

A Flexible Country in the Making

Reaction and strategy of the trade union movement to flexibilization in the Netherlands in the 1980s

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Abstract

Internationally, the 1980s marked a shift in economic policy. In the Netherlands, the supposedly moderate neoliberal turn and the first round of flexibilization characterized the decade. Nowadays, labour market flexibility is exceptionally high in the Netherlands compared to neighbouring countries. This article examines how the trade union movement in the 1980s responded to increasing flexibilization, which strategy was used, and how this contributed to early Dutch flexibilization. In contrast to literature reflecting an institutional perspective, the trade union movement is analysed in this article from a social-historical perspective and as a social movement. As a result, it is argued that the effects of rising flexibilization were noted very early on within the trade unions. Be that as it may, both the priorities that followed from the agreements with employer organizations and the internal dynamics were decisive for the trade union movement's relatively late and unassertive responses to the flexibilization of labour in the 1980s.

Introduction

Since the financial crisis of 2008, the flexibilization issue has been a fixture in Dutch public debate. In these discussions, 'flex' is often linked to neoliberalism. In early 2019, for example, the influential sociologist and political scientist Anton Hemerijck stated that European financial-economic policy: 'is inspired by the intellectual dogma: flexibilizing, liberal-

izing, privatizing, reducing social spending.¹ At the same time, according to historian Bram Mellink and sociologist Merijn Oudenampsen, neoliberalism ‘has become an umbrella term for all evils of our time.’² As a result, it remains generally unclear how flexibilization of labour and neoliberal policy-making relate to one another, what the historical relationship is between these processes, and how they have evolved in the Netherlands.

Labour sociologist Maarten Keune situates the start of the gradual ideological shift that strongly emphasized labour market flexibility in the late 1970s.³ Historians and political scientists believe that neoliberalism started to resurge in the same period.⁴ Over the course of the 1980s, the political movement gained ground in various policy fields and influenced the views of workers’ and employers’ organizations on labour relations. In these years, rising unemployment figured high on the agenda. The governments headed by Lubbers (1982-1994) responded to this issue with supply-driven policy. A decade later, that reaction was widely acclaimed domestically and abroad: in the Netherlands a miracle was said to have transpired. In 1997 Anton Hemerijck and fellow sociologist Jelle Visser published the authoritative work *A Dutch Miracle*. They argued that the most important changes in policy and mind-set entailed broad acknowledgement among government, employer, and employee organizations that to boost investment levels, which was deemed essential to create more jobs, higher profitability was needed. To achieve this, wage moderation was pivotal in the Wassenaar Agreement (Akkoord van Wassenaar). Concluded between employer and employee organizations in 1982, the Agreement was to be conducive to reducing the actual exchange rate and to more competitive pricing among Dutch companies and products.⁵ In 1980s lit-

1 M. ten Hooven, ‘De uitholling van Nederland. Dertig jaar neoliberalisme,’ *De Groene Amsterdammer* 13 March (2019) <https://www.groene.nl/artikel/de-uitholling-van-nederland/>. Consulted on 5 February 2020.

2 M. Oudenampsen and B. Mellink, ‘Neoliberalisme is de schuld van alles. Toch?’ *De Correspondent* 28 August (2019) <https://decorrespondent.nl/10426/neoliberalisme-is-de-schuld-van-alles-toch/1114113591734-5021aded>. Consulted on 5 February 2020.

3 M. Keune, ‘Is het flexizekerheidsconcept (in) de beperking meester?’ in: E. Sol and C. Nysten (eds), *Wat is de zekerheid in flex en zeker?* (Amsterdam 2011) 53-72, 56-57.

4 D. Hellema, *Nederland en de jaren zeventig* (Amsterdam 2012) 261; P. de Rooy, *Ons stipje op de wereldkaart. De politieke cultuur van Nederland in de negentiende en twintigste eeuw* (Amsterdam 2014) 268; M. Oudenampsen, ‘In de boksring van de vrijheid. Den Uyl versus Hayek,’ in: M. Hurenkamp and R. Cuperus (eds), *Omstreden vrijheid* (Amsterdam 2015) 112-135, 132; J. Kennedy, *Een beknopte geschiedenis van Nederland* (Amsterdam 2017) 365-369.

5 J. Visser and A. Hemerijck, *A Dutch miracle. Job growth, welfare reform and corporatism in the Netherlands* (Amsterdam 1997) 13 and 16.

erature about neoliberalism and corporatism, authors such as Visser and Hemerijck, as well as German political scientist Peter Katzenstein, German sociologist Wolfgang Streeck, and English sociologist Colin Crouch, constantly noted that trends in corporatist countries, such as the Netherlands, were less radically market-oriented.⁶

This discourse, however, is at odds with the exceptionally high degree of flexibilization of the Dutch labour market in comparison to surrounding countries.⁷ In a recent report the Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy (Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid; WRR) determines that the Netherlands is presently at the vanguard in Europe: 36 percent of those employed does not have a fixed contract, and flexibilization of work here has more than doubled in recent decades.⁸ If the resurgence of neoliberalism is connected to the growing flexibilization, the question that arises is therefore why in this 'moderate' country flexibilization is so advanced. A step toward answering that question is to identify factors that came into play. The historical indicators of the extent of flexible labour relations we gathered for the exploratory study *Precaire Polder* (2017) suggest that the neoliberal transition had early practical and tangible consequences.⁹ The data show that in the mid and late 1980s the numbers of those working under flexible employment contracts rose significantly each year and – especially – the numbers of those working via temporary employment agencies (in 1984-1986 about 7-9 percent; in 1989 as high as 9-15 percent). The relative rise in the share of flexible employees (the percentage of flexible employees with respect to the total active population) was in fact 6 percent or higher in 1984 and in 1989-1990 (see Graph 1). According to Statistics Netherlands (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek; CBS), registered flexible workers increased by over 200,000 in the period 1983-1990.

6 Ibid., P.J. Katzenstein, *Corporatism and change. Austria, Switzerland, and the politics of industry* (Ithaca/ London 1984); P.J. Katzenstein, *Small states in world markets. Industrial policy in Europe* (Ithaca/ London 1985); C. Crouch and W. Streeck (eds), *The diversity of democracy. Corporatism, social order and political conflict* (Cheltenham 2006).

7 H. Borstlap et al., *In wat voor land willen wij werken? Naar een nieuw ontwerp voor de regulering van werk* (z.p. 2020) 21; J. Leupen, 'Geen land heeft zo'n flexibele arbeidsmarkt als Nederland. Trend naar flex is een voorbode voor Europa, zegt Guy Ryder,' *Financieel Dagblad* 9 December (2015).

8 G.B.M. Engbersen et al. (WRR), *Het betere werk. De nieuwe sociale opdracht* (The Hague 2020) 11. See also: M. Kremer, R. Went and A. Knottnerus (WRR), *Voor de zekerheid. De toekomst van flexibel werkenden en de moderne organisatie van arbeid* (The Hague 2017) 19; CBP, *Flexibiliteit op de arbeidsmarkt* (n.p. 2016) 3; 'Report from the commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Central Bank and the European Economic and Social Committee,' *Alert Mechanism Report* (2016).

9 M. van Dijk et al., *Precaire polder. Rapport in het kader van het onderzoeksproject Historische Verkenning Vakbeweging* (Amsterdam 2018) 28-32.

In this article we explore how the trade union movement related to the increasing flexibilization in the 1980s. Which strategy was applied, and how was this conducive to early Dutch flexibilization? Going back to this decade, we explore the first round of growth in flexible labour relations. This first increase occurred long before the regulation of flexible labour in the 1990s, on which Dutch research so far has mainly focused. In the present study we have also adopted a different approach from the one in the existing historiography, as other core factors are examined via different perspectives. We show that to enhance understanding of the organization of work and the labour market, when neoliberalism was on the rise, considering only changes in ideas and policy structure of the welfare state is not enough. The reaction of the trade union movement is also a core factor for understanding flexibilization in the Netherlands in this period. By adopting a social-historical perspective, we analyse the trade union movement as a social movement. This approach differs from the institutional perspective in recent international comparative research – which builds on the frameworks from the 1980s and 90s of authors such as Visser and Hemerijck. The latter perspective does not overlook how the trade unions struggled with the rise of flexibilization but has certain shortcomings.¹⁰ In this type of research, the Dutch trade union movement tends to be studied as an actor with primarily formal influence on economic decision-making in national politics. Trade unions in the Netherlands, however, also reflect far more complex independent organizational and social dynamics and wear different hats in the political-social landscape. Indeed, the unions participate in social consultation with government and employer organizations, such as in the Social-Economic Council (SER; advisory council) and the Stichting van de Arbeid (StvdA; consultative body) and in that capacity reaches nationwide agreements that result in legislation, such as the Flex Agreement (Flex Akkoord) from 1996. At the same time, however, the trade union movement is a social movement that is active at various other levels: unions also combine reaching collective labour agreements with firms and companies (and staging protest actions to achieve them) with various other strategies that influence terms of employment conditions among workers (self-organization, training, as well as, for example, control and compliance). The great majority

10 For recent contributions in this field, see e.g.: B. Palier (ed.), *A long goodbye to Bismarck? The politics of welfare reform in continental Europe* (Amsterdam 2010); K. Thelen, *Varieties of liberalization and the new politics of social solidarity* (New York 2014); P. Emmenegger, *The power to dismiss. Trade unions and the regulation of job security in Western Europe* (Oxford 2014).

of collective labour agreements reached in the Netherlands is generally declared compulsory (*algemeen verbindend verklaren*) and then applies for all companies and employees in a certain branch. As a result, most Dutch workers are covered by a collective labour agreement (between 2000 and 2009 over 80 percent on average).¹¹ Union strategies and stakes in collective labour agreements and employment conditions thus become crucial in labour market dynamics and therefore are also important, when we consider the changes due to the rise of flexible labour relations. As a social movement, the trade union movement organizes people, especially employees, around a broad range economic interests and social themes.¹² Especially the combination of forces generated at and by the nationwide negotiations on the one hand and the internal dynamics of the trade union movement as a social movement on the other hand, have decisively influenced the position adopted by the Dutch trade union federation (Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging, FNV) with respect to flexibilization in the 1980s.

