay the old rents and everybody would know how much support there was for the action.³³

The BHW focused its organising and campaigning activities on housing corporations. They managed about one-third of Leiden's housing stock and provided a key service to the SP's target group. Furthermore, although formally independent, these corporations were factually an extension of local and national governments, which made fighting the corporations a way to turn social strife into political conflict. As corporation renters lived next to each other in blocks or neighbourhoods, they were also relatively easy to organise.

The BHW effectively made use of the legal and political opportunities for protest, for example by collectively organising renters around their individual right to oppose rent increases. The BHW also mobilised renters to protest during annual public meetings of housing corporations – who were not enthusiastic about the rent increases either, but had no way to counter them. Similarly, the BHW challenged local government, which was in a similar position as the housing corporations. Finally, the BHW used its position as a political outsider to challenge established political actors such as social democrats. Although the social democratic party criticised the rent increases in the city parliament, many housing corporations were governed by prominent local social democrats and trade union leaders, with close contacts to the city government. Calling them out proved an effective way to pressure local government and gain local legitimacy.

The BHW's main competitor was the LHC (*Leids Huurderscomité*, Leiden Renters' Committee), which also organised collective rent strikes. While the BHW was linked to the SP, the LHC had close ties to the left-socialist PSP (*Pacifistisch-Socialistische Partij*, Pacifist Socialist Party). Both competed against the mainstream social democratic party and both aspired to be local, grass-roots organisations, focused on direct action. Neither was interested in joining newly established national renters' organisations with a seat at the table of the Ministry of Housing. As in other cities, rent activism and renters' advocacy were thus divided into two camps, with one aiming for negotiations with policy-makers, and the other striving to confront them.

At first the BHW and LHC fought over local dominance, but in time they found ways of working alongside one another. As one SP member explains:

In the north of Leiden we sort of divided the territory: the BHW focused on organising renters from the Gemeentewoningen housing corporation, while the LHC tasked itself with organising renters from the Ons Belang corporation. We never discussed this, it just happened.³⁴

Eventually, the rent strike gained such broad support that a junior central government minister felt forced to visit the city and defend his policies. According to a local newspaper, he inspected 18 houses 'and was told by 18 families that they were not going to pay any rent increase because the houses were not worth it'.³⁵ In response, the junior minister explained that renters could individually object to the increase, but even the local government found this to be too bureaucratic. In 1974 he gave in to pressure from both rent activists and local government, annulling the rent increases for all Leiden pre-war inner-city houses for 1972 and 1973.³⁶ This was seen as a major victory by rent activists – a sign that local activism could even yield concessions from national governments. As annual rent increases were set to start again from 1974 onwards, however, rent strikes continued throughout the 1970s.

Shortly afterwards the BHW even organised a rent *decrease* campaign. This focused upon the Merenwijk, a new development of flats on the northern outskirts of Leiden. Because the rents in the Merenwijk were twice as expensive as pre-war inner-city houses, the BHW was scandalised that working families were forced to 'choose between living in unaffordable apartments or perish in affordable hovels'.³⁷ Those who moved to the Merenwijk were dissatisfied with the lack of amenities; roads, bus stops and supermarkets still needed to be constructed, for example.³⁸ In February 1974 renters decided to lower their rents unilaterally by f 75. The campaign lasted for about 18 months. At its height the BHW claimed that 277 of the 800 families living in the Merenwijk had joined the campaign. This time the junior minister did not yield, however, instead calling the campaign illegal. When the corporation brought the rent activists to court, a judge agreed. The campaign subsequently fizzled out, without the renters realising any of their demands.³⁹

Other actions also ultimately failed. In 1973 members of the BHW were voted into the board of one of the housing corporations; they gained a majority on the board and proceeded to decrease the rents for all the houses under the corporation's management. However, the city – responsible for the rent collection for all corporation houses – refused to implement the rent decrease and the central Ministry of Housing

threatened to dissolve the corporation. The board subsequently relented and the BHW members were voted off.⁴⁰

