Chapter 21
Trade unions in the Netherlands: Erosion of their power base in the stable Polder Model
Paul de Beer and Lisa Berntsen

Trade unions in the Netherlands are characterized by a strong institutional embeddedness, but their power base has been eroding. Since the Second World War, close cooperation between unions, employers’ associations and the government has been one of the defining characteristics of the Dutch ‘Polder’ system of industrial relations. As a consequence, unions have a strong influence on government policies, albeit at the price of accepting compromises that are not always understood by their rank and file. Moreover, unions are strongly represented at the industry level, the main level of collective bargaining, which covers approximately three-quarters of all employees and two-thirds of all employed persons (including self-employed). Often, affiliates of the three national confederations, the Confederation of Dutch Trade Unions (FNV, Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging), the Christian National Confederation (CNV, Christelijk Naatnaal Vakverbond) and the Confederation for Professionals (VCP, Vakcentrale voor Professionals), cooperate in collective bargaining, although recently an increasing number of collective agreements have not been signed by FNV affiliates, or have been signed only by small independent or in some cases ‘yellow’ unions. Because the FNV confederation organizes the lion share of union members, most attention in this chapter will be paid to FNV, and much less to the other confederations and the independent unions.
Table 21.1 Principal characteristics of trade unionism in the Netherlands

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1980</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2019</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total trade union membership</td>
<td>1,717,000</td>
<td>1,913,000</td>
<td>1,602,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women as a proportion of total membership</td>
<td>14 %</td>
<td>31 %</td>
<td>39 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gross union density</td>
<td>39 %</td>
<td>27 %</td>
<td>21 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net union density</td>
<td>35 %</td>
<td>22 %</td>
<td>15 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of confederations</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of affiliated unions (federations)*</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of independent unions</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collective bargaining coverage</td>
<td>85 %</td>
<td>82 %</td>
<td>76 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal level of collective bargaining</td>
<td>industry</td>
<td>industry</td>
<td>industry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Days not worked due to industrial action per 1,000 workers</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: * This number includes only affiliates of the two largest confederations, FNV and CNV.

Source: Appendix A1, CBS (Statline), FNV, CNV.

Whereas the unions’ institutional position is relatively stable, their power base is weakening, mainly because of the secular decline of union density, which has halved since the 1980s and currently stands at about 15 per cent of all employees (see Table 21.1). Moreover, because of membership ageing and the underrepresentation of young, flexible and migrant workers, union membership reflects the composition of the labour force less and less. New union strategies, in particular organizing, although successful in some industries, have not reversed the downward unionization trend. Employer strategies to circumvent collective agreements are also undermining the unions’ power base, for example by hiring agency workers or solo self-employed or by negotiating an agreement on terms of employment with the works council instead of bargaining with the unions. The unions’ political base has also weakened because all formal ties with political parties have been severed and dominant government policies have turned in a neoliberal direction since the 1990s. Hence, the argument running through this chapter is that, despite their strong institutional embeddedness and stable formal position, the unions’ power base has weakened and, consequently, they find it increasingly difficult to achieve their goals. In the longer run, this may also weaken their institutional base, which could ultimately result in marginalization.
Historical background and principal features of the industrial relations system

The Dutch industrial relations system, which today is often named the ‘Polder model’, finds its origins in the inter-war period, when a number of important laws were enacted that still constitute the core of the current system, in particular the Act on Collective Labour Agreements (1927) and the Act on the Mandatory Extension of Collective Labour Agreements (1937). The system came to full bloom after the Second World War. Immediately after the war, the Labour Foundation (StvdA, Stichting van de Arbeid) was formed by the central employers’ associations and the trade union confederations. The Foundation did not attain the central role in economic governance that the founders intended, but it nevertheless played a crucial role in the ‘guided wage policy’ that was in force until the early 1960s. Only after 1963, and formally after 1970, did collective bargaining become ‘free’, although the government still regularly intervened until 1981.

In 1950 the tripartite Socio-Economic Council (SER, Sociaal-Economische Raad) was established, composed of an equal number of union and employers’ representatives and independent Crown members, who are mostly academics, appointed by the government. This became the most important government advisory body on socio-economic policies. Both the Labour Foundation and the Socio-Economic Council reflect the long-standing tradition of consulting and consensus-seeking, in which collective actors, despite their different ideologies or religion, acknowledge that they have to cooperate in order to build and maintain a prosperous and relatively egalitarian society.

In the post-war period, this resulted in the so-called ‘pillarization’ of Dutch society. Society was divided into three ‘pillars’ (Catholic, Protestant and socialist, although sometimes a fourth ‘neutral’ pillar is distinguished), each with its own political parties, newspapers, broadcasting companies, schools, sports clubs and also trade unions. Despite the sharp dividing lines between the pillars, the respective leaderships were willing to cooperate and seek compromises across pillars to govern the country. This was also reflected in the positions taken by the union

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1 After the parts of the country that lie below sea level and are protected by dykes that have been built through the cooperation and joint effort of diverse societal groups.
confederations and their affiliates, which were willing to cooperate with each other despite their ideological differences.

In the course of the 1960s the pillars started to crumble, which led, among other things, to talks about closer cooperation between the confederations, ultimately resulting in a merger of the socialist and the Catholic confederations into the FNV. Depillarization also led to a more conflictual and polarized period in terms of relations between unions and employers during the 1970s. The 1982 Wassenaar Agreement marked the return to a phase of more consensual relations between the social partners. It was followed by a long series of bipartite and tripartite national agreements and social pacts, which have become typical of the Polder model.

The system of industrial relations has long been characterized by a high collective bargaining coverage rate of around 75–85 per cent of all employees. This high coverage is mainly the result of high employer density: approximately 80 per cent of all employees work for an employer who is a member of an employer association, most of which conclude collective agreements that apply to all their employees. Bargaining takes place primarily at the industry level, and the extension of collective agreements at this level further explains the high coverage. Since the Wassenaar Agreement and in particular since the New Course agreement of 1993, however, industry collective agreements increasingly leave room for individual employers to deviate from the agreement, mostly after consulting the works council.

**Structure of trade unions and union democracy**

Faced with declining union membership and weakening political influence, the three main union confederations, FNV, CNV and VCP, have all undergone organizational changes in recent years. Since the 1990s, there has been a series of mergers, especially in the largest confederation, FNV. As a consequence, two affiliates, *FNV Bondgenoten*, which resulted from a merger or amalgamation of a number of private sector unions in 1998, and *AbvaKabo FNV*, the largest public sector union, became by far the largest affiliates within FNV, representing about two-thirds of its membership. In 2015, these two affiliates, together with the construction workers’ union (*FNV Bouw*) and a few smaller affiliates, amalgamated with the confederation to form one big union (see Figure 21.1). This undivided FNV includes twenty-three sectors (including separate sectors...
Trade unions in the Netherlands

for women, young people and seniors). Eleven smaller FNV affiliates (most of them representing specific occupations, such as teachers, journalists and police officers) did not merge into the undivided FNV but remained independent, out of fear of losing their identity. As a result FNV now has individual members as well as (industry) unions as affiliates, making it a union and a confederation at the same time (de Beer and Keune 2018).