Because little systematic research has been conducted on the position of the Dutch trade union movement to date, we have examined the archives of the FNV as the trade union representing the largest share of the trade union movement in this country. The FNV is a trade union organization with direct individual members and a trade union confederation with thirteen affiliated unions (in 1980 nearly 1.08 million members; in 2019 just over 1.01 million members). The next largest is the Christian National Trade Union Federation (Christelijk Nationaal Vakverbond; CNV), an employee organization based on Christian principles (in 1980 304,000 members; in 2019 236,000 members). Finally, there are the Trade union federation for Professionals (Vakcentrale voor Professionals; VCP; until 2014 the Vakcentrale MHP), which endeavours to defend the interests of the more highly educated workers and those in supervisory positions in corporate industry and with the government (in 1980 118,000 members; in 2019 164,000 members), and the other trade unions (in 1980 totalling 289,000 members; in 2019 totalling 188,000 members).¹³ Since the second half of the nine-

11 J. Visser, *The institutional characteristics of trade unions, wage setting, state intervention and social pacts*. ICTWSS Database, version 4.0, Amsterdam Institute for Advanced Labour Studies, 2013, <http://www.aias-uvanet.nl>

12 M. van Dijk and M. van Rossum, 'Terugblikken om meer te zien! Een historische reflectie op vakbeweging, strategie en onderzoek,' in: S. Boumans and W. Eshuis (eds.), *Positie en strategie vakbeweging. Bescho.uwingen, analyses en voorstellen* (Amsterdam 2018) 84-91.

13 'Historie leden vakverenigingen 1901-2019,' *Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek* 25 October (2019) <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/cijfers/detail/70061ned>.

teenth century, trade unions in the Netherlands have been organized mainly as ‘modern’ trade unions: based on policy determined centrally (through democratic means), paid (remunerated) executives defend the interests of members (and non-members). Moreover, like the rest of the world, over the past forty years these unions have had to cope with declining levels of union membership. Between 1995 and 2011 the degree of organization dropped from 28 to 20 percent.¹⁴ In the period 2012-2016 on average 19 percent of all workers from age 15 to 75 belonged to a trade union.¹⁵ In mid-2016 this degree of organization was over 17 percent.¹⁶

In the 1980s the FNV experienced the rise of a plethora of types of flexibilization and distinguished – as still analytically relevant – between *internal* flexibilization, *external* flexibilization, *numerical and functional* flexibility (see Table 2). *Internal* flexibilization means expanding the opportunities to assign workers within a company through flexibility in work hours and duties, while *external* flexibilization concerns flexible contracts (e.g. on-call workers and staff from temporary employment agencies). *Numerical* flexibility varies labour quantity, either externally, by sourcing additional workers, or internally, by adjusting the schedules of those already employed. *Functional* flexibility coincides with a change in labour quality or position. In all these forms of flexibilization, the primary objective of employers is the same, but the consequences for employees vary (such as the resulting degree of insecurity).¹⁷ In this article we also explore these different forms and the different ways they are interrelated. For the period studied, we identify a clear connection between reductions to part-time work on the one hand and various forms of flexibilization on the other hand.

The article elaborates on an earlier exploratory historical research project on the FNV archives that was based on broad, systematic samples from the archives of the FNV trade unions. The samples taken were focused on three strategic references that shed light on the challenges the trade union movement encountered and the strategies it applied,

14 ‘Organisatiegraad van Werknemers 1995-2011,’ *Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek* 31 May (2015) <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/maatwerk/2012/22/organisatiegraad-van-werknemers-1995-2011>.

15 W. Gielen and J. Floris, *Wie is er nog lid van een vakbond? Inzicht in lidmaatschap, belang en tevredenheid* (The Hague 2018) 6.

16 M. Tamminga, *De vuist van de vakbond. Een recente geschiedenis* (Amsterdam 2017) 22.

17 L. Delsen, *Exit poldermodel? Sociaal-economische ontwikkelingen in Nederland* (Assen 2000) 76-77. See also: C. Passchier and W. Sprenger, *Alledaagse flexibilisering. Uitkomsten van een onderzoek naar de praktijk van flexibele arbeidsrelaties onder vakbondsbestuurders, klachtenbehandelaars en ondernemingsraden* (Amsterdam 1998).

i.e. the records of union boards and councils (of three major unions: the *Industriebond* [industrial union], the *Dienstenbond* [service workers' union] and the civil servants' union *Abvakabo*), records of material on actions (*Bouwbond* [construction workers' union], *Dienstenbond*, *Industriebond* [industrial union], *Vervoersbond* [transport workers' union], *Voedingsbond* [food workers' union], and the *Abvakabo*), and records on training (*Dienstenbond*, *Industriebond*, *Abvakabo*, and *Vakbondsschool* [trade union school]). The sample-based research yielded a good preliminary account, indicating that these archives offered a foundation for more in-depth studies on how the FNV dealt with flexible labour in this period.¹⁸ This article is based on additional research focused on collective labour agreement coordination records of the trade union confederation. In collective labour agreement coordination, we notice both the role of the trade union movement as a consultation partner of officials and MPs, as the trade union movement that shapes labour relations through agreements via collective labour agreements and other strategies with respect to employment conditions. The records are a crucial link to examine how the central policy of the trade union movement came about, and what the influence was of – and the interaction with – policy and practice among the FNV-affiliated unions. The files consist of (multi-year) policy plans adopted on employment conditions, annual memos on employment conditions policy of the trade union confederation and at union level, sample collective labour agreements, evaluations of collective labour agreement negotiations, and reactions from unions (in correspondence, discussion documents, and memos for congresses and as a consequence thereof amendment of the draft texts). To analyse the effect of the trade union movement and the dynamics between the different layers of the organization, a systematic analysis was conducted of collective labour agreement records from the years 1983-1989. We examined hundreds of pages of documents, gathered in six full archive boxes.

The collective labour agreement coordination consultation yields various new insights. Visser and Hemerijck highlighted how the economic recession had led the trade union movement to adopt a new position on Dutch labour market policy.¹⁹ *Precaire Polder* instigated the assumption that the trade union leaders expected to use the nationwide social consultation in the effort to counter the high unemployment of

¹⁸ Van Dijk et al., *Precaire polder*, 16-19.

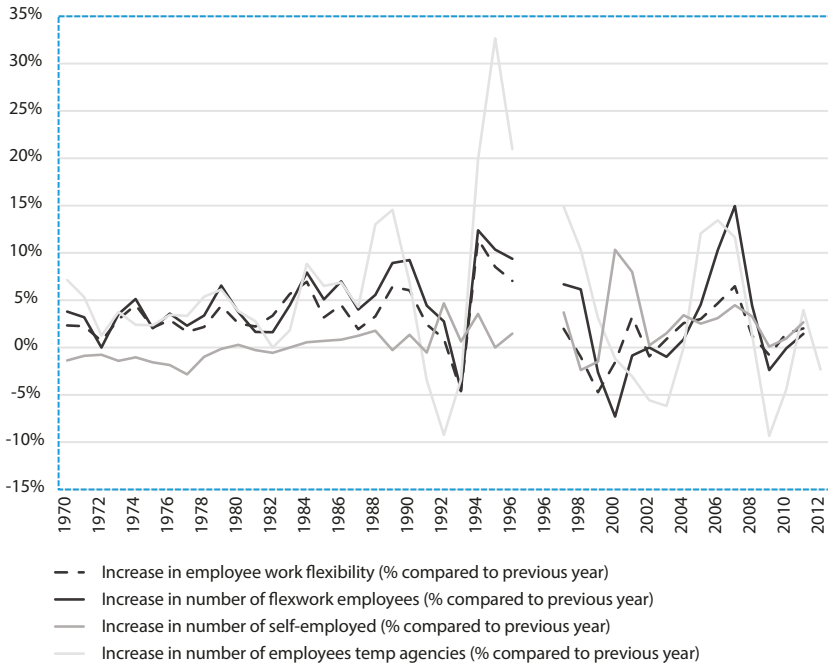
¹⁹ Visser and Hemerijck, *A Dutch miracle*, 17.

the 1980s but in doing so lost sight of advancing flexibilization.²⁰ The collective labour agreement records reveal that not the actual recession but especially the dynamics that arose from the Agreement explain the role and disposition of the trade union movement. The FNV was by no means blind to this situation. Both the trade union confederation and the affiliated unions identified flexibilization as a serious problem almost immediately after the Wassenaar Agreement.