Despite this setback, the BHW also established smaller actions, often with surprising results. In 1973 BHW activists set up tents in front of the city hall, distributed flyers and collected signatures in support of three young working-class families who had squatted houses and were threatened with eviction. At the end of the day the alderman informed them that the families could stay or would get replacement housing.⁴¹ Following this, BHW activists later occupied the offices of the *Bureau Huisvesting*, charged with assigning houses to renters; the activists successfully demanded appropriate housing be offered to two large families (the first living with five children in a one-room apartment; the other living with eight children in a three-room apartment).⁴² In 1974 the BHW sided with a group of renters who demanded a playground and safer traffic; they threatened to destroy a street if the local government did not respond. A few months later it was announced that the playground would be built and that several streets would be closed off to cars.⁴³

These actions and results gave SP/BHW members a sense of accomplishment. The community organising model through which SP members connected with renters, set up campaigns and achieved tangible results seemed to work. One SP/BHW activist remembers:

I was cycling through Leiden in the spring of 1973. We had been working with the BHW for two years by then, and everywhere I saw streets and places where we were doing actions and organising campaigns. It gave me a powerful feeling.⁴⁴

As a fellow activist told a local newspaper, 'There is almost no neighbourhood where we have not done an action or campaign, and they clearly resonate.'⁴⁵

The BHW had proved to be a successful vehicle for mobilising renters and achieving results. At the same time, the BHW also influenced the SP. Successful neighbourhood activism encouraged the SP to focus more than ever on community activism. In 1970 the SP had decided that all members were to start working in factories and organise the workers there. But in Leiden the SP soon acknowledged that 'the BHW is an important part of our success', and after 18 months labour issues were moved to the side in favour of neighbourhood activism.⁴⁶ When SP activists realised that Maoist imagery and Leninist slogans led to criticism and were counter-productive in their community organising efforts, they swiftly decided to downplay their Maoist roots. Slowly but

surely, community activism translated into political power. In 1982, after 12 years of community activism, the SP gained its first seat in Leiden's city parliament.⁴⁷

Middletown Maoists: the strange case of the Socialist Party

What kind of party was the SP and how did it become such a prominent voice in the city's rent activism? The answer is that the SP holds a special place in Dutch political history and in the history of Western Maoism. In the Netherlands it was the first political party after 1945 to establish an extensive local support base before making a breakthrough into national politics. At the national elections of 1994 the SP won two parliamentary seats (gaining 1.32 per cent of the vote) – but by that time the party already counted 17,000 members (making it the fifth largest party, despite its long-time absence of national representation), 56 party chapters and 126 seats in local parliaments.⁴⁸ In the years that followed, in a development similar to that of the German party *Die Linke*, the SP grew into the main left-wing challenger of the social democratic Labour Party (alongside the Greens). In the wake of the 2011 financial crisis it even threatened to outgrow it, before entering a protracted phase of electoral and political decline.

In the history of Western Maoism, i.e. Maoism in industrialised and liberal democratic countries, the SP also stands out.⁴⁹ Maoists formed a vocal, at times influential, minority within the student and social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. In the Netherlands, the official Moscow-oriented Communist Party mobilised thousands of young people, while Maoists organised hundreds and Trotskyists dozens.⁵⁰ In most surrounding countries, the proportions were the same. However, of all the Maoist groups and parties founded in Western Europe and the US during the 1960s and 1970s, the SP was one of the few to survive the 1970s and 1980s. It was also the only one to evolve independently, developing from a political fringe group or sect into a well-established party with national parliamentary representation.