**Figure 21.1** Structure of FNV

![Diagram of FNV structure](https://www.fnv.nl/over-de-fnv/wie-we-zijn/ledenparlement)

This merger was the outcome of the internal governance struggles created by the crisis within FNV that occurred in 2011 when *FNV Bondgenoten* and *AbvaKabo FNV* refused to accept the pension agreement reached between the unions, the employers’ associations and the government (de Beer 2013). The agreement boiled down to a transition from a defined-benefit to a defined-contribution scheme, which was decried by its adversaries as a ‘casino pension’. The internal crisis was also fuelled by the dominance of the two affiliates that represented the large majority of FNV membership and the tension between two opposing currents within FNV advocating different union strategies. On one hand, one group, strongly represented in the two largest affiliates, pleaded for a more activist strategy, for instance, through organizing activities (see below), while another group, including the majority of the confederation’s executive committee, favoured a more consensual approach to maintain good relations with the employers and the government. Although the merger did not resolve the tension between these two currents, it became less overt.
because the major protagonists in the conflict, the presidents of the confederation and the two largest affiliates, resigned.

Within the amalgamated FNV, which currently has just under 1 million members, a members’ assembly is the main decision-making body: they determine long-term union strategies, control the FNV board and have a deciding vote on board proposals. The assembly consists of 103 elected or assigned (unpaid) union members from both the undivided FNV and the independent affiliates. Each of the twenty-three sectors has one or more representatives in the members’ assembly. The number of representatives depends on the sector’s membership size: education, for instance, has eight seats; the self-employed sector one; the sector ‘seniors’ has eighteen seats; and the sector ‘young people’ has one seat. The assembly meets every month. There are no public minutes from the members’ assembly meetings and only the discussion headlines are published on the FNV website.

Within the undivided part of the FNV, the sectors are subordinated to the members’ assembly, which decides, for example, on collective bargaining policy. The extent to which union officials at the sectoral (industry) level can follow their own bargaining course varies. FNV’s ‘independent’ affiliates have more room to manoeuvre, despite their formal subordination to the member assembly’s decisions.

Also, within the second largest, but much smaller Christian confederation, CNV, affiliates merged to strengthen their position in the face of declining membership rates. In 2015, the public sector unions merged into CNV Connectief (c. 100,000 members), and in 2010 the manufacturing, construction and transport unions merged into CNV Vakmensen, which subsequently merged with the union of artists in 2011 and with the services union in 2016, although these were actually more like acquisitions. It now has approximately 140,000 members. These two unions now account for the large majority of CNV membership. This has not led to (overt) tensions comparable to those in FNV, however. CNV’s highest decision-making body is the General Assembly, consisting of representatives of the affiliates, in proportion to their membership, which convenes

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2 See https://www.fnv.nl/over-de-fnv/wie-we-zijn/ledenparlement

3 The unions CNV Onderwijs (education), Overheid (public sector), Zorg & Welzijn (health and well-being) and Publieke Diensten (public services) still exist under the CNV Connectief umbrella.
twice a year. Each affiliate delegates a representative to the general board, which also includes the executive committee appointed by the General Assembly for a period of four years (CNV 2011). In 2012, the General Christian Police Union (ACP, Algemene Christelijke Politiebond), dissatisfied with the confederation’s overall course, decided to leave CNV, which currently has a membership of approximately 240,000.

The smallest union confederation, MHP (Vakcentrale voor Middelbaar en Hoger Personeel), which organized mainly middle and senior staff, experienced the departure of its largest affiliate, De Unie, in 2013 because it disagreed with the course of the confederation. This meant that MHP lost almost half of its members. In 2015, MHP together with ACP formed a new confederation under the name of the Confederation for Professionals (VCP). VCP now has over fifty mostly small affiliates, including De Unie, that joined VCP in 2017, and it has a total of 160,000 members.

Meanwhile, the Netherlands has seen an increase in the number of independent unions. These are mainly affiliates that have left a union confederation because of a policy disagreement, not newly established independent unions. The total membership of independent unions has increased by half over the past twenty years (de Beer and Keune 2018: 253). Independent unions often organize specific occupational groups, such as civil servants or train operators. Next to these independent unions, there is probably an increasing number of ‘yellow unions’, which are largely dependent on (funding from) employers. An interesting, yet controversial example is the Alternative to Union (AVV, Alternatief voor Vakbond), which claims to represent groups of workers, such as young people, flexible workers and self-employed, that established unions represent only inadequately. Although AVV has only a small number of members – approximately 700 – they claim to be more representative than other unions because they gauge the opinion of the employees of a company via workforce surveys. Because they are financially almost completely dependent on the contributions of the employers or employers’ associations with which they conclude a collective agreement, their independence has been questioned by the established unions (Delhaas and Davidson 2020).

Both CNV and FNV have specific union bodies for young people (CNV Jongeren with 1,400 members and FNV Jong with 8,000 members), although youth membership is generally low in both unions (less than 5 per cent of total membership is under the age of 25). The youth
section in CNV was established in 1955 as an independent union body within the confederation. The need for a specific youth section in FNV has been subject to internal debates over the years. In the 1990s, the FNV youth section was dissolved, because of the small membership and the internal strategy to represent youth interests primarily via the sectors. In 2011, the youth section was re-established, after AVV criticized established unions for neglecting the interests of young people (Keune and Tros 2014). Through the use of social media, lobbying and issue-based alliances, FNV Jong has put youth issues on the FNV’s agenda and has had some public influence (Vandaele 2013), especially during the FNV Young and United youth wage campaign in 2015–2016 (see below).

**Unionization**

Total union membership increased continuously from 805,000 in 1945 to 1,792,000 in 1979, then dropped slightly until 1984, to rise again to its peak of 1,923,000 in 2002. After that, membership declined by more than 300,000 (–17 per cent) to 1,602,000 in 2019, the lowest number in almost half a century. Although membership peaked in 2002, the net union density rate had already reached its highest point in 1975 with 33.6 per cent and subsequently declined steadily, with a brief intermission between 1990 and 1994 – the term of the popular FNV chairman Johan Stekelenburg. In 2019, net union density stood at 15.4 per cent, less than half the density rate of 1975.

As in many countries, union density varies strongly between industries. It is highest in public administration, education, manufacturing, construction and transport, and lowest in financial services, retail and wholesale, and hospitality (see Table 21.2). Union density has declined in all industries, however, and most dramatically in some more highly organized industries. From 2007 to 2018, union density fell by 11 to 12 percentage points in, for instance, construction, transport and public administration and by 8 points in manufacturing, whereas it declined by 3 to 4 percentage points in retail and wholesale, education and health care (TNO/CBS, microdata NEA 2007 and 2018).