This article reveals how during these years the trade union confederation and the unions were well informed about and quite critical of the new post-industrial concept of disassociating work from full employment based on full-time working hours and permanent employment contracts. Moreover, the upper echelons of the trade union movement instantly perceived an explicit relationship between the increasing flexibilization and the Wassenaar Agreement. At the same time, the trade union confederation and trade unions alike clearly shied away from more radical measures. While during the 1980s and 90s, special working groups were formed and campaigns and even some protest actions addressing flexibilization set up, the main intention was to counter the excesses of flexible labour relations and – remarkably – in nearly all cases through relatively ‘mild’ measures, such as arranging information services (for example through a Flexline), organizing moderate public actions, and sometimes by going to court. Not everyone agreed with this approach. Internally, the FNV was deeply divided about the right strategy. Especially women insisted that trade unions needed to adopt a more active stand on flexibilization. Such grass-roots sentiment, however received little (and progressively less) consideration. Those in charge prioritized the arrangements in the Wassenaar Agreement and over the course of the 1980s firmly structured the internal organization from above. After discussing the historiographic context of the research, we will elaborate on these findings by consecutively addressing the Wassenaar Agreement, relating this agreement to flexibilization, explaining how the FNV also noticed that connection, and describing the strategy the trade union confederation then formulated and the reaction to it from the FNV unions.

²⁰ Van Dijk et al., *Precaire polder*.

Graph 1 Relative development of flexible labour relations, 1970-2012



Source: CBS, *Tijdreeksen Arbeidsrekeningen 1950-heden, werkgelegenheid*; CBS, *Beroepsbevolking; beroepsklassen 1996-2011*.

Table 1 Types of flexibilization²¹

	External	Internal
Numerical	Workers via temporary staffing agencies and on-call workers Temporary employment contracts Labour pools	Part-time work Overtime Shift work
Functional	Working from home Secondment Freelance and subcontracting	Job rotation Transfers Expansion and enhancement of duties

21 L. Delsen and J. Visser, 'Flexibilisering van de arbeid via cao's,' *Sociaal Maandblad Arbeid* 6 (1999) 296.

Debates about the political economy, corporatism, and flexibilization

Dutch economic historian Jeroen Touwen combines two explanatory models common in literature on the rise of flexibilization. In his book from 2015, Touwen emphasizes both the coordinated nature of the changes in the Dutch economy and the economic desirability of flexible labour. From the 1980s, in Touwen's view, consensus increased among Dutch institutions – employer and employee organizations and the government – that economic privatization and deregulation and flexibilization of the labour market were inevitable and necessary reforms. The period 1980-2010 may therefore not be qualified, according to Touwen, as a period of dispassionate neoliberal reforms. He finds 'pragmatic adaptations to globalizing markets' a more appropriate description.²² In recent international literature on the rise of *precarious work* the idea is similarly paramount that in this *era of fast capitalism* companies were forced to adapt their work operation rapidly and at little cost to economic fluctuations and competitive pressure.²³ In the 1980s and 90s political scientists and sociologists such as Visser, Hemerijck, and Katzenstein were equally convinced that changing international markets called for flexible companies in a flexible economy.²⁴

The question, however, is whether inevitability is a valid explanation. Dutch labour economist Ronald Dekker argues that political parties and authoritative institutions are 'caught up in the defeatist idea' that the Netherlands 'is merely a tiny vessel [...] in the turbulent waters of the world economy,' and as such is hardly able to offset the 'market rhetoric of inevitable flexibilization.'²⁵ According to Dekker, advice from international think tanks and organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) about the necessity of flexible European labour markets contributed to the consensus that flexibilization is inevitable. Dutch corporate historian Keetie

22 J. Touwen, *Coordination in transition. The Netherlands and the world economy, 1950-2010* (Leiden/Boston 2015) 339.

23 A. Herod and R. Lambert, 'Neoliberalism, precarious work and remaking the geography of global capitalism,' in: A. Herod and R. Lambert (eds.), *Neoliberal capitalism and precarious work. Ethnographies of accommodation and resistance* (Cheltenham 2016) 1-42, 20; L. Kösters, and W. Smits, 'Tijdelijk werk. Nederland in Europees perspectief,' in: R. van Gaalen et al. (eds.), *Dynamiek op de Nederlandse arbeidsmarkt. De focus op flexibilisering* (The Hague 2015) 128-150.

24 Visser and Hemerijck, 'A Dutch miracle'; Katzenstein, *Small states*.

25 R. Dekker, 'Als alles flexibel wordt,' *Socialisme & Democratie* 9 (2011) 110-118, 110.

Sluyterman also notes that this is a specific and an especially distorted perception. She argues that the institutional landscape of government, employer and employee organizations became convinced that an internationally competitive corporate industry was a foundation for economic growth and employment. According to Sluyterman, the employers' lobby subsequently came to dominate the ideas and impressions about whether flexibilization was necessary and inevitable.²⁶ As a result, only one of the two explanatory models remains.

The idea that coordinated government policy is the key to understanding all kinds of changes in the political economy of previous decades originated in the 1980s. In *Small States in World Markets* (1985), Katzenstein set the tone – the book is described by political scientist Mark Blyth as one of the three cornerstones of contemporary research on political economies.²⁷ Katzenstein shifted the focus to corporatist political structures in small West-European countries, such as the Netherlands, which thus far had received little consideration from scholars. These countries had proven they could cope effectively with a rapidly changing world through their democratic corporatism, which made them a role model for large industrial nations.²⁸ The enthusiasm that arose (in the Netherlands and beyond) in the 1990s about the Dutch Poldermodel, as in the work of Visser and Hemerijck, aligns with this train of thought. In *A Dutch Miracle*, they argued that the Netherlands had overtaken the rest of Europe, thanks to the polder miracle. Consultation, policy learning, and forming consensus among trade unions, employer organizations, and the government had been crucial factors in overcoming unemployment in the early 1980s and in the labour market achievements of the 1990s.²⁹

This school of thought within political-economic research transitioned to the twenty-first century with the *varieties of capitalism* de-

26 K. Sluyterman, 'Ruthless neoliberal reform or pragmatic adjustment to globalizing markets. That's the question,' *TSEG – The Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History* 12:3 (2015) 83-86, 84; K. Sluyterman and B. Wubs, 'Multinationals as agents of change,' in: K. Sluyterman (ed.), *Varieties of capitalism and business history. The Dutch case* (New York 2015) 156-182, 172-175. Cf.: Katzenstein, *Small states*, 11.

27 In addition to P. Gourevitch, *Politics in hard times. The great recession in comparative perspective* (Ithaca 1986) and P.A. Hall, *Governing the economy. The politics of state intervention in Britain and France* (New York 1986), M. Blyth, 'An approach to comparative analysis or a subfield within a subfield? Political economy,' in: M.I. Lichbach and A.S. Zuckerman (eds), *Comparative politics. Rationality culture and structure* (Cambridge 2009) 193-219, 194.

28 Katzenstein, *Corporatism*; Katzenstein, *Small states*.

29 Visser and Hemerijck, 'A Dutch miracle'.

bate. In 2001 the political economists Peter Hall and David Soskice presented a new framework for understanding the institutional similarities and differences between developed economies and in doing so attributed a more prominent role to companies.³⁰ A core insight from internationally comparative literature about *varieties of capitalism* (VoC) is that structural economic changes, such as globalization, do not have a uniform effect, because firms in different types of economies react differently to comparable economic challenges.³¹ At the same time, the theory indicates how the reaction of companies is deeply influenced by legislation and balances of power among the social partners (workers' and employers' organizations) in the nationwide consultation. With the publications of historian Touwen and the collaborative project *Business in the Netherlands in the Twentieth Century* (*Bedrijfsleven in Nederland in de Twintigste eeuw*; BINT), the VoC debate has surfaced in Dutch historical research as well.³² In other words, the emphasis on the importance of the mediating role of economic institutions has spread from political science research to other fields and has become firmly anchored in these various disciplines.