The party that in 1972 would become the SP was in fact founded in 1964. Its early members were communists who turned against Khrushchev and supported Mao's Cultural Revolution, then were expelled from the Moscow-oriented Communist Party.⁵¹ After a few years the SP took solid shape by focusing on community organising and ombudsman politics. It organised itself to be the voice of under-represented inhabitants of

working-class boroughs, mobilising them to demand lower rents, better housing quality and the removal of polluting industries from residential areas; they also established campaigns for more speedbumps and better street lighting. This specific form of pragmatic-practical politics went hand in hand with a gradual downplaying of the party's radicalism and Maoist roots. Together, these two factors set the SP apart from most Maoist parties, and were responsible for the party's survival, growth and breakthrough.

Dutch political scientists Voerman and Beekers have attempted to assess to what extent the SP was a typical or an atypical Western Maoist party.⁵² According to them, both the development and success of the SP were logical outflows of its Maoist politics. Both Voerman and Beekers assert that Mao's thought centred around three key elements: 1) the imperative to fight capitalism without reservation, 2) to counter bourgeois attitudes individually and collectively, and 3) always to serve the people. Although these three notions were intended to balance each other, the Western Maoist movement started to splinter and grow apart during the 1970s, leading to different currents emphasising different aspects of Maoist thought. Groups that emphasised the need to fight capitalism aggressively formed underground armed groups; both the Italian Red Brigades and the West German Red Army Faction, for example, were inspired by Maoism. Groups that emphasised the need to 'kill the inner bourgeois' formed sex-pol communes focusing on sexual liberation and new forms of living together.

The SP, on the other hand, emphasised the imperative to 'serve the people'. Inspired by the Cultural Revolution in China and guerrilla warfare in Vietnam, SP members decided early on that the best way to mobilise the working class against capitalism in the Netherlands was by going door to door, conducting surveys and organising campaigns around issues such as housing, environment and healthcare. Soon, however, SP members learned that many members of their target group were more interested in practical matters such as rent increases and electricity bills than they were in 'capitalism' and 'revolution'.

This caused the SP to downplay Maoism since this hindered its ability to mobilise people. As an SP member explained:

We need to start out from the people's viewpoints, so not talk about revolution. Many don't understand that. We need to be very practical.⁵³

As the SP became an explicitly practical and pragmatic party, Voerman and Beekers explain this development as a kind of Mao-inspired

de-Maoisation of the SP. In this form, it could develop into a left-wing challenger of the politically moderate social democratic party.

The extent to which the SP really set itself apart within the world of Western Maoism seems to be reflected even in its historiography. While many histories of Western Maoist parties focus on political, ideological and organisational developments – in short, on what activists thought and believed – histories of the Dutch SP focus instead on local campaigns and their effects – i.e. on what activists *did*.⁵⁴ A second remarkable difference is that most literature focuses on Maoist activism in metropolitan areas, where protest movements soon merged with urban youth subcultures to focus on politicised issues such as educational reform, labour rights, international solidarity and anti-repression. Literature on the SP, on the other hand, zooms in on activism in medium-sized cities and small towns, where protests were more practical and pragmatic.

Schmidt-Lauber has stated that these mid-sized towns and cities represent ‘a specific type of urbanity’ characterised by ‘a far greater degree of overview/manageability, more direct communication and binding ties, and a smaller sense of openness and anonymity’.⁵⁵ A political campaign in a small place will often bring protesters out in direct opposition to the mayor, an alderman or an urban authority figure; it will easily become an issue that involves the entire local polity. In a metropolis, by contrast, a neighbourhood campaign is not so easily elevated into a city-wide issue; to do this often requires more general demands. The difference in urban scale thus significantly influences (the effects of) local protest behaviour.

This assessment caused Schmidt-Lauber to conclude that Middletown protests were not simply smaller, more moderate or less radical, but rather that they assumed a specific form. This notion resonates strongly with the history of the SP. The party’s focus on community organising was especially successful in small towns and mid-sized cities, where they could elevate neighbourhood actions into local political issues. On the other hand, their attempts to transform neighbourhood actions in Amsterdam and Rotterdam into local political power proved far less successful.