The basic explanation for the decline of union membership is that each new (younger) generation is joining a union less often than the previous generation. This is illustrated by the membership rates presented in Table 21.2. The table shows that union density increases with age and
Declines over time. If one compares the union density of specific age groups in 2009 with the next – 10 years older – age group in 2018, one notices little change in union density over time within cohorts, but overall density decreases as older cohorts are replaced by younger cohorts. This tendency contributes to the ageing of union membership, because the difference in membership rates between older and younger workers is increasing. Moreover, an increasing share of union membership consists of retirees.

The declining trend in union membership can only partly be explained by the growth of the labour market segments with a low union density, such as business and consumer services, and atypical contracts, such as fixed-term contracts, agency work, on-call work or solo self-employment, because membership is also declining within segments with a higher union density. Because union density among part-time workers and female workers – largely overlapping groups – is only slightly lower than among full-time workers and male workers (see Table 21.2), the growth of part-time and female employment does not explain the decline of union membership, either.

A recent time series analysis revealed that union decline is partly explained by the long process of wage ‘moderation’ (de Beer and Berntsen 2019). Each percentage point increase of contractual wages boosts membership by about 0.16 per cent. Apparently, employees are more likely to join a union when they see that it has been able to raise wages. Interestingly, a reduction in public expenditure on social benefits as a percentage of GDP by 1 percentage point increases union membership by 0.94 per cent. Apparently, (potential) union members perceive unions as a shield against the risk of unemployment and therefore as a substitute for state protection.
Table 21.2 Net union density rate by member categories, 2009 and 2018/2019

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2009 (%)</th>
<th>2018/2019 (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>24</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>less than 25</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 to 35</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35 to 45</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45 to 55</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55 to 65</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Educational attainment</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Working time</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Contract type</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permanent</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexible</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sector</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail, wholesale</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport, logistics</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospitality</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information, communication</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial services</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business services</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public administration</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health care, social services</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture, sports, recreation</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Although the unions’ institutional position does not directly depend on membership or their capacity to mobilize, the continuous decline in membership undermines representative legitimacy and has led unions to explore new strategies to halt this decline, stimulate member engagement and revitalize their organization. Initiatives focus particularly on attracting and engaging new and underrepresented groups of workers, such as women, young workers, self-employed workers and (im)migrant workers (Kloosterboer 2007). Membership growth is high on the FNV agenda: FNV launched an organization-wide membership plan in 2020 to strengthen membership recruitment and retention, putting particular emphasis on attracting and engaging young members. FNV has further introduced organizing methods to extend representation of underrepresented groups. CNV, on the other hand, experiments with member and non-member engagements to enhance its representativeness.

FNV commenced its organizing efforts after the 2005 FNV Congress established worker engagement and representation of underrepresented groups as crucial issues. Some of the assertive organizing techniques diverge from the consensus-based action repertoire characteristic of the social partnership tradition. The outcomes in the form of extended regulation via collective agreements and representation of workers, however, have enhanced the unions’ institutional power base (Connolly et al. 2017; Knotter 2017). While organizing was introduced to attract and engage a new membership base, its tactics and narrative have also stimulated internal reflection and debate on union purpose and identity (Connolly et al. 2017). It has, for example, led to organizational changes: an organizing department, established in 2009 within FNV Bondgenoten, was continued as an internal department in the amalgamated FNV, employing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2009 (%)</th>
<th>2018/2019 (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed/disabled</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pensioners</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Employees only, except unemployed, disabled and pensioners.

around 100 organizers (Tamminga 2017: 89). The scope of organizing compared with servicing and partnership – the latter with employers and the state – remains small, as FNV has a total of around 2,000 paid employees. Still, organizing has led to changed and qualitatively different social relationships within FNV’s overall social dialogue repertoire (Connolly et al. 2017: 332). At the same time, organizing is not uncontested in FNV: it is labour-intensive, especially when one compares the ratios of organizers versus union officers (bestuurders) to the number of members, and campaigns in low-member and low-wage sectors have been cross-financed by more affluent sectors of FNV, such as manufacturing and construction.

The first organizing drive in the Netherlands was the ‘Clean Enough’ (Schoon genoeg) campaign by FNV Bondgenoten in 2007, modelled on the American Service Employees International Union’s successful ‘Justice for Janitors’ campaign. The ‘Clean Enough’ campaign combined grassroots organizing, direct action – including prolonged strike action in 2010 and 2012 – and broad coalition formation to pressure employers and contractors to improve pay and working conditions in cleaning. FNV Bondgenoten officials were trained by American colleagues in organizing techniques, including methods of identifying workplace leaders, (re)building workplace collectives and activating members. Inspiration for public actions during the campaign was taken from exemplary campaigns in the United States and Britain (Connolly et al. 2017). FNV mobilized a significant share of cleaners, despite the fragmented nature of their employment and workplaces. This resulted in collective agreements with better wages and working conditions, and increased membership and mobilizing capacity in the sector. The increase in union membership among cleaners was highest in the first few years of the campaign, but levelled off subsequently.

Other organizing campaigns were conducted in care in 2011–2017; in supermarket distribution centres in 2009–2013; and at the national airport Schiphol since 2013, which is still ongoing. The Schiphol campaign has organized workers based on the shared geographical location of their work, instead of their specific job or organization. The organizing activities have led to various types of industrial action, including work stoppages of security personnel, freight handlers, ground stewards at KLM and cabin crew at Ryanair, and to an increase in passive and active membership among various types of jobs at Schiphol airport (de Beer and van der Valk 2020).
Organizing also contributes to union renewal. The fact that it brings in a new cohort of officials and organizers, equipped with different toolboxes of union tactics, shifts the focus, at least in part, towards social movement unionism (Connolly et al. 2017: 330). The question is, how new methods of operation are incorporated and structurally embedded within conventional union practices. One way to bridge organizing and partnership practices could be found in what Mundlak (2020) has called ‘integrative innovations’. One example is the cleaners’ assembly, established during the cleaners’ campaign. This is a representative body of elected cleaners and an elected president who joins the negotiating team at industry-level negotiations. The cleaners’ assembly functions independently of the FNV’s organizing team as a democratic instrument to build worker participation from the ground up. Mundlak, however, points to the difficulty for the assembly of continuing on its own without the organizing division’s support, now that the industry’s campaign has come to a close (Mundlak 2020: 189).