Debates about the rise of flexibilization in countries such as the Netherlands are imbued by this tradition. In keeping with the *varieties of capitalism* explanatory model, Touwen emphasizes that in choosing to flexibilize the work operation, companies are strongly driven by labour legislation and balances of power between employer and employee organizations. After all, by deregulating its labour market, a government creates a crucial condition for the emergence and growth of flexible labour relations.³³ In international literature on the rise of flex-

30 P.A. Hall and D. Soskice, 'An introduction to varieties of capitalism,' in: P.A. Hall and D. Soskice (eds.), *Varieties of capitalism. The institutional foundations of comparative advantage* (Oxford 2001) 1-68.

31 Ibid.; G. Esping-Andersen, *The three worlds of welfare capitalism* (Princeton 1990); G. Esping-Andersen and M. Regini (eds.), *Why deregulate labour markets?* (Oxford 2000). Cf.: J. Touwen, 'Varieties of capitalism en de Nederlandse economie in de periode 1950-2000,' *TSEG* 3:1 (2006) 73-104.

32 J. van Gerwen and F. de Goey, *Ondernemers in Nederland. Variaties in ondernemen* (Amsterdam 2008); K. Sluyterman and B. Wubs, *Over grenzen. Multinationals en het Nederlandse kapitalisme* (Amsterdam 2009); B. Bouwens and J. Dankers, *Tussen concurrentie en concentratie. Belangenorganisaties, kartels, fusies en overnames* (Amsterdam 2012); E. Nijhof and A. van den Berg, *Het menselijk kapitaal. Sociaal ondernemersbeleid in Nederland* (Amsterdam 2012); J. Peet and E. Nijhof, *Een voortdurend experiment. Overheidsbeleid en het Nederlandse bedrijfsleven* (Amsterdam 2015); G. Westerhuis and A. de Jong, *Over geld en macht. Financiering en corporate governance van het Nederlandse bedrijfsleven* (Amsterdam 2015).

33 Touwen, *Coordination*; J. Barbier, 'A conceptual approach of the destandardization of employment in Europe since the 1970s,' in: M. Koch and M. Fritz (eds.), *Non-standard employment in Europe. Para-*

ibilization and the decline of job security, authors elaborate on and combine *VoC* and corporatist theories. In *Varieties of Liberalization and the New Politics of Social Solidarity* (2014), for example, political scientist Kathleen Thelen advocates adding a new category to the *VoC* model.³⁴ In a study published that same year, political scientist Patrick Emmenegger reviews the *VoC* models and examines a theory about the influence of social Catholicism and the *power resource theory*. He concludes that the latter is relevant as an explanatory model when complemented by insights from historical institutionalism, thereby including among other things the role of trade unions in policy development.³⁵ Research on labour sociology is also clearly influenced by discussions about corporatism and the popularity of the polder model. Dutch labour sociologist Maarten Keune, for example, considers what he calls the discursive and institutional foundations of that Dutch polder model. According to Keune, these forces ensure cohesion between the social partners and give them a common vision and policy framework: ‘those who position themselves outside this discourse with divergent views or policy proposals are likely to be dismissed as irresponsible or irrational. This is especially likely to happen to the FNV, when, from the perspective of employers or government, it makes “irresponsible” demands in collective labour agreement negotiations.’³⁶ The extensive attention devoted to the Flex Agreement (1996) in contemporary Dutch literature on flexibilization confirms the tendency to concentrate on agreements and political policy.³⁷ As a consequence, most social-scientific and historical studies about the Netherlands to date highlight the marked rise in flexibilization and the new regulations introduced through legislation in the 1990s.

Remarkably, the focus on policy development goes hand in hand with a lack of knowledge about the internal dynamics of the economic institutions involved. Internationally comparative studies today are mainly about changes in social policy. Political scientists examine taxes, benefits, social insurance systems, and public services (Palier); or the institutional development of wage negotiations, the labour market, and

digns, prevalence and policy responses (Basingstoke 2013) 13-28, 15-16.

34 Thelen, *Varieties*.

35 Emmenegger, *The power*.

36 M. Keune, ‘Inleiding. De legitimiteit van het poldermodel in de eenentwintigste eeuw,’ in: M. Keune (ed.), *Nog steeds een mirakel? De legitimiteit van het poldermodel in de eenentwintigste eeuw* (Amsterdam 2016) 9-37, 13.

37 K. Boonstra, ‘De invloed van het sociaal akkoord op de Nederlandse arbeidswetgeving,’ in: Keune (ed.), *Nog steeds een mirakel?* 197-223.

education and training policy (Thelen); or legal regulations concerning job security for the private sector (Emmenegger).³⁸ What is missing is a core factor for understanding the rising flexibilization in the Netherlands, namely the disposition and strategy of the trade union movement that was shaped at the negotiating tables at national, sectoral, and corporate levels and as a consequence of the internal dynamics of this stratified social movement. Dutch labour lawyer Klara Boonstra has stated that conceptual confusion about flexibilization afflicted the trade union movement, by which she means that within the trade unions flexibilization has acquired a different, more negative, connotation over time.³⁹ This article demonstrates that in the 1980s the disposition of the FNV was determined largely by the arrangements in the Wassenaar Agreement. As a consequence, especially *external* flexibilization ceased to be a priority and was granted ample latitude, even though this development was indeed identified within the organization.

That flexibilization did not figure high on the agenda of the trade union movement was in part because of the balance of power within the unions and the federation. Here, another direction in the flexibilization debate focused on dualization or segmentation turns out to be important. This theory emphasizes that the consequences of structural economic changes were not the same for all workers, because part of the labour market is protected by labour legislation and collective protection of interests (the *insiders*), while protection of interests and legal protection is withheld from another part (the *outsiders*). Features such as gender, ethnicity, age, and education largely determined the distinction (albeit to varying degrees) between *insiders* and *outsiders*.⁴⁰ Trade unions and governments regarded some employees and sectors as the *core workforce*, motivated in part by electoral and organizational considerations, and therefore focused on protecting the interests of these groups. In the 1980s the *core workforce* was not the first facing flexibilization in the Netherlands, and the women within the FNV were the driving forces trying to get the struggle against it on the agenda. Moreover, for both these women and the rest of the FNV, there was certainly

38 Palier, *A long goodbye*, 20; Thelen, *Varieties*, 1-2 and 32; Emmenegger, *The power*, 3.

39 Boonstra, 'De invloed,' 210-219; Tamminga, *De vuist van de vakbond*, 143. See also: Keune, 'Is het flexizekerheidsconcept (in) de beperking meester?' 53-72, 56-57.

40 S. Mosoetsa, J. Stillermann and C. Tilly, 'Precarious labor, south and north. An introduction,' *International Labor and Working-Class History* 89 (2016) 5-19; L. Hipp, J. Bernhardt and J. Allmendinger, 'Institutions and the prevalence of nonstandard employment,' *Socio-Economic Review* 13 (2015) 351-377, 355.

no conceptual confusion about flexibilization, as they already identified flexibility as a new problem by early 1980s.

Flexibilization as a current issue

Precaire Polder reveals that a group of women within the FNV spoke up as soon as they were confronted with the increase in flexible work in the early 1980s.⁴¹ In 1983 the FNV Secretariat for female employees (FNV-Secretariaat voor vrouwelijke werknemers) formed the FNV-wide working group Marflex, which compiled an inventory of flexible work. In 1985 this group issued a brochure on flexible labour and the strategy they envisioned as union women against bad temporary jobs. At that point, flexibilization had become a ‘magic word’ to make staff flexible in five areas: working hours, employment agreements, positions and levels, income, and regulations. The Marflex women moreover noted that flexible contracts ‘at first went unnoticed by the trade union movement.’⁴² In *Precaire Polder* this gave rise to the hypothesis that it was mainly the lower echelons of the organization that were calling attention to the rising flexibilization.⁴³

Studying records on collective labour agreements reveals that the highest body of the FNV was just as aware of this new trend. In a policy memorandum from March 1983, the Federation board of the trade union confederation already identified flexibilization as the new objective of employers. The board noted the matter as relevant and current for the union and deemed it necessary to regulate the ways in which flexibilization could take place.⁴⁴ In October 1983 the Federation board decided that a more specific stand was needed to keep pace with this development.⁴⁵ In 1984, by the time the trade union confederation had drafted its coordinated employment conditions policy for 1985 and 1986, the FNV had formulated that position.

41 Van Dijk et al., *Precaire polder*, 103.

42 FNV Secretariaat van vrouwelijke werknemers, *Flexibele arbeid. Onder de maat! Een vakbondsvrouwenstrategie tegen wegwerpbanen* (Amsterdam 1986) 5-6 and 42.

43 Van Dijk et al., *Precaire polder*, 103-107.

44 International Institute of Social History (hereafter IISH), Archief FNV (hereafter FNV), inv. 2584, Circulaire 479. Aan de leden van de Federatie Raad t.k.n. aan de bondsbesturen (hereafter Circulaire 479), 27 March 1984.

