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How to Self-Organise? Insights from Workers at Albert Heijn (Ahold) and Unox (Unilever) in the Netherlands, 1960-2020

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Summary

This dissertation tells the stories of workers from various workplaces who organised within, outside and in interaction with both formal, modern trade unions and less formal, more grassroots collectives. These workers, both white-collar and blue-collar, men and women, migrants and natives, young and old, employed in both the industrial and service sectors, show the diversity of the working class. They offered their labour and skills in exchange for recognition and payment at three well-known Dutch companies belonging to two multinational corporations: Albert Heijn's distribution centres and supermarkets (Ahold Delhaize), and the Unox sausage and soup plant (Unilever). While the geographical scope makes this a Dutch labour history, my overall argument transcends national borders.

The stories of these workers shed light on the mechanisms of workers' organising in general. Current developments in academia and beyond are prompting us to shift our focus away from formal, modern trade unions in the Global North. However, to date, most academic studies have not paid sufficient attention to bottom-up action, grassroots groups or workers' initiative. Furthermore, the most widely used theories and models in both historical and sociological research are inadequate for meeting this challenge. I therefore put forward the concept of self-organisation, which draws the attention to workers' initiative, decision-making and active participation. This enables me to reflect on and better understand workers' capacity to organise. I examine workers' self-organisation during a period when formal, modern trade unions were well established: from the 1960s to the 2020s. Those who self-organise within an organisation raise their own issues, formulate their own demands and/or establish their own subgroups and/or activities. They also often encourage other workers to join them.

Over the course of these decades, labour relations and working conditions underwent significant changes. Employment shifted from industry to the service sector. Multinational companies grew in influence and relocated their manufacturing plants to other regions. Employers also increasingly outsourced jobs, demanded greater flexibility from workers and embraced mechanisation and automation. These changes are evident at Albert Heijn and Unox, which enables me to study mechanisms and patterns. I examine the timing of these trends and how they manifested in the daily reality of the workplace, as well as how workers reacted to and were influenced by them. In other words, alongside self-organisation, the everyday environment of workers is the second focus of this study. The aim is to recount working experiences from the perspective of the workers as much as possible.

To capture the everyday dynamics of work, workers' organisations and actions, I consulted a wide range of qualitative and quantitative sources from archival institutions and the internet. These include, among others, pamphlets, minutes, newspaper articles, photographs, data sets and a Facebook group. The focus is on materials from the time in question, or from ten to 15 years later at most. In addition, I distinguish between materials produced in the workplace by work-

ers and sources produced by external observers, as well as between key figures, participants and spectators. Finding and accessing the right sources required persistence and creativity. Most importantly, the trust and help of others was essential. Although conducting bottom-up research can be challenging, this dissertation hopes to showcase its feasibility.

The dissertation is divided into five chapters, each focusing on a specific time period and workplace. To best understand the context in which workers performed their jobs and self-organisation occurred, the chapters have a similar structure. Each one begins with an overview of the workplace, moves on to examine the groups and activities of workers' organisations, and concludes by looking at how workers took the initiative. This means that the subsections can also be read in parallel, enabling readers to focus on specific areas of interest or identify differences and similarities. The insights arising from these chapters have implications for academic and societal debates.

Workers' Self-Organisation

Self-organisation is not always easy to identify or uncover, but trying to get a grip on it proves to be illuminating. Above all, this study shows that self-organisation matters, as it made a difference to workers in both industrial and non-industrial workplaces. In the distribution centre, supermarkets and the soup and sausage factory, it was crucial to the success of campaigns and created opportunities for workers to tackle problems and make their voices heard, even when they were ignored by the formal trade unions.

In addition, this study sheds new light on the mechanisms of workers' organising in several ways. Firstly, the role of self-organisation in workers' organisations is found to be more important and complex than is usually assumed. In the cases discussed, (more) informal and (more) formal organisations constantly interacted, in the same way that bottom-up initiatives interacted with, or competed with, top-down organisations and activities. Secondly, the distinction between the formal and the informal turns out not to be as rigid as many studies suggest, and the informal proves equally relevant and helpful when trying to understand more about workers' organising in the Global North. At Albert Heijn and Unox, informal and semi-informal groups emerged within and beyond the boundaries of formal organisations, with the formal and informal often intertwined in complex and mutually reinforcing ways. Thirdly, the concept of self-organisation enables me to better understand the relationships between workers' initiative, decision-making and active participation, on the one hand, and the different types of workers' organisations, activities and target groups, on the other. In the cases discussed, there seems to be a link between an organisation's preference for certain types of activities (repertoires) and its organisational form (in its combination of formal/informal and top-down/bottom-up). Similarly, there were differences in the goals and target groups that organisations had in mind when developing seemingly similar activities in terms of the repertoire chosen.