While migrants and ethnic minority workers are underrepresented in unions’ membership base (Kranendonk and de Beer 2016), FNV has attracted migrant members via a number of campaigns (Roosblad and Berntsen 2017). The exact number of migrant members is unknown, because their nationality is not recorded. The cleaners’ campaign mentioned above organized many ethnic minority workers in the industry. With campaigns for equal pay for equal work at the same workplace, FNV fights the underpayment and poor working conditions of mobile/migrant European Union (EU) workers. Although, on occasion, FNV has mobilized EU migrant workers, including posted workers, retaining their membership has proved challenging (Berntsen and Lillie 2016). Specifically, advances were made with a short-term cross-industrial initiative within FNV informing Polish workers, mainly in agriculture and meat-processing, about their rights in the Netherlands in 2013–2015. The idea behind this initiative, called the ‘Polish brigade’ (Poolse brigade) was to improve union accessibility for migrants with flexible jobs. Advances have also been made in activating Polish union members; for example, in 2014 the first group of Polish shop floor representatives finished an FNV training course. Still, the overall number of Polish union members remains small. With the ‘Matter of Civilization’ (Kwestie van beschaving) campaign since 2019, FNV has raised public awareness of the precarious conditions of migrant workers coming from other member states within the EU. The campaign has brought together an active group of migrant...
workers who publicly share their experiences. For instance, they shared the problematic coupling of work and housing practices by temporary agency firms, which have become poignantly visible during the Covid-19 pandemic. The membership and engagement of EU migrants have been developed particularly by FNV officials with Polish and Romanian backgrounds. This is part of several – though not all successful – initiatives by FNV since the 1990s to increase its organizational diversity. Despite these initiatives, migrant and ethnic minority workers remain underrepresented, especially in more senior staff positions (Roosblad 2013).

The increasing proportion of solo self-employed persons (zzp, zelfstandigen zonder personeel) in the workforce has led unions to focus more on this group. Self-employed workers and freelancers have always been able to join unions, such as the Union for Journalists (Nederlandse Vereniging van Journalisten) and the Union for Creative Professions (Kunstenbond). In 2000, FNV established the first union for self-employed workers with FNV Zelfstandige Bondgenoten, which later became FNV ZZP and joined the undivided FNV in 2015. Although relatively small in size, with around 10,000 members in 2017, FNV ZZP sets itself clear membership goals: in the period 2017–2022 it aims to recruit 15,000 new members (FNV 2016a: 5).

FNV has also developed activities involving workers in the platform economy. Freelance food delivery riders organized themselves in the Riders Union, which later became integrated as a section within FNV as the FNV Riders Union. When Deliveroo changed the employment contracts of delivery workers into freelance contracts, FNV successfully challenged this change of employment status before the court, which ruled that the delivery workers should be considered employees of Deliveroo. While the FNV Riders Unions was relatively active initially, with well-covered protest actions by the media, it is more or less dormant now. This is again indicative of the difficulties unions face embedding new initiatives in established union structures. On the other hand, unions’ engagement with platform food delivery services may be informed by attempts to regulate the platform economy in general, and not so much by the desire to build up a membership base among platform workers (Vandaele 2020).

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4 See https://kwestievanbeschaving.nl/english/
5 See https://fnvzzp.nl/nieuws/2017/01/fnv-zelfstandigen-nu-integraal-onderdeel-van-fnv
Trade unions in the Netherlands

CNV does not use organizing to strengthen its position, because it does not fit well with its more consensual approach. Instead, CNV aims to create more engagement between members and non-members to become a more representative organization, even if that means having fewer members (van der Valk 2020). One initiative aimed at promoting such engagement is the CNV project ‘James career counselling’, available to both CNV members and non-members. Membership recruitment is not one of its objectives, but the project does actively approach people on the shop floor, especially in cases of upcoming bankruptcy, to encourage workers to think about career development (van der Valk 2020). The ‘Try the Union’ (Probeer de Bond) initiative of CNV Vakmensen aims to attract young members by informing students in vocational education about unionism and offering free union membership to students. It aims to recruit 5,000 to 6,000 non-paying members each year, of whom 20–30 per cent become paying union members after finishing their studies. The plan is to extend the programme to universities of applied sciences (de Beer and van der Valk 2020).

Union resources and expenditure

Trade unions’ main sources of funding are membership fees, employer contributions when concluding collective agreements, income from social and pension funds, and, for the well-endowed unions such as FNV, returns on investments. There is no state funding of unions, although particular activities, such as training and support for unions in developing countries, receive some government subsidies. In general, unions are relatively well-endowed. How financially solid they are is not exactly clear, however, because no annual accounts are published. Recently, financial details were leaked to the press, indicating that FNV’s wealth totals some 739 million euros (€), of which €67 million is allocated to the strike fund (Kuijpers and Van Keken 2020). The financial reserves are mostly brought in by wealthy affiliates, such as FNV Bondgenoten and FNV Bouw. Within FNV, these wealthy affiliates helped finance less well-off

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6 See https://www.cnvvakmensen.nl/probeerdebond

7 In 2019, FNV’s return on investments was €73.7 million; in 2018 FNV made a loss of €21.6 million (Kuijpers and Van Keken 2020).
affiliates through ‘cross-subsidies’. Also, financial reserves are earmarked to fund incidental costs or expenditures.

Even though the unions are well resourced, their position is under strain because of declining union income, as membership contributions diminish and employer contributions tail off because fewer collective agreements are concluded. The extent to which the unions’ financial position is under pressure is not known. Since the 2015 merger, FNV has not published a public annual report. Annual financial reports are not shared by CNV either. Despite FNV’s well-endowed strike fund and financial buffer against investment risks, its financial solidity is precarious. In 2015, the members’ assembly questioned the use of financial reserves for incidental costs or structural expenditure (Het Financieele Dagblad, 22 January 2016). For FNV, annual structural deficits of €24 million, mainly because of declining membership fees, led to the announcement of restructuring in 2019, including a plan to cut about 20 per cent of staff. According to the leadership, structural expenditure should be financed from structural revenues (De Volkskrant, 21 May 2019). The restructuring plans were put on hold after internal protests, however, leaving the issue of financial solidity unresolved (De Vries 2019).

For most collective agreements signed, the unions receive an employer contribution per employee. This arrangement dates back to 1966, when it was signed off by the General Employers Association (AWVN, Algemene Werkgeversvereniging Nederland), and the predecessors of FNV, CNV Vakmensen and De Unie. In 2020, the AWVN determined the contribution at €21.43 per employee when a new collective agreement is concluded. Although this money cannot be used to fund strike activities, it can be used for union officials’ salaries. The Foundation Industrial Unions Fund (FIB, Stichting Fonds Industriële Bonden) distributes the money to the signing unions, after employers indicate the number of employees covered by the collective agreement, based on a ratio determined by the unions. In recent years, an increasing number of collective agreements have been concluded without FNV as signatory party. According to the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, in the period 2013–2018, 40 per cent of

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8 Where the established unions miss out on these employer contributions, these contributions benefit the smaller, new, ‘yellow’ unions that do sign these agreements.
9 Independent unions in FNV do publish annual reports online, such as FNV Horeca.
10 See https://www.awvn.nl/nieuws/awvn-werkgeversbijdrageregeling-werkgeversbijdrage-2020/
employees were covered by a newly closed collective agreement not signed by FNV.\textsuperscript{11} FNV’s stance of refraining from signing ‘bad’ collective agreements directly infringes on an important source of income.\textsuperscript{12} Around 20 per cent of FNV’s income is derived from employer fees (Jansma 2019).