45 IISH, FNV, inv. 2583, Circulaire 1432. Aan leden Beleidsadviesraad Werkgelegenheid en Sociaal-Economische Aangelegenheden (hereafter Circulaire 1432), 19 October 1983.

The coordinated employment conditions policy for 1985 and 1986 stated that the trend was favourable in some respects. Work operations needed to be adapted to meet individual needs, and flexibilization offered such opportunities. The trade union confederation also agreed to some extent that flexibilization was necessary. As stated in the FNV memorandum on employment conditions policy principles for 1987, 'firms reacting quickly and decisively to changing (market) circumstances serve the interests of workers as well.'⁴⁶ Overall, however, this trend was considered to be highly disadvantageous. 'Increasingly, employers,' according to a memo on employment conditions policy principles for 1985/1986, 'see flexibilization as an opportunity to adapt the work force unilaterally to the needs of the firm.'⁴⁷ This caused specific groups of employees to be marginalized. 'Certain forms of extensive flexibilization' were therefore 'to be avoided,' and workers needed to be informed that their working patterns might change.⁴⁸ In the central coordination memos on employment conditions policy of the trade union confederation, flexibilization, and its negative consequences appear year after year.⁴⁹ Klara Boonstra wrote about the positive connotation of flexibilization within the trade union movement in the 1980s, but this rarely seems to have been the case in collective labour agreement coordination and negotiations.⁵⁰

In devising its own view of post-industrial work and its limitations, the FNV distinguished between *internal* flexibilization, *external* flexibilization, *numerical* and *functional* flexibility. Memos on working conditions from 1986, 1987, and 1988, for example, reveal that the FNV

46 IISH, FNV, inv. 2584, FNV-uitgangspunten voor het arbeidsvoorwaardenbeleid 1987 (hereafter Uitgangspunten AVB 1987), 6 October 1986.

47 IISH, FNV, inv. 2584, Nota inzake uitgangspunten voor het arbeidsvoorwaardenbeleid 1985/1986 (hereafter Nota AVB 1985/1986), October 1984.

48 IISH, FNV, inv. 2584, Nota AVB 1985/1986, October 1984; IISH, FNV, inv. 2584, Circulaire 479, 27 March 1984.

49 IISH, FNV, inv. 2584, Circulaire 1181. Aan de leden van Beleidsadviesraad Werkgelegenheid en Sociaal-Economische Aangelegenheden, 24 September 1985; IISH, FNV, inv. 2584, Circulaire 119. Aan de leden van de Federatieraad, 21 January 1986; IISH, FNV, inv. 2585, FNV-uitgangspunten voor het arbeidsvoorwaardenbeleid 1988 (hereafter Uitgangspunten AVB 1988), 1987.

50 Boonstra uses the term conceptual confusion to convey that the meaning of flexibilization changed, unannounced and unexplained. 'Before the flex agreement of 1996 the term flexible primarily meant: work that is done part-time. Flexible work has brought hundreds of thousands of women into the work force.' This emancipation effect gave flexibilization positive connotations, including within the trade union. Flexibilization became synonymous with part-time work and was appreciated for enabling better combinations of work and personal life. See Boonstra, 'De invloed' and Tamminga, *De vuist van de vakbond*, 143.

disapproved of external flexibilization. The FNV 'believed that flexibilization should come about embedded in broader social policy and via *internal* flexibilization of the work operation, i.e. by organizing production and services more flexibly'.⁵¹ *Internal functional* flexibilization was to be accomplished through: 'less hierarchy, less rigid segmentation of work by functions and duties,' and 'ongoing attention to continuing, additional, and re-training.' Such modernization of the work organization could, according to the FNV, substantially further a more flexible operating style.⁵²

Still, the trade union confederation and individual unions did not manage to curtail the maligned flexible contracts. In 1988 the Voedingsbond *continued* to see addressing flexibilization as necessary.⁵³ The Federation board had noted the year before that little progress was made. The board concluded that the trade union movement would need to come up with a lot more ideas and initiatives.⁵⁴ The reason for the limited development of initiatives against rising flexibilization was that the FNV was focusing on another matter in this period.

Flexibilization and the Wassenaar Agreement

In November 1982 the social partners reached the renowned and retrospectively internationally acclaimed Wassenaar Agreement – more commonly known at the time as the *Stichtingsakkoord*. Unemployment had been on the rise for years, while returns were diminishing. In response, employers wanted to cut costs by laying off redundant employees. They were not interested in reduced working duration (*arbeidsduurverkorting*, rwd), certainly not if wages were to remain the same. Because of the rising unemployment, however, trade unions aimed to redistribute work through reduced working duration and without changing wages. The government and employer and employee organizations negotiated and eventually agreed on a joint long-term objective of maintaining employment by aiming for reduced working duration and waiving wage adjustments for price compensation in the short

51 IISH, FNV, inv. 2585, Uitgangspunten AVB 1988, 1987.

52 Ibid.; IISH, FNV, inv. 2584, Uitgangspunten AVB 1987, 6 October 1986.

53 IISH, FNV, inv. 2585, Nota arbeidsvoorwaardenbeleid 1989 van de Voedingsbond (hereafter Nota AVB Voedingsbond 1989), 24 November 1988.

54 IISH, FNV, inv. 2585, Notitie 'FNV-arbeidsvoorwaardenbeleid en flexibilisering. Overwegingen en mogelijke uitwerkingen behorend bij paragraaf 4 van de nota "FNV-Uitgangspunten voor het arbeidsvoorwaarden 1987"' (hereafter Notitie FNV-AVB en flexibilisering), 19 January 1987.

term. The Agreement accommodated the wishes of both parties, and Minister De Koning of Social Affairs stated that they hoped to reduce working duration to 36 hours a week.⁵⁵ In July 1984 the Labour Foundation (Stichting van de Arbeid) reconfirmed the recommendations of November 1982 for the subsequent years.⁵⁶ The consequence was that for the rest of the decade the FNV prioritized concretizing the agreed ambition to reduce working duration and working hours – in practice the organization used the terms interchangeably. With reduced working duration (rwd), the number of hours worked on different days is reduced. In the 1980s this was achieved by introducing a shorter working week and scheduled days off and encouraging part-time work (*internal flexibilization*).⁵⁷ Reduced working hours (*arbeidstijdverkorting*, rwh) decreases the average working time per employee, by a method that differs from rwd but yields the same result.

The trade union movement hoped that reduced working duration and working hours would lead to the reallocation of available employment. In the Agreement, employer organizations had pledged to try to reduce working hours. In the collective labour negotiations unions and employers would need to include more specific agreements on how the reduction of working hours would in fact preserve and create jobs.⁵⁸ In the months after reaching the Agreement, the FNV leadership noted the possible dangers that the trade union movement might face here. In March 1983 the Federation board asserted that flexible work needed to be addressed in the negotiations with employers about filling job vacancies resulting from rwh. The fear was that employers might try to use rwh to achieve extensive *external* flexibilization.⁵⁹ Or, as a policy staff member of the trade union confederation told his listeners during a lecture in September 1983: employers hoped to benefit from the Agreement, because it might augur more flexible employment conditions.⁶⁰ Union officials from the affiliated unions shared these concerns. In 1984 the Voedingsbond feared that employers would use the emerg-

55 K.G. Tijdens, 'Arbeidsduurverkorting en het Akkoord van Wxassenaar. Via deeltijdarbeid en verlofsparen naar CAO à la carte' *Tijdschrift voor Arbeidsvraagstukken* 18 (2002) 309-318, 309.

56 IISH, FNV, inv. 2584, Notitie strategie arbeidsvoorwaardenbeleid van B Akkerboom, 11 December 1984.

57 Tijdens, 'Arbeidsduurverkorting,' 310.

58 IISH, FNV, inv. 2583, Notitie inzake de voortgang van het arbeidsvoorwaardenbeleid in 1984 (hereafter Notitie voortgang AVB 1984), 29 June 1983.

59 IISH, FNV, inv. 2584, Circulaire 479, 27 March 1984.

60 IISH, FNV, inv. 2583, Lecture 'Arbeidsvoorwaarden in Nederland' door B. Akkerboom, 11 September 1983.

ing latitude to fill gaps with on-call staff (*external numerical flexibility*) and workers paid off the books. The Voedingsbond observed that other unions were concerned about this as well.⁶¹

As the 1980s progressed, these concerns proved justified. Trade union federation executives and union officials established a direct link between their focus on reduced working duration and working hours and the growing numbers of workers with temporary contracts, of people working from home, and on call, or of staff from temp agencies (*external numerical* and *functional flexibility*). At a theme congress on the trade union movement and the labour market in 1986, the FNV mentioned flexibilization as 'the magic word that employers used to counter the trade union strategy toward a general gradual reduction in working duration.'⁶² Both the Voedingsbond, which was active in sectors that employed relatively large numbers of women, and the Industriebond, which catered mainly to the *core workforce*, held the view that very few jobs had been reallocated, and that in most cases extra temporary staff had been recruited.⁶³ Significantly, however, the FNV was receptive to redistribution through part-time work during the 1980s. Part-time was regarded as a form of *internal* flexibilization and considered acceptable because of the emancipation effect.⁶⁴ Still, the FNV aimed to improve the position of part-time workers by striving for worthy arrangements for these workers in collective labour agreements, and the organization advocated equal pay for overtime. In the view of the FNV, the voluntary nature was all too often compromised, and employers more often dealt with peaks in production by having part-timers temporarily work longer hours.⁶⁵

Because employers responded with different types of flexibilization, the reduced working hours did not give rise to the new jobs the FNV envisaged. Between 1986 and 1990 over one percent of additional jobs per annum in labour years was made possible, mainly in poorly paid

61 IISH, FNV, inv. 2584, Notitie Voedingsbond over afroepkrachten en cao-beleid (hereafter Notitie VB afroep en cao), 5 April 1984.