The SP flourished in mid-sized cities and towns, where it managed to carve out a niche through its Middletown activism. Yet at the same time the SP was heavily influenced by these local experiences, which led to its deradicalisation. The extent to which this made the SP an atypical Maoist party remains unclear, since much of the historiography of Western Maoism asks different questions and follows different approaches. Although we have evidence that Maoists in Sweden also

mobilised rent strikes in Middletown contexts,⁵⁶ more information is needed concerning the actual activism of Maoists in the US, West Germany and Italy, to name just a few examples, in order to compare their trajectories.

Such a focus on the practical activism of Maoists could provide a counterpoint to many historical accounts that emphasise the ‘lunacy’ of Western Maoists.⁵⁷ In *Global Maoism*, Lovell struggles to understand the ‘Mao fever’ that swept Western Europe and the US during the 1960s and 1970s; she zooms in on those groups that ultimately took to forming communes or armed underground groups – in reality, fringe groups within Western Maoism. Steffen argues that in West Germany the Maoist scene consisted of a small ultra-left, a far larger mainstream and another (again much smaller) conservative current.⁵⁸ In his study on Maoists in the United States, Elbaum does focus upon such mainstream Maoists, but mainly on their politics and organisation.⁵⁹ The history of the SP may provide an incentive to students of Western Maoism to investigate mainstream Maoist currents, and especially the kinds of politics and activism that they inspired. Although the story of the Leiden SP provides only one case study of Middletown Maoism in action, it offers an opportunity to push the boundaries of scholarship and to ask different questions about the history of Western Maoism.

Outcomes and debates

Actions such as occupying the town hall square or *Bureau Huisvesting* forced the local government to make concessions. However, larger conflicts such as a city-wide rent strike movement even forced the central government of the Netherlands to intervene. The annulment of two rent increases is just one example. In 1973 a left-liberal national government came into office and allocated sizeable resources to urban renewal. The city of Leiden profited from this development, especially because Leiden civil servants had good contacts with the Ministry of Housing in The Hague. Rent strikes and other forms of rent activism worked in favour of the Leiden civil servants because they showed the Ministry just how serious the situation in Leiden had become.⁶⁰

The combination of new governmental policy, connections between Leiden and The Hague and continued rent activism ensured that, from 1977 onwards, Leiden could apply for special funding initially reserved for urban renewal projects in the four main Dutch cities of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht. Through this programme the central

government fully reimbursed cities for large urban renewal projects. According to one historian, Leiden was especially successful with funding applications:

every time a junior minister offered a possibility to apply for funding, Leiden would submit its plans no later than the following day.

In the end, Leiden managed to extract 130 million guilders from the fund, proportionately much more than the other cities.⁶¹

The funding brought about a turning point for Leiden, which could now thoroughly renovate and renew its inner-city infrastructure and housing blocks. Between 1977 and 1984 as many as '50 bridges, 9 kilometres of quay walls, 75 kilometres of sewage pipe and 2,000 kilometres of pavement' were renovated and renewed. Furthermore, 2,800 houses were built and 5,300 houses were renovated.⁶² A large part of Leiden's inner-city housing was connected to modern sewage. In 1993 a group of urban historians in Leiden stated that it had 'overcome a phase of dilapidation and pauperisation and instead has become a city pearl'. This was not only due to newly appointed competent aldermen, 'but just as much – and maybe more – to the protest movement of the 1970s'.⁶³

The campaign in the Merenwijk also had consequences in the long run. Even though the city government disagreed with the protesters' choice of action, it did accept that 'rents were too high' and contacted the Ministry of Housing. Influenced among others by similar actions in Amsterdam, as well as other protests and debates, the ministry started to look for ways to align rents and income more successfully. This resulted in the development of rent subsidies, which in the decades that followed became an important mechanism of governmental housing and income policy.⁶⁴