CNV derives 27 per cent of its income from employer contributions, De Unie 19 per cent (Jansma 2019). For AVV, employer contributions and structural fees from social funds are its main sources of income. AVV estimates that less than 3 per cent of its total income originates from membership contributions. Structural fees from social funds (67 per cent), employer contributions (16 per cent) and project fees from social funds (12 per cent) are more important sources of income.\textsuperscript{13} This has raised questions about AVV’s independence (Jansma 2019; Julen 2020).

As already mentioned, unions are not publicly financed but they obtain government subsidies for particular activities. The CNV youth union, which is an independent union body under the CNV umbrella, attracts external funding, for instance, through collaborative projects with municipalities, operating on a project basis. International activities, such as support for unions in developing countries, are often subsidized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Unions also attract income from attendance fees (\textit{vacatiegelden}), for instance when union employees are on the board of a pension or sectoral fund. For AVV, 2.3 per cent of its annual income is derived from attendance fees.\textsuperscript{14}

The monthly membership contributions for FNV and CNV are similar, differing by income category, whereas CNV membership contributions also differ by industry (see Table 21.3). Both unions grant free membership in exceptional cases. FNV offered free membership for a year during the Young & United youth wage campaign. CNV Vakmensen has a free membership option for young people in vocational education, part of the ‘Try the Union’ project mentioned above. CNV offers young people, working or studying, a reduced membership rate of €1.50; FNV has a youth rate for students in full-time education of €2.08.

\textsuperscript{11} By comparison, only 13 per cent of employees in the same period were covered by a collective agreement not signed by CNV; Ministerie van SZW (2019) in de rapportage Cao-afspraken 2018, p. 141.

\textsuperscript{12} In 2018, 20 collective agreements were concluded without FNV, amounting to a possible €15 million loss of revenues; estimation by De Waard, Peter (2018) ‘Waarom betalen niet-leden ook vakbondscontribution?’ De Volkskrant 11 July 2018.

\textsuperscript{13} According to the 2020 budget.

\textsuperscript{14} According to the 2020 budget.
The unions offer their members similar benefits and services, providing legal advice on work and income, assistance with filing tax returns, career counselling, help in case of occupational disease, and reductions on various products and services, such as insurance, education or mobile phone subscriptions. FNV and CNV also offer their members discount health insurance, although FNV cancelled this in 2019, because no new agreement could be reached that satisfied both FNV and the health insurance company.

**Table 21.3** Monthly membership fees of FNV and CNV (in Euro), 2020

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FNV membership fees</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>full-time students</td>
<td>2.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>income &lt; € 826.00; unemployed or retired</td>
<td>8.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>income between € 826.00 and € 1,653.60</td>
<td>12.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>regular membership</td>
<td>17.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CNV membership fees</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CNV Vakmensen</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>income below € 1,051</td>
<td>5.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>income between € 1,051 and € 1,578</td>
<td>12.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>income between € 1,578 and € 2,630</td>
<td>17.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>income above € 2,630</td>
<td>19.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNV Connectief</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>income less than half minimum wage</td>
<td>9.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>income less than minimum wage; workers below 26 years old in education</td>
<td>12.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>regular membership</td>
<td>17.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNV Jongeren</td>
<td>1.50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: CNV and FNV.

The unions offer their members similar benefits and services, providing legal advice on work and income, assistance with filing tax returns, career counselling, help in case of occupational disease, and reductions on various products and services, such as insurance, education or mobile phone subscriptions. FNV and CNV also offer their members discount health insurance, although FNV cancelled this in 2019, because no new agreement could be reached that satisfied both FNV and the health insurance company.

**Collective bargaining and unions at the workplace**

Collective bargaining takes place both at company and industry level. Although there are more company level than industry (multi-employer) agreements (475 versus 176), the vast majority (91 per cent) of employees covered by a collective agreement are covered by an industry agreement. Industry agreements can be either standard, minimum or framework agreements. A standard agreement prescribes all terms of employment; a minimum agreement formulates only a basic level, which means that the employer can deviate from the agreement if it is more favourable to the employees; and a framework agreement leaves room to deviate from the standard if the employer and the works council agree on this.
Almost all collective agreements are concluded with one or more affiliates of the three confederations. Sometimes, one or more independent unions sign the agreement, too. Increasingly, collective agreements are not signed by affiliates of all three confederations. In particular, the largest union, FNV, refuses to undersign agreements that do not meet their minimum standards. Sometimes, collective agreements are signed only by a very small independent or ‘yellow’ union.

Although bargaining coverage is high and relatively stable, it has declined somewhat in recent years. Probably more important is the increased circumvention of collective agreements by employers. The manoeuvres they employ for this purpose include hiring solo self-employed workers who are not covered by a collective agreement, or agency workers who are covered by a ‘cheaper’ collective agreement, or outsourcing services – for instance, cleaning or catering – to an industry with a collective agreement with less generous terms of employment. This erodes the effective scope of collective agreements, even though bargaining coverage remains stable.

There are no recent studies of the wage-effect of collective bargaining. The Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis (CPB 2016) concluded that mandatory extension raises wages on average by 2 per cent, varying between 4 per cent in a boom (2007) and zero in an economic slump (2011). The CPB compares wages under mandatory extension with the hypothetical situation that all employees are directly covered by a collective agreement, in which case extension makes little sense. An alternative reading of the CPB analysis is that mandatory extension lowers wages by 2 to 4 per cent compared with a situation in which the employees who are subject to extension are not covered by a collective agreement (De Beer 2016). There is thus little evidence of a positive mark-up effect of collective bargaining. There are no studies of the non-wage effects of collective bargaining, though it is probably beneficial for secondary terms of employment, such as pension schemes and training facilities, for instance, through industrial training funds.

Another indicator of the impact of collective bargaining on wages is the difference between the evolution of contractual wages and earnings over time. Figure 21.2 shows index figures of real contractual wages and real earnings – that is, after correcting for consumer price increases – since 1970. Real contractual wages have been virtually stable since 1979! This means that unions have, overall, only managed to adjust wages to inflation and have not realized any real wage increase over the past forty years. In the same period, real earnings increased by 18 per cent, which
points to a positive wage drift of, on average, 0.5 per cent per year. This prolonged period of wage moderation has been heralded both as the ‘secret’ of the Polder Model and the engine of strong job growth (Visser and Hemerijck 1996) and as a drag on innovation and productivity growth (Becker 2005).

Since 1999, FNV has striven for a stronger increase in the lowest contractual wages than the average pay rise. In 2010, a wage floor target of 1.3 times the minimum wage was formulated (FNV 2010: 5). Nevertheless, Figure 21.3 shows that the opposite happened. Since 1990, the lowest contractual wages have declined in real terms and the gap between the lowest contractual wages and the minimum wage narrowed from 12 per cent on average in 1993 to only 2 per cent in 2018. In more than half of collective agreements, weighted by the number of employees, the lowest wage is now equal to, or even lower than, the mandatory minimum wage. As a consequence, half a century after its introduction in 1969, the minimum wage is increasingly becoming the actual wage floor. Given that the minimum wage strongly lagged behind contractual wages from 1983 to 1996, because the government refrained from regular indexation, the relative level of this wage floor has plummeted, however.