62 Quoted in: Van Dijk et al., *Precaire polder*, 93.

63 IISH, FNV, inv. 2585, Nota arbeidsvoorwaardenbeleid 1990 van de Voedingsbond FNV (hereafter Nota AVB VB 1990), December 1989; IISH, FNV, inv. 2585, Conceptnota arbeidsvoorwaardenbeleid 1989, 1988; IISH, FNV, inv. 2584, Cao-voorstellen cao-en metaalindustrie, 2 January 1986.

64 IISH, FNV, inv. 2585, Vraagpuntennotitie arbeidsvoorwaardenbeleid 1988 (hereafter Vraagpuntennotitie 1988), 15 June 1987.

65 IISH, FNV, inv. 2584, Inventarisatie cao-resultaten 1985 (hereafter Inventarisatie 1985), 30 August 1985; IISH, FNV, inv. 2584, Gemeenschappelijke uitgangspunten voor het arbeidsvoorwaardenbeleid 1986, 18 June 1985; IISH, FNV, inv. 2584, Nota AVB 1985/1986, October 1984.

Illustration 1 Poster FNV & CNV (designer unknown),
 Work 36 hours. Opt for reduced
 working hours, 1982
 (source: IISH BG D44/S12).



and part-time jobs (*internal flexibilization*) in the service sectors, where women were especially likely to end up.⁶⁶ In the metal industry the Industriebond observed that the rise in ‘external employees’ through outsourcing work (*external flexibilization*) largely eliminated the intended effects of reduced working duration.⁶⁷ In 1988 the Voedingsbond strongly advocated curtailing flexible contracts, ‘not only because flexible employment contracts impaired the legal leverage of employees, but also because they undermine successful employment policy.’ ‘After all,’ continued the memo on employment conditions policy for 1989, ‘the more flexibility employers have in scheduling labour in the production process, the less they need to fill jobs falling vacant (for example as a consequence of reduced working hours).’⁶⁸ Notwithstanding the recurring attention to the problems with flexible work and the conclusion that the focus on reduced working hours was merely exacerbating them, the fight against flexibilization was a low priority. Why was the FNV so reluctant?

66 IISH, FNV, inv. 2586, Meerjarig arbeidsvoorwaardenbeleid 1990-1993, June 1989.

67 IISH, FNV, inv. 2584, Cao-voorstellen cao-en metaalindustrie, 2 January 1986.

68 IISH, FNV, inv. 2585, Nota AVB Voedingsbond 1989, 24 November 1988.

Strategies of the trade union movement

The strategies selected and the methods applied indicate which policy the FNV pursued in the 1980s. Which choices did the FNV make with respect to reduced working hours and flexibilization? First, there were the national agreements between the social partners, such as the Wassenaar Agreement. In these years, the federation saw these agreements as the most influential and important instrument for achieving change and, therefore, the one with which the federation hoped to resolve reductions in working hours and working duration. Vice chairman, Johan Stekelenburg was very clear in 1987 and 1988: the FNV needed to address social problems – in this case unemployment – mainly through national negotiations between the social partners. Decentralized policy on employment conditions would be far less effective in countering the issue. The FNV would achieve better results, if after a national agreement, unions joined the collective labour agreement discussions. ‘In my view, it is very likely,’ explained Stekelenburg, ‘that the sum of the result of purely decentral negotiations will be more disadvantageous in social and socioeconomic respects.’⁶⁹

Collective labour agreements were a second instrument for enforcing trade union demands. In the 1980s redistribution through working duration and reduced working hours was the main objective within collective labour agreement policy. After the Wassenaar Agreement multi-year collective labour agreements (most running until 1985) for nearly 50 percent of all employees covered by a collective labour agreement comprised arrangements about reduced working duration.⁷⁰ Within the centrally coordinated employment conditions policy of the FNV trade union confederation for the 1986-1990 period, the basic principle was that unemployment had not yet declined sufficiently, and that more extensive redistribution through reduced working duration therefore remained necessary.⁷¹ Or, as a draft version of employment conditions policy memo for 1989 reads: ‘It appears the 1980s will end just as they started. Employment tops the wish

69 IISH, FNV, inv. 2585, Speech J. Stekelenburg ‘De FNV-visie op het decentralisatieproces in het arbeidsvoorwaardenbeleid,’ 18 March 1987.

70 IISH, FNV, inv. 2583, Circulaire 1432. 19 October 1983; IISH, FNV, inv. 2583, Notitie voortgang AVB 1984, 29 June 1983; IISH, FNV, inv. 2584, Circulaire 90. Aan de leden van de Federatieraad, 16 January 1985; IISH, FNV, inv. 2585, Vraagpuntennotitie 1988, 15 June 1987; IISH, FNV, inv. 2585, Nota Arbeidsvoorwaarden 1989, 11 July 1988.

71 IISH, FNV, inv. 2584, Circulaire 1111. Notitie over de voortgang van het arbeidsvoorwaardenbeleid 1985/1986, 28 August 1984.

list.⁷² Moreover, the FNV aimed to continue that strategy in the 1990s. In the memorandum drafted in 1989 *on employment conditions policy for 1990-1993*, jobs topped the list of demands once again. Realizing the average 35-hour working week was the objective for the next four years.⁷³

The FNV leadership was also willing to resort to the third instrument to achieve reduced working duration: protest actions. Collective labour agreement actions at sectoral, industrial, or corporate levels might take place at different moments in the negotiating process. The FNV could also decide to stage nationwide protest actions. Generally, the federation wanted to wage a joint battle, only when the matter in which no agreement was forthcoming was a priority for the board. To mobilize enough people for a nationwide demonstration, the discussions generally needed to be at an impasse, preferably at several or leading companies. This was indeed the case for *rwh* and *rwd*. In March 1985, when the FNV unions were making little progress in the collective labour agreement negotiations, the Federation board envisaged minor protest actions in the first half of April and more radical protest actions in the second half of the month as a realistic opportunity. Minor actions included brief work stoppages, work to rule, and warning strikes and for the more radical actions strikes lasting several days were considered.⁷⁴ Although the decision to resort to action, the choice and duration of actions, and the point at which they would conclude pertained to the autonomy of the unions, the trade union confederation felt responsible for arrangements relating to what it described as ‘coordinated actions.’⁷⁵ The trade union confederation policy advisory board on employment and socioeconomic affairs (Beleidsadviesraad Werkgelegenheid en Sociaal-Economische Aangelegenheden) already coordinated the action-strategy end of employment conditions policy, and the Federation Council hoped to decide soon whether to form a coordination group for protest actions.⁷⁶ In the end, the *Industriebond FNV* executive also hoped to engage in protest actions to achieve the 36-hour working week.⁷⁷ At the *Hoogovens* steel company (presently *Tata Steel*) the un-

72 IISH, FNV, inv. 2585, First draft concept *Arbeidsvoorwaardenbeleid* 1989 (hereafter *Concept AVB* 1989), 25 May 1988.