These long-term effects should, of course, not be over-estimated. Nor can they be wholly explained as having resulted from local activism or the actions of the BHW. Urban renewal in Leiden was a lengthy and arduous process. It took more than 15 years, and when its first phase ended in the mid-1980s nobody would have dared to say that Leiden was out of the woods. In fact, the housing shortage remained an important issue; renovations still escalated into rent conflicts and deindustrialisation had caused unemployment to rise up to 15 per cent – significantly above the national average.⁶⁵ The positive effects of urban renewal politics only became clear later, in the 1990s and after. In a similar way the BHW managed to achieve small results, but its overall

aim – renovations guided by the wishes of the renters and not leading to any rent increase – was not fulfilled. In the larger context of urban renewal, they were one factor among many that helped to push the process in the right direction.

All of this explains, finally, how the rent strike movement in Leiden slowly fizzled out from the mid-1970s onwards. It had managed to push the local government out of its passive state and to convince central government to annul two rent increases, as well as to make more funds available for urban renewal. However, as authorities started energetically to take up the task of urban renewal, the political and legal opportunities for collective rent action grew smaller. From the mid-1970s onwards SP members refocused their activism from housing to environmental and health issues.

Of course, from the central government's perspective, Leiden was not the Netherlands' most important city. Metropolises such as Amsterdam and Rotterdam could apply for more funding, and protests in these cities had greater effects on political debates and decision-making. From the SP's perspective, too, Leiden was not the most important or successful party chapter. In smaller cities in the country's periphery (Nijmegen, Oss, Heerlen), SP chapters were more successful in mobilising members and voters.⁶⁶

What the case study of SP rent activism in Leiden shows, however, is the practical activism of the SP, the dynamics that this set in motion and its potential to realise smaller (direct) and larger (indirect, long-term) successes. This provided the SP with local legitimacy and political influence. It also motivated SP members to continue their activism throughout the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, when most Maoist groups in Western Europe and North America disbanded or shrank to minor groups or sects.

Conclusion

A case study of rent activism in Leiden during the 1970s fits a global history of rent strikes and challenges the historiography of Western Maoism. As in many other times and places, the Leiden rent strike movement occurred at a moment of great change – a point at which a politics of *laissez-faire* with regards to the dilapidation and deterioration of rental houses gave way to a far more pro-active governmental politics of urban renewal, renovation and redevelopment. The grey period between these two eras created legal and political opportunities

for new political actors, as long as they managed to mobilise renters and challenge established parties and organisations through innovative action repertoires. This was exactly what the Leiden SP did, under the banner of the BHW. When new housing policies were firmly established, the rent strike fizzled out – but not before it had pressured local and central government to yield to some of its demands, for example those concerning rents, rent subsidies and waiting lists.

The case study of Leiden rent activism challenges historiography because it highlights the practical activism of mainstream or Middletown Maoists. They managed to form a sizeable but often overlooked current within the world of Western Maoism. This focus on practical activism has the potential to show what activists *did* (rather than which politics they adhered to, and what organisations they formed). Furthermore, it has the potential to explain why the SP kept on going strong while many other Maoist groups and parties declined.

As journalist and former SP member Jos Palm remembers, authorities in small towns and cities were more easily pressured when residents mobilised than metropolitan ones. He remembers an occasion when the local director of a housing corporation telephoned him with a request to moderate demands. It was this kind of experience that gave Middletown Maoists a sense of power.⁶⁷ At the same time, when Maoists failed to achieve tangible results they lost traction. In 1980, when squatter conflict escalated in Amsterdam, it stimulated a young Maoist to abandon the ‘splinter organisation’ to which he belonged. After a night of building barricades and fighting heavy-duty police, his comrades

called the following day, asking why I had not been at their meeting in Rotterdam; they did not even know that barricades were being built in Amsterdam.⁶⁸

While the squatters’ movement offered an opportunity to transform ideals into political power, the unnamed Maoist splinter party had lost that ability. An open question remains whether the SP was as unique within the Western Maoist landscape as has been claimed.