**Figure 21.2** Evolution of real contractual wages and real earnings since 1970

Note: 1970= 100. Authors’ calculations.
Source: CBS (Statline).
Of course, wages are only one component of collective bargaining. It is possible that improvements in other terms of employment have compensated for wage losses. Quantitative indicators cannot trace these other terms of employment over time, but in any case it seems unlikely that they could fully compensate wage losses. Pension contributions, the most important non-wage component in terms of ‘costs’, have increased strongly in recent decades. Because the employer usually pays two-thirds of pension contributions, actual wage ‘costs’ have increased more than contractual wages. Even if these pension contributions are taken into account, however, total wage ‘costs’ have declined, from 58 per cent of GDP in 1980 to 48 per cent in 2018.

Special perks for union members in collective agreements, although legally not forbidden, are rare. Unions seem to fear that such perks might harm unions’ legitimacy as representatives of all employees and may also jeopardize the quasi-automatic mandatory extension of collective agreements to all companies in an industry, although perks for union members
are excluded from such extension. Special measures for union members, however, such as special support or additional severance pay, are not uncommon in the ‘social plans’ that are often concluded between unions and companies in cases of mass redundancy.

The presence of unions on the shop floor has always been weak in the Netherlands. When the Labour Foundation was established in 1945, the unions accepted that they would play no role whatsoever at the workplace in exchange for a prominent role at the national and industry levels. In 1950, the Act on Works Councils established works councils as workers’ representative body at the company level. Although works council competences were extended in 1979, most councils still do not exert a significant influence on company strategy. The unions usually nominate candidates for works council elections, but an increasing number of members are independent and do not represent a union.

Occasionally, individual companies negotiate with their works council on a collective agreement. Legally, this is not a collective labour agreement – which can only be concluded by a trade union – and instead is called a ‘terms of employment regulation’, which cannot be enforced on all employees. Nevertheless, some companies find this an attractive alternative to bargaining with the unions. In an increasing number of cases, industry collective agreements allow companies to deviate from particular clauses after consulting the works council, even if these are detrimental to the employees. Several industry agreements distinguish between mandatory clauses and terms of employment that can be negotiated with the works council at the company level.

**Industrial conflict**

Dutch workers have never been very strike prone. In rankings of the countries with the largest numbers of days lost due to industrial conflict, the Netherlands always shows up somewhere near the bottom. This is probably because of its strong consensual tradition and the division of unions as a consequence of pillarization. Despite ideological differences, union leaderships have traditionally been characterized by their willingness to deliberate and seek compromises. Figure 21.4 shows that the number of strikes declined substantially after the 1970s. Since the 1980s, the annual number of strikes has hovered between twenty and twenty-five. The numbers of day lost per 1,000 workers varies strongly,
reaching an all-time low in the first decade of the twenty-first century but increasing strongly in recent years. On average, forty-three days were lost per 1,000 workers in the period 2017–2019, a figure comparable to the 1970s. The share of workers that participated in strikes was even higher than at any time since the 1960s.

**Figure 21.4** Number of strikes, days not worked due to industrial action (per 1,000 employees) and workers involved, averages per decade

These strikes took place mainly in the public sector, in particular in education and health care, in which a number of 24-hour strikes were declared. This was because of increased dissatisfaction in the public sector with the fact that wages lagged behind the private sector as a consequence of ‘austerity’ policies. Another general trend in industrial action is that most strikes are relatively brief but involve a large proportion of the workforce. The average number of workers participating in a strike tripled from about 1,000 in the 1970s to almost 3,000 in the 2010s. This is partly explained by the shift to the public sector, where bargaining units are relatively large.

Union members usually receive strike benefit from their union. FNV pays an average strike benefit of €75.44 per day (€64 for the first five
days, €87 after that).\textsuperscript{15} Whereas in the past each affiliate had its own strike fund, currently FNV has one central strike fund, which amounts to €67 million.\textsuperscript{16} If a strike is declared in a particular industry, the strikers will receive a benefit only if the confederation board approves the strike. CNV Vakmensen pays a similar amount.\textsuperscript{17}

Unions also organize other forms of industrial action, such as rallies, work to rule actions and petitions. No statistics are available about such actions, so it is difficult to determine whether their frequency and size vary over time. Although general strikes are virtually absent in the Netherlands, the unions sometimes organize large demonstrations to put pressure on the government. The largest post-war union-organized demonstration took place on 2 October 2004 in Amsterdam, when about 300,000 people demonstrated against the government plan to abolish early retirement schemes. Later demonstrations have never attracted over 100,000 participants. For example, the largest union rally of recent years was a demonstration by teachers in October 2017 in The Hague, in which 60,000 people participated.

**Political relations**

In the past, relatively strong institutional ties existed between the union confederations and political parties, as part of the pillarized society. The breakdown of pillarization in the 1960s and 1970s also meant that the ties between the confederations and the political parties were loosened. Nevertheless, informal contacts and consultations between them continued to play an important role. Although not visible to the outside observer, there is ample anecdotal evidence that confederations and political parties often consult each other and align their stances with regard to important political issues. Nowadays, CNV maintains most contact with the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA, Christen-Democratisch Appèl), whereas FNV has links with the social democratic Labour Party (PvdA, Partij van de Arbeid), as well as with the more radical left-wing Socialist Party (Socialistische Partij) and the Green Party (GroenLinks).

\textsuperscript{15} See https://www.fnv.nl/werk-inkomen/staken/stakingsuitkering
\textsuperscript{16} See https://www.vn.nl/fnv-transparant/. This is less than 10 % of total equity of FNV, which amounts to €739 million.
\textsuperscript{17} See https://www.cnvvakmensen.nl/diensten/kennisbank/stakingsuitkering
A recent example is the coordination between FNV, on one hand, and the PvdA and GroenLinks, on the other, during the negotiations between the confederations, the employers and the government about pension system reform in 2019. Because the centre-left government needed the support of the two left-wing parties to attain a majority in the Senate, the tuning between the confederations and those parties was an important precondition for passing the pension reform in Parliament.

Another indication that there are still important informal ties between the confederations and political parties is the significant number of former union officials who have become politicians in one of these parties. The best known example is Wim Kok, the former FNV chairman (1976–1985) who became leader of the PvdA in 1986 and later prime minister (1994–2002). More recent examples include former FNV chair Agnes Jongerius, who is now a member of the European Parliament for the PvdA, former CNV vice-chair Aart Jan de Geus, who became Minister of Social Affairs and Employment for the CDA, and former chair of Young-CNv Jesse Klaver, who is now leader of the Parliamentary group of GroenLinks.