73 IISH, FNV, inv. 2586, *Coördinatie-nota Arbeidsvoorwaarden* 1990, 13 December 1989.

74 IISH, FNV, inv. 2584, *Notitie aan J. Maat, F. Drabbe, J. Stekelenburg, B. Akkerboom, J. van Hoof*, 1985.

75 IISH, FNV, inv. 2584, *Circulaire* 459. *Aan de leden van de Federatieraad*, 26 March 1985.

76 *Ibid.*

77 IISH, FNV, inv. 2584, *Notitie voor de regionale teambijeenkomsten op 5 en 9 June 1986. Poging tot evaluatie Arbeidsvoorwaardenbeleid* (hereafter *Notitie regionale teambijeenkomsten*), 3 June 1986.

ion encouraged workers to engage in protest actions to obtain collective labour agreement arrangements for rwd.⁷⁸

Which of these three instruments did the trade union movement use to counter forms and consequences of flexibilization qualified as disadvantageous? The flexibilization strategy was based on the principle that ‘employment conditions for irregular (deviating from standard) contracts [needed to be] regulated via collective labour agreements’ and therefore not via national agreements.⁷⁹ In fact, the matter was a recurring feature in the centrally coordinated employment conditions policy. According to the memorandum *on employment conditions policy principles for 1985/1986* trade unions and company works councils faced the task of countering the uncontrolled proliferation of on-call contracts, working from home, and other marginal work (*external flexibilization*). In the memo on employment conditions policy principles for 1987 the trade union confederation emphasized this position again: ‘The underlying principle for the FNV unions, however, is that flexibility in employment conditions is to be regulated (and restricted) via collective labour agreements.’⁸⁰

In some cases, the collective labour agreements, as the evaluations reveal, were conduits of success for unions. The *Dienstenbond* managed to agree that companies were not allowed to recruit auxiliary and on-call workers for continuous activities. After lengthy negotiations about collective labour agreements in hospitals, where on-call workers were not covered by the collective labour agreement, the civil servants’ union *Abvakabo* managed to restrict the percentage of on-call workers within the total work force. Also at the PTT, the state-owned company in charge of postal services, an agreement was reached about curtailing on-call contracts. The employer accepted to convert one-hour contracts into optional fixed employment. *Druk en Papier’s* [print and paper] objective was to forestall decline. Although the legal status of those working from home had improved in collective labour agreements in the graphics industry, the union had been unable to avert deletion of the injunction against working from home.⁸¹ The *Dienstenbond* negotiated with the KBB group (the parent company of large department

78 R. Kösters, *Hand- en ellebogenwerk. De transformatie op de werkvloer bij Hoogovens en Philips* (masterscriptie Universiteit van Amsterdam 2019) 85-86.

79 IISH, FNV, inv. 2584, Nota AVB 1985/1986, October 1984

80 IISH, FNV, inv. 2584, Uitgangspunten AVB 1987, 6 October 1986.

81 IISH, FNV, inv. 2584, Inventarisatie 1985, 30 August 1985.

stores such as the Bijenkorf) and managed to have some measures taken there to counter flexible work. Workers from temp agencies could be used only incidentally, and the moment the work became more structural, department stores were required to offer another employment contract. Zero-hour contracts were prohibited, as were six-day working weeks. In addition, the one-third criterion for minimum wage was discontinued. According to this requirement, employees working less than one third of the normal working duration had not been entitled to minimum wage.⁸² In 1985 the Voedingsbond noted that in the food industry the legal status of part-time workers was arranged reasonably well in the majority of the contracts by then.⁸³ Moreover, the union occasionally managed to curtail on-call contracts and recruitment via temporary employment agencies.⁸⁴ In 1989 some companies in this industry no longer offered zero-hour contracts, while others applied a minimum work threshold of eight and 26 hours, and still others restricted overtime for part-time workers.⁸⁵

Successes remained limited, however, and some within the organization advocated elaborating common principles and devising a joint plan. Accordingly, in 1986 the trade union confederation decided to tackle advancing flexibilization. Publication of two internal memos on *several aspects of labour flexibilization* in 1986 and 1987 manifested increased attention to the matter in employment conditions policy.⁸⁶ In the first memo the FNV aimed to 'embark on launching a broader strategy to address flexibilization.'⁸⁷ In the coordinated employment conditions policy for 1987 and 1988 (adopted in 1986 and 1987) 'good labour relations' emerged as the most important theme after employment, arguing that flexibilization should not bring about groups of employees with second-rate employment conditions and legal status.⁸⁸

82 I. Kuijpers, 'Vier kanttekeningen bij de discussie over flexibilisering,' in: P. de Beer (Ed.), *Onzeker werk. Achtergronden, consequences en strategie ten aanzien van flexibel werk* (Amsterdam 2016) 35-41, 35.

83 IISH, FNV, inv. 2584, Inventarisatie 1985, 30 August 1985.

84 IISH, FNV, inv. 2584, Discussienota arbeidsvoorwaardenbeleid 1986/1987 Voedingsbond (hereafter Discussienota AVB VB 1986/1987), 1985.

85 IISH, FNV, inv. 2585, Nota AVB VB 1990, December 1989.

86 IISH, FNV, inv. 2585, Notitie 'FNV-AVB en flexibilisering,' 19 January 1987; IISH, FNV, inv. 2584, Notitie 'Eerste notitie over een aantal aspecten van flexibilisering van de arbeid die in het arbeidsvoorwaardenbeleid van belang zijn' (hereafter Notitie 'Eerste notitie flexibilisering'), 27 August 1986.

87 IISH, FNV, inv. 2584, Notitie 'Eerste notitie flexibilisering,' 27 August 1986.

88 IISH, FNV, inv. 2584, Uitgangspunten AVB 1987, 6 October 1986; IISH, FNV, inv. 2585, Uitgangspunten AVB 1988, 1987.

That broad strategy did not materialize in the 1980s. After 1987 the coordinated collective labour agreement campaign against flexibilization faded into the background. Until 1989, officials from the FNV-affiliated unions aimed primarily to achieve agreements about jobs and averting redundancies, policy on the labour market and education; and equal progression of income for workers and benefit recipients, and the FNV coordination therefore focused on these three causes. The objective was that unions would conclude only collective labour agreements that reflected a good balance of a clearly recognizable positive effect for jobs, clearly visible policy on the labour market and education, and income progression.⁸⁹ Limiting flexibilization was addressed only briefly later on in the memo, in a fleeting reference to the flexibility memos from 1986, which were labelled as ‘still current.’ Nor did the summary of demands mention anything at all about the issue.⁹⁰ Moreover, in the memo on employment conditions policy for 1990-1993 curtailing flexible work and including those working from home in a collective labour agreement appeared considerably lower on the agenda than before.⁹¹ On the whole, trade union policy aimed at promoting employment and countering unemployment had been revived by 1988. At the autumn consultation that year, the social partners had agreed at the negotiating table that in addition to the need for measures improving the outlook for unskilled workers and long-term unemployed on the labour market, continuing along the course of the Agreement of 1982 remained as important as ever.⁹² In fact, the Wassenaar Agreement was revisited again in 1993, when the unions reached new agreements about wage moderation in exchange for more jobs.⁹³

As for the third instrument for enforcing demands, executives from the Federation Council and the Federation board did not discuss resorting to protest actions to promote collective labour agreement demands on flexibilization. Nor do individual unions appear to have engaged in actions to achieve better collective labour agreement arrangements on flexibilization in the 1980s. Supermarket employees almost staged protest actions in 1988. The *Dienstenbond* hoped to tackle underpayment and ‘unwanted flexibilization’ via the collective labour agreement for

89 IISH, FNV, inv. 2585, Nota Arbeidsvoorwaarden 1989, 11 July 1988.

90 IISH, FNV, inv. 2585, Concept AVB 1989, 25 May 1988.

91 IISH, FNV, inv. 2586, Coördinatie-nota Arbeidsvoorwaarden 1990, 13 December 1989.

92 IISH, FNV, inv. 2585, Concepttekst naar aanleiding van het najaarsoverleg ‘Samen voor werk,’ 25 November 1988.

93 Van Dijk et al., *Precaire polder*, 48.

1989. Despite the low degree of organization and lack of a protest action tradition, the union involved many supermarket workers in the negotiations via information campaigns and member consultations. When employers walked out of the collective labour agreement negotiations, the *Dienstenbond* mobilized a great many supporters, and actions became imminent. In the end, the mere announcement of a new form of action, known as ‘picket lines,’ was ample reason for employers to accept the union’s demands (albeit only in part).⁹⁴

Thus, unlike with *rwd* and *rwh*, the FNV did not devise a coordinated strategy involving broad and systematic use of different measures to counter flexibilization between 1983 and 1989. Meanwhile, the ‘trade-off’ that was core to the Wassenaar Agreement failed to yield the desired result. Dutch trade union historian Sjaak van der Velden concluded: ‘Working time measured by the number of hours to be worked in a full-time job declined from 1,829 in 1982 to 1,770 three years later. Unemployment rates, however, remained as high as ever: around 15 percent of the active population not self-employed, according to the calculation at the time.’⁹⁵ In addition, a study by Dutch sociologist Kea Tijdens reveals that the trade union movement had limited influence on the redistribution of work. In the years 1986-1993 there was no additional reduction of working hours, and the social partners hardly ever reached collective labour agreements about reduced working duration, as they had in the period immediately after the Agreement. According to Tijdens, the disappointing redistribution led the trade union movement to forego additional reduced working duration and to restate wage demands in the negotiations. Nor was reduced working duration a priority for employers anymore, according to Tijdens.⁹⁶ Alternatively, the records on collective labour agreements reveal that reaching agreements with employers grew increasingly difficult, but reduced working duration and working hours never vanished from the FNV agenda. This insight also alters the view of how Wassenaar affected the rest of the decade. Tijdens already noted that any redistribution of work that came about arose largely from part-time jobs. This article shows how the Agreement determined the FNV employment conditions policy and paved the way toward increasing flexibilization in the 1980s.

94 *Ibid.*, 109.