Like spontaneous, bottom-up action, these interactions and relationships are often overlooked in other studies.

In short, at Albert Heijn and Unox, workers' organisations played an important role in shaping and stimulating workers' initiative, decision-making and active participation through the structures, groups and activities they set up. At the same time, however, the development of structures and activities, even if they were very formal and very top-down, led to workers taking initiative; in other words, workers also used more formal and top-down activities and tools in their own way. Regarding the mechanisms of self-organisation, this study provides preliminary insights into the differences between campaigns, motivations to self-organise, and the role of self-mobilisation and digital tools. It also demonstrates that factors such as age, life stage, gender and migration background played a central role in self-organisation, and that, although workers' organisations did not always respond positively, self-organisation was essential.

The insight that self-organisation matters, and that its role is more important and complex than is usually assumed, is relevant to sociological and historical debates. It encourages sociologists to take self-organisation more seriously when analysing and developing theories about how trade unions and/or social movements function. Additionally, it enables Dutch historians to move beyond the traditional focus on formal, modern trade union organisations and advance the emerging field of Dutch labour movement history. Furthermore, this dissertation brings insights from global labour history to the Global North and demonstrates the benefits and potential of comparing formal and informal organisations in different sectors and at different points in time.

The Everyday Environment of Workers

The everyday experience of work influenced whether workers (self-)organised. In addition to demonstrating that similar developments could have different effects, this study identifies cooperation with colleagues as an important factor. Those who worked in close proximity (in terms of working environment and hours) and those who had been colleagues for a long period of time (in terms of seniority) were more willing and persistent in organising together. Conversely, colleagues who were divided by organisational history, language or schedules were less likely to organise and take action. In addition, it mattered not only how employers created workplace divisions, but also how workers' organisations and workers dealt with them. Some organisations perpetuated or even reinforced divisions by accepting or acquiescing to them, as it was shown that some workers challenged them. I also found that the attitudes of trade unions and the position of workers within the organisation were important factors in determining how flexibility affected workers' willingness to organise. Another conclusion is that the dynamics of (self-)organisation outside the workplace – that is, the role of communities – should not be overlooked.

By starting from the perspective of workers, I not only acknowledge the value

of writing about workers' experiences as such but also show that this leads to important new insights into the changes that have taken place in recent decades. This study reveals that, in some respects, workers in industrial and non-industrial workplaces faced very similar trends. Furthermore, it clarifies that, contrary to what is often argued in narratives of the neoliberal workplace, workers did resist the changes that were taking place.

In addition, it shows that the well-known features of today's workplace are much older than is often assumed. I trace the introduction and large-scale implementation of a variety of flexible contracts in the largest supermarket chain in the Netherlands to the period 1963–1972. Similarly, the Albert Heijn distribution centre in many ways proves to be the precursor of the distribution centres that are often discussed in academic literature and journalistic publications today.

It becomes clear that Dutch companies gave shape to the new, neoliberal workplace starting in the 1960s. This means that trends such as flexibilisation, robotisation and globalisation, which are often seen as fairly recent phenomena – going back ten or maybe 20 – in reality go much farther back, in some cases to the heyday of Fordism or the welfare state. Shaping these neoliberal workplaces was not always a linear process – experiments did not always follow each other directly – but it was often cumulative, as the experiences from the past formed the basis for new experiments and practices. Unox's core business strategy, for example, had its roots in the late 1970s and early 1980s, to reappear at several other key moments in the following decades, and to eventually result in the outsourcing of the entire factory in 2017.

These conclusions have several implications for the way we look at the Dutch economy. Firstly, it makes us realise that some distribution centres were almost as dependent on migrant labour in the past as they are today. This means that we are not so much dealing with a temporary shortage of Dutch labour, or a recent trend that Dutch people are less inclined to do this kind of work, but that these companies have developed a business model that relies on migrant workers. Secondly, it means that Dutch supermarkets have been committed to a business model that prioritises reducing labour costs by hiring cheap young workers for decades. This insight sits uneasily with the nationally dominant idea that working in a supermarket is good for young people because it gives them the opportunity to gain some work experience. Finally, the findings of this study challenge us to talk more about how inevitable relocation and outsourcing was and show that the impact of the disappearance of companies is not just about the loss of jobs. For workers, relocation and/or outsourcing meant that facilities disappeared or further investment in the area stopped. For workers' organisations, it meant the disappearance of places where workers could meet outside of work and build further ties.