The confederations also play an important role in the (neo-)corporatist Polder model, in which regular consultation of the confederations—usually together with the employers’ associations—by the government about important socio-economic issues takes place in various forms. The tripartite Socio-Economic Council is one of the government’s most influential advisory bodies. The bipartite Labour Foundation is not only an important body for national-level discussions between the social partners, but also acts as a representative of their common interests vis-à-vis the government. Many social pacts concluded since the 1982 Wassenaar Agreement have been the outcome of negotiations between the Labour Foundation and the government. Finally, there is also ample informal consulting between union and government officials. The key players in the Polder model—union officials, employers’ representatives and ministers—know each other’s phone numbers and will not hesitate to call or text if they want to discuss a pressing issue. As a consequence, important changes in socio-economic policy never pass Parliament unless they have been extensively discussed with the social partners and only rarely without the consent of the confederations.

Populist right-wing parties have enjoyed increasing success in the Netherlands in recent decades, including the Freedom Party (PVV, Partij voor de Vrijheid) and, more recently, the Forum for Democracy.
(FvD, *Forum voor Democratie*). Whereas the confederations were quite outspoken against racism and xenophobia during the 1980s and 1990s, in recent decades they have been rather silent on these issues. There is an internal debate on whether FNV should publicly denounce the ideas of PVV and FvD (*Trouw*, 20 April 2019). The call from Geert Wilders of the PVV for ‘fewer Moroccans’ in Dutch society during the 2014 municipal election campaign was an exception, as confederations publicly denounced this statement for its racist and discriminatory message (Roosblad and Berntsen 2017: 187). Earlier, when anti-Islam discourse intensified after the murder of filmmaker Theo van Gogh in 2004, FNV started the ‘Shop Floor Dialogue’ project: workplace meetings to stimulate dialogue between workers from various background (ibid.).

### Societal power

Public trust in Dutch trade unions has been relatively high and stable, with average percentages fluctuating between 60 and 70 per cent. The high degree of trust in unions does not translate into stable membership numbers, however. While public campaigning is not one of the prime instruments used by the confederations, it is gaining importance. When 300,000 people protested against government plans to abolish early retirement schemes in 2004 (see above), this was unprecedented. Other examples are the general publicity campaigns for union work, such as the FNV campaign ‘This is how the Netherlands works’ (*Zo werkt Nederland*). In the cleaners’ campaign, and more recently in the Young & United campaign against youth wages, it was considered important to gain targeted support from the general public.

Obtaining sympathy and support from the general public was an important element in the cleaners’ campaign, for instance, via ‘inverse-strike’ actions such as cleaning premises extra-thoroughly (Mundlak 2020: 201). Public support for the cleaners’ demands was especially important to compensate for the cleaners’ structurally weak power position. Many of them work via temporary work agencies or subcontractors on small contracts, which are easily discontinued by employers.

In the FNV’s Young & United youth wage campaign, young people were the face of the campaign. Via various media outlets, young people shared the difficulties they experience in sustaining themselves with low youth wages. The campaign appealed to the broader public with its slogan ‘half wage for adult work’. One of the public statements made
at the start of the campaign was a young stock clerk taking off half his business suit in front of the Ahold supermarkets’ shareholders meeting to symbolize the fact that youth wages are only half a full wage. Such creative actions attracted the media attention needed to raise public support for the abolition of youth wages. In only a few months 130,000 signatories were collected to abolish youth wages. Even municipalities and large companies issued their support for the abolition of youth wages (Berntsen 2019).

Confederations on occasion build coalitions with NGOs or social movements, although this was more common in the past. Recent examples are the coalition in health care ‘Save the health care sector’ (Red de zorg) and the campaign to increase the minimum wage to €14 per hour. The ‘for 14’ claim is supported by various municipalities. In care, FNV initiated a petition (volkspettie), which obtained 700,000 signatures in six weeks, calling upon the secretary of state to stop budget cuts in the sector. CNV supported this, as did various organizations and prominent people. Recently, a coalition was formed with the grassroots initiative in primary education called ‘Primary education in action’ (PO in actie). When PO in actie, fighting for higher wages and reduced work pressure for schoolteachers, gathered support from 40,000 teachers within a few months in 2017, the unions decided to join forces with them. Together they called for a strike and in October 2017, 60,000 teachers protested in The Hague. This yielded extra government investments in the sector.

FNV and CNV and their affiliates are present on the common social media platforms, such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and Instagram. FNV has over 40,000 likes on Facebook, 16,000 followers on Twitter, almost 10,000 followers on LinkedIn, and almost 4,000 followers on Instagram. CNV has almost 3,000 likes on Facebook, 6,000 followers on Twitter, almost 4,000 followers on LinkedIn and 200 followers on Instagram. FNV Young & United has gathered almost 30,000 likes on Facebook, a number unequalled on the other social media channels. The social media presence of the youth branch of CNV on Facebook outweighs that of the CNV confederation. CNV presence on Twitter is more developed than on Instagram compared with that of FNV.

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18 See https://www.fnv.nl/nieuwsbericht/algemeen-nieuws/2020/06/volgende-gemeente-steunt-fnv-bij-pleidooi-voor-hog
19 Likes and followers as of 7 July 2020.
Trade union policies towards the European Union

Dutch confederations have been deeply involved in international and EU bodies from the outset. Over recent years, the European domain has been gaining in importance. The still prominent position of Dutch confederations at the international level was, for instance, reflected in the election of FNV official Catelene Passchier as president of the Workers’ Group of the International Labour Organization in 2017. Compared with FNV, CNV invests fewer resources in EU work (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2013: 165). CNV, FNV and VCP are all members of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC). CNV is also part of the European Union of Christian Democratic Workers (EUCDW) via EUCDW-Netherlands. FNV and CNV affiliates are members of the European Trade Union Federations (ETUF) at industry level.

Dutch confederations are involved in several cross-border union initiatives. A well-known example is participation in the Doorn group, an initiative of cross-border union cooperation to coordinate collective bargaining policy between unions in the Netherlands, Germany, Belgium and Luxembourg. In the border regions, there are Inter-regional Trade Union Councils (IVR, Interregionale VakbondsRaad) in which unions from each side of the border participate to advocate for the rights and interests of border workers and encourage cross-border mobility for work. The IVR collaborate with public employment agencies and employers within the European jobs network EURES (FNV 2014: 37).