Another question left open is the extent to which global developments and transnational connections influenced the Leiden rent strike movement. Although it has been acknowledged that the emergence of the SP was driven by the 1960s youth revolt, and by the split between Moscow and Beijing, the party’s history has mainly been researched from a local or national perspective. We know that young people who joined the SP took inspiration from the Cultural Revolution in China

and the war in Vietnam, that the SP had contacts with like-minded parties and groups abroad, and that it reported on activism in other countries in its monthly newspaper. At the same time, however, there is little evidence to suggest, for example, that the Merenwijk campaign was inspired by the *autoriduzione* (self-reduction) actions of Italian rent activists.⁶⁹ Still, much suggests that the Leiden rent strike movement and the development of the SP formed far more of a connected history than has often been assumed. Here, too, there is space for more research and theoretical conceptualisation.

Notes

- 1 De Liagre Böhl 2012.
- 2 Van der Steen 2018; 2019.
- 3 Slager 2009.
- 4 For Leiden rent activism, see De Liagre Böhl 2012; Smit 2006; Van Oosten 2017. On the history of the SP, see Slager 2009; Kagie 2004; Voerman 1986; Beekers 2005.
- 5 For more information on specific use of sources and source criticism, see Van der Steen 2019, 18–19.
- 6 Wietsma and Nijssen 1989; 2000; Simons 2000.
- 7 Smit 2006, 39–40.
- 8 Smit 2006, 49–59.
- 9 Wietsma and Nijssen 2000, 127–33.
- 10 Wietsma and Nijssen 2000, 118.
- 11 Wietsma and Nijssen 2000, 132–3.
- 12 Pflug 2015.
- 13 See Chapter 6 by Hannes Rolf in this volume.
- 14 Beekers 2012, 17.
- 15 Smit 2006, 146.
- 16 Custers 2015.
- 17 Smit 2006, 127, 146. ‘Lezers schrijven’; Smit 1989, 17–28.
- 18 Smit 2006, 127, 146. All quotations have been translated from Dutch to English by the author.
- 19 “M’n huis is net een oude overall”.
- 20 Interview with Cor Smit, 15 July 2021; Interview with Laurens Beijen, 26 November 2021; Interview with Dirk Halfwerk, 30 September 2020.
- 21 Van Oosten 2017, 15–29.
- 22 Smit 2006, 130.
- 23 Interview with Leendert Jonker, 13 January 2021.
- 24 Smit 2006.
- 25 “M’n huis is net een oude overall”.
- 26 Slangen 1989; “De onrust komt uit de hoek van de sociaal zwakkeren”.
- 27 ‘Ham: “KVP en prot. chr. groep moeten op één lijst”’.
- 28 ‘Ook Transvaalbuurt laat Huurdersbond vallen’.
- 29 ‘Merenwijkers blijven huur inhouden’.
- 30 De Liagre Böhl 2012.
- 31 Information brochure, ‘Huurharmonisatie voor woningen van gemeenten en woningcorporaties’, 1972; Archive SP Leiden, folder 11; BHW, Eerste acties in Noord en Kooi. The archive is held at Erfgoed Leiden en Omstreken.
- 32 “De onrust komt uit de hoek van de sociaal zwakkeren”.
- 33 ‘Voordat de BHW er was zat je maar te kankeren’.
- 34 Interview with Cor Vergeer.
- 35 ‘Van Dam: Verenigingen en gemeente moeten het met elkaar eens worden’.