The confederations’ stance towards the European project is generally favourable. Regarding the imposed transitional restrictions in the Netherlands following Eastern European enlargement in 2004, they were initially divided: FNV opposed transitional measures, because it might encourage irregular employment; while CNV supported restrictions to cushion the impact of labour inflows. When it came to the Dutch vote on the Constitutional Treaty in June 2005, which resulted in a 62 per cent ‘no’ vote, FNV urged its members to vote ‘yes’, because it saw the European Constitution as a step forward, but it did not actively engage in the campaign (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2013: 175). More recently, FNV adopts a more critical stance calling for a Europe with a strong social dimension. This is for instance echoed in FNV’s 2014 vision document on Europe titled ‘FNV on the move towards a social

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20 Named after the Dutch town where the first meeting took place in 1998.
Europe’. In this, FNV calls for, among other things, European social (minimum) norms and cross-border inspections to halt social dumping practices (FNV 2014). Similar calls have been made at the industrial level. In 2016, FNV and the European Transport Union urged the Dutch government, then with the EU presidency, to create European regulations for fair road transport (FNV 2016b).

**Conclusions**

Dutch unions are characterized by a stable formal position, but a crumbling power base. On one hand, unions still play a crucial role in determining the terms of employment for three out of four employees, through collective bargaining with the employers, and by influencing government policies via national-level consulting mechanisms. On the other hand, unions are gradually losing ground in achieving their ultimate goals, as illustrated by, among other things, the stagnation of real negotiated wages, the steady decline of the wage share in GDP, the dominance of neoliberal government policies, the retreat of the standard employment relationship and companies’ increasing evasion of collective agreements. The secular decline of union density and the growing power of capital compared with labour are important driving forces behind these trends.

To conclude, we briefly discuss which of Visser’s (2019) four possible futures for the unions seems to be most likely for the Dutch unions. To start with Visser’s last scenario, there are no signs of an upcoming revitalization of the unions. Even though union officials regularly express their confidence that they will succeed in reclaiming some of the lost terrain, all attempts to revitalize them have not yet yielded tangible results. Even new activities and campaigns that are generally considered successful, such as organizing activities among cleaners or the campaign to abolish the youth minimum wage, have not left a noticeable mark on the unions’ structural position, as measured for example by the union density rate or the wage share in GDP. Of course, it is imaginable that further erosion of union power will incentivize unions to become more active in the future, with activities that will have more lasting impact, but up till now this is wishful thinking.

The substitution scenario is recurrently suggested by critics of the current union movement, who claim that the unions are twentieth-century institutions that are not adapted to the challenges of the twenty-first
century. It is far from clear, however, which organizations could take over the unions’ role. In some companies, works councils negotiate terms of employment with management, but there are just as many doubts about the legitimacy and representativeness of works councils as about the unions. Moreover, works councils are largely absent in small companies and at the industry level. Some new unions, which are not based on the traditional member model, such as AVV, claim to better represent the interests of all workers, because they base their demands on surveys of the entire staff of a company or industry. Because these small unions are financially fully dependent on the employers’ contribution, however, their independence is questionable, to say the least.

Even though substitution of the unions’ role by other organizations does not seem to be a likely future, a more realistic option is that unions will increasingly cooperate or even form coalitions with other NGOs, as they have done quite often in the past, mostly in joint campaigns for reform of government policies. Such joint campaigns, however, usually address issues that lie outside unions’ core activity of negotiating terms of employment with employers. Therefore, these kinds of cooperation do not interfere with the unions’ dominant role in collective bargaining and it is unclear how this might structurally strengthen their position.

Even though collective bargaining coverage is still around 75 per cent, some tendencies seem to point to a dualization of industrial relations. That is to say, an increasing share of the labour force is not covered (any- more) by collective agreements that are concluded by the largest union, FNV. From the latter’s perspective, labour market dualization might already be a fact.

In the private service sector, unions play a marginal role, particularly in retail, wholesale and hospitality, where union density is low, the terms of employment unfavourable and the share of non-standard employment large and increasing. On the other hand, the unions remain relatively strong in manufacturing, transport, education, health care and public administration, industries that are characterized by higher union density rates and relatively good terms of employment. Although there are thus clear signs of dualization, it is not very likely that the unions will disappear completely from the industries in which they are relatively weak, which is a testament to FNV organizing efforts to rebuild union power in some of these low-wage sectors. Most employers – and especially the employers’ associations at the industry level – still endorse the importance of collective agreements concluded with the ‘traditional’ unions. The weakening
of the unions makes collective bargaining even more attractive for them, because they can realize more of their preferences, while maintaining the legitimacy vis-à-vis their employees of an agreement signed by one or several unions. Thus, despite clear dualization tendencies, it is not likely that in the future the unions will be fully absent from a substantial part of the labour market.

Finally, there is the marginalization scenario. If we extrapolate the trends of the past two decades, marginalization seems the most likely scenario for the Dutch unions. To date, there have been no indications that the union density rate has bottomed out, and trends such as globalization, technological progress and migration will most likely continue to weaken the unions’ position vis-à-vis employers. The unions’ formal position is still strong and stable, however. The 2019 agreement between the unions, the employers and the government on a profound pension reform underlines that the unions still play a pivotal role in realizing important policy changes. Arguably, however, they can continue to play this role only as long as the employers and the government are willing to allow it. As the erosion of union membership and power continues, ultimately a point may be reached at which the employers and the government no longer need the unions to secure societal and political support for their aims. If that happens, their formal position may be endangered, too.

By and large, this implies that Dutch unions are on the road to potential marginalization in the future. Unless, of course, something unexpected happens that changes the downward slope on which the unions currently find themselves into an upward slope.

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**Abbreviations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACP</td>
<td>Algemene Christelijke Politiebond (General Christian Police Union)</td>
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<tr>
<td>AVV</td>
<td>Alternatief Voor Vakbond (Alternative for Trade Union)</td>
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<tr>
<td>AWVN</td>
<td>Algemene Werkgeversvereniging Nederland (General Employers Association)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CDA</td>
<td>Christen-Democratisch Appèl (Christian Democratic Appeal)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CNV</td>
<td>Christelijk Nationaal Vakverbond (Christian National Confederation)</td>
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<tr>
<td>EU</td>
<td>European Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>FIB</td>
<td>Stichting Fonds Industriële Bonden (Foundation Industrial Unions Fund)</td>
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<tr>
<td>FNV</td>
<td>Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging (Federation of Dutch Trade Unions)</td>
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<tr>
<td>FvD</td>
<td><em>Forum voor Democratie</em> (Forum for Democracy)</td>
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<tr>
<td>IVR</td>
<td>Interregionale VakbondsRaad (Inter-regional Trade Union Councils)</td>
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<tr>
<td>MHP</td>
<td>Vakcentrale voor Middelbaar en Hoger Personeel (Confederation for Middle and Senior Staff)</td>
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<tr>
<td>PvdA</td>
<td>Socialistische Partij (Socialist Party)</td>
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<tr>
<td>PVV</td>
<td>Partij voor de Vrijheid (Freedom Party)</td>
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<tr>
<td>SER</td>
<td>Sociaal-Economische Raad (Social-Economic Council)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>StvdA</td>
<td>Stichting van de Arbeid (Labour Foundation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VCP</td>
<td>Vakcentrale voor Professionals (Confederation for Professionals)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zzp</td>
<td>zelfstandigen zonder personeel (solo self-employed persons)</td>
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