- 36 'Huren oude huizen niet hoger'.
- 37 'Hoge huren vernielen gezinsleven'. In 1974 rents of newly built apartments in the Merenwijk could be as high as f 375 per month, while pre-war inner city houses often cost no more than f 150 per month. Smit 2006, 164.
- 38 Korteweg 2008.
- 39 Van der Steen 2019, 65–7.
- 40 Van der Steen 2019, 61–3, 68–70.
- 41 'Een grote tent'.
- 42 “‘Ik blijf hier zitten tot ik een behoorlijk huis heb’”; ‘Grote gezinnen kregen toch leefbare huizen’; ‘Bezetting leidt tot overwinning’.
- 43 ‘Staalwijk wil speelplaatsen’; ‘Voorlichting over staalwijk’.
- 44 Interviews with Cor and Fenna Vergeer, October 2014 to February 2015.
- 45 “‘Wij blijven een actiep partij en worden geen praatpartij’”.
- 46 Archive SP Leiden; folder 1; KEN, KPN, Verslagen afd. Leiden, notulen KEN-Leiden, 8 November 1971.
- 47 Van der Steen 2019, 112–34.
- 48 Van der Steen 2019, 130–4; Van der Steen 1995.
- 49 Alexander 2001.
- 50 Verbij 2005.
- 51 Slager 2009; Voerman 1986; Beekers 2005.
- 52 Voerman 1986; Beekers 2005.
- 53 Beekers 2005, 57.
- 54 An encyclopaedic overview of Western Maoism can be found in Alexander 2001. Studies on Maoism in West Germany include Kühn 2005; Gehrig 2008; Koenen 2012. For Maoism in the USA and France, see Fields 1988; Elbaum 2002.
- 55 Schmidt-Lauber 2010.
- 56 Rolf 2023.
- 57 Lovell 2019, 268–71.
- 58 Steffen 2002.
- 59 Elbaum 2002.
- 60 Van Oosten 2017, 45–6.
- 61 Van Oosten 2017, 45–6.
- 62 De Liagre Böhl 2012.
- 63 *Leiden zoals het was*, vol. 4, 95.
- 64 ‘Weth. Ham wil met Merenwijkers naar staatssecretaris’; ‘Huurgewenningsbijdrage voor deel Merenwijk’; Smit 2006, 163–4.
- 65 Smit 2006, 176–7.
- 66 Van der Steen 1995.
- 67 Palm 2003.
- 68 Duivenvoorden 1997, chapter 4.
- 69 Around the same time Italian guest workers and rent activists played an important role in a Frankfurt rent strike movement. See Karakayali 2005 and chapters 7 and 10 by Crompton (7) and Novaro and Crosetti (10) in this volume.

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- ‘Grote gezinnen kregen toch leefbare huizen’, *Leidsch Dagblad*, 16 March 1973.
- ‘Ham: “KVP en prot. chr. groep moeten op één lijst”’, *Leidsch Dagblad*, 10 November 1973.
- ‘Hoge huren vernielen gezinsleven’, *De Tribune*, no. 2, 1974.
- ‘Huren oude huizen niet hoger’, *Leidsch Dagblad*, 12 March 1974.
- ‘Huurgewenningsbijdrage voor deel Merenwijk’, *Leidsch Dagblad*, 14 November 1974.
- “‘Ik blijf hier zitten tot ik een behoorlijk huis heb’”, *Leidsch Dagblad*, 15 March 1973.
- ‘Lezers schrijven’, *Leidsch Dagblad*, 19 January 1977.

- 'Merenwijkers blijven huur inhouden', *Leidsch Dagblad*, 7 May 1974.
- "M'n huis is net een oude overall", *Leidsch Dagblad*, 8 January 1973.
- 'Ook Transvaalbuurt laat Huurdersbond vallen', *Leidsche Courant*, 24 March 1971.
- 'Staalwijk wil speelplaatsen', *Leidsch Dagblad*, 13 March 1974.
- 'Van Dam: Verenigingen en gemeente moeten het met elkaar eens worden', *Leidse Courant*, 4 September 1973.
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- 'Voorlichting over staalwijk', *Leidsch Dagblad*, 6 June 1974.
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- "Wij blijven een actiepartij en worden geen praatpartij", *Nieuwe Leidse Courant*, 7 May 1974.
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