95 S. van der Velden, *Loonstrijd en loonontwikkeling in Nederland* (Amsterdam 2016) 40.

96 Tijdens, ‘Arbeidsduurverkorting,’ 311.

Internal dynamics of the trade union movement

The policy choices by the FNV did not go unchallenged. The strategy following the Wassenaar Agreement and regarding flexibilization instigated considerable internal discussion. In February and March 1987 trade union executives Johan Stekelenburg and Henk Leemreize visited the larger FNV unions to talk informally about employment conditions policy for the years ahead. They spoke with (chief) officials and staff responsible for policy and its coordination within the unions. Stekelenburg and Leemreize concluded that many unions were ambivalent about additional rwd to an average working week of 36 hours. 'They sense,' read the evaluation memo, 'that additional rwd is needed to counter unemployment. However, doubts are growing.'⁹⁷ These doubts resulted from bad experiences with rwd, since redistribution had been insufficient, work pressure had increased, and taking scheduled days off proved problematic. The memo also noted that active trade union members (*kaderleden*) expressed greater eagerness than ordinary members to continue the rwd policy. Moreover, many unions were said to have emphasized that support from the entire FNV would be needed to be able to advance rwd; as soon as people from the different unions felt they were on their own, they would definitely abandon the cause.⁹⁸ Who did the federation board executives mean, when they referred to 'these people from different unions'? How did the (large) individual unions in the 1980s view FNV strategies for rwd and against flexibilization, the priorities set in that respect, and their consequences? And how did the internal dynamics of the trade union movement lead rwh and rwd to prevail, while flexibilization was a lower priority within the movement?

The Industriebond FNV strongly advocated the campaign for reduced working duration and working hours and redistributing work. It criticized both the dedication and the efforts of the other unions and the general FNV coordination. In 1985, their views on priorities in policy and strategy differed, according to the trade union officials from the industry. While the Industriebond maintained it was doing its best for the 36-hour working week, the other unions were believed to be doing (too) little. The Voedingsbond, for example, valued rwh, but did this union truly believe it was the most important theme? The civil servants'

97 IISH, FNV, inv. 2585, Evaluatie van gesprekken met bonden over het arbeidsvoorwaardenbeleid in de komende jaren, 14 April 1987.

98 Ibid.

union Abvakabo had initially expressed reluctance, which instigated frustration as well. In 1986 the Industriebond considered itself to be alone in its 'desires for rwh.'⁹⁹ Evaluation of the employment conditions policy of 1987 revealed that little had changed by then. The Industriebond once again appealed for rwh but noted huge differences in the positions adopted by fellow unions. Likewise, the Abvakabo drew criticism again, 'knowing with absolute certainty that its members would be affected by cuts, *without* redistribution!' At the same time, the Vervoersbond was considered fully occupied with a termination matter in break bulk cargo in the Rotterdam harbour. That year the Industriebond decried the internal FNV coordination as 'hardly effective,' and the union 'once again [observed] diminishing confidence in reduced working hours.'¹⁰⁰ Their conclusion was obviously that rwh required greater consideration. Meanwhile, flexibilization was a far lower priority in employment conditions policy for this union than for some others.

The Bouw- en Houtbond [Construction and timber union] FNV differed little from the Industriebond in its pursuit of rwd and rwh. According to the Industriebond, in 1987 Bouw- en Hout intended to 'insist tenaciously' on the demand for rwh.¹⁰¹ The memorandum on employment conditions policy principles for 1989 reveal that the construction workers' union wanted to highlight three closely related main points: improving employment prospects and countering unemployment; developing a labour market and training policy, aimed at improving the position of jobseekers; and income progression intended to enable both retention of purchasing power and equal income progression for those employed and benefit recipients alike. Rwd would suit these ends perfectly. After all, 'although many suggest that general reduced working hours are no longer an option, the Bouw- en Houtbond FNV believes that the 36-hour working week should be made available to all.'¹⁰² By contrast, the 1989 memo and its corresponding draft collective labour agreement mentioned nothing about flexibilization.

Things were different with the Voedingsbond. In discussions regarding this sector, flexibilization received extensive consideration in addition to reduced working hours.¹⁰³ In the collective labour agreement proposals for the company Turmac for 1984 and 1985, the union listed

99 IISH, FNV, inv. 2584, Notitie regionale teambijeenkomsten, 3 June 1986.

100 IISH, FNV, inv. 2585, Evaluatie Arbeidsvoorwaardenbeleid 1987, 1988.

101 Ibid.

102 IISH, FNV, inv. 2585, Concept cao-voorstellen Bouwbedrijf 1989, 25 August 1988.

103 IISH, FNV, inv. 2585, Conceptnota arbeidsvoorwaardenbeleid 1989, 1988.

various measures in response to increasing *numerical internal* and *external* flexibilization. The union wanted to give part-time workers first choice in the event of fulltime vacancies and to introduce a penitents' provision for those agreeing to switch from full-time to part-time employment.¹⁰⁴ In 1985 the union had included curtailing on-call contracts in all proposals and had drafted specific measures to this end.¹⁰⁵ Over the next two years, according to the Voedingsbond, 'resistance' was the indicated response to converting fixed contracts with an indefinite duration into temporary flexible contracts and to on-call contracts, which were regarded as having great merit in the 'employer's mind-set.'¹⁰⁶ Nor did this union hesitate to note in the employment conditions memo for 1990 that after Wassenaar very little redistribution had taken place, and that flexibilization and overtime had increased. According to the Voedingsbond, it was by then high time to reach a central agreement regulating restriction of flexible contracts by law. In the same memo, the Voedingsbond expressed reluctance with respect to the FNV strategy for effectively countering unemployment through redistribution by means of *rwh* and *rwd*. A good solution for the declining attention to *rwh* and the disappointing redistribution results would be possible only with a three-party agreement reached centrally, but circumstances did not yet appear right for that. Before such an agreement was reached, the Voedingsbond considered it pointless for individual unions to try to resolve the matter on their own. This union was not interested in 'chasing people onto the "barricades" over one hour a week or a few extra days of free time'. Moreover, 'the after effects (...) would be still worse, if no guarantees were forthcoming,' as had generally been the case.¹⁰⁷

The Abvakabo also encountered resistance to *rwh* and *rwd* among its constituents – the Industriebond had rightly noted that the members caused the union to express criticism. In a letter about employment conditions policy for 1987, the Abvakabo informed the federation that their constituents would not understand a discussion about more extensive generally reduced working hours. 'We do not want to ignore the employment problem,' wrote the union, 'but additional reductions in working hours in a situation where the government erodes the jobs we fund as fast as they come about seems inconceivable.'¹⁰⁸ Work-

104 IISH, FNV, inv. 2584, Notitie VB afroep en cao, 5 April 1984.

105 IISH, FNV, inv. 2584, Inventarisatie 1985, 30 August 1985.

106 IISH, FNV, inv. 2584, Discussienota AVB VB 1986/1987, 1985.

107 IISH, FNV, inv. 2585, Nota AVB VB 1990, December 1989.

108 IISH, FNV, inv. 2584, Letter from AbvaKabo to FNV J. Stekelenburg, 9 March 1987.

ing hours should be reduced further only with strict conditions relating to changes in purchasing power, equal treatment for men and women, and complete redistribution that would not be at the expense of the Abvakabo members. Moreover, the civil servants' union urged national agreements, albeit with two clear conditions: the arrangement should not lead to imposing reduced working hours unilaterally, and agreements could be reached with the council of ministers, only if equal treatment for men and women figured in the negotiations. In addition, flexibilization was an important issue for the Abvakabo. In a 1986 strategy memo, the union wrote that their aim was to ensure that new developments, including flexibilization, would figure in the central discussions.¹⁰⁹

Finally, by 1989, the Vervoersbond emphasized that there were lessons to be learned from the negative consequences of the FNV policy for rwh. On the one hand, the union saw ample reason to continue redistribution of work in the interest of creating new jobs. On the other hand, it observed that experiences with reduced working hours had certainly not been favourable in all cases. According to the union, deteriorations that employers and the government had introduced together with the rwh had averted redistribution, so that the objective of rwh (i.e. more jobs) had not been achieved sufficiently. 'In some cases, working conditions had therefore even deteriorated, and payroll cuts had been introduced. As a result, rwh had brought about the opposite of its intended purpose,' read the employment conditions memo. In the future the union wanted to avoid this risk, and the elaboration of the redistribution should lead only to improved employment conditions or work quality, so 'less irregularity' and by 'reducing flexibilization.'¹¹⁰

The vast discrepancies in attention devoted to flexibilization by different unions arose from the distribution and deployment of women within the FNV and its affiliated unions. First, the Marflex women had been trailblazers in identifying (especially *external*) flexibilization as a problem.¹¹¹ Then, in 1986, trade union confederation executives regarded flexibilization as a problem affecting mainly specific workers. The FNV was therefore responsible for averting as much as possible 'that only certain groups of male and female workers bear the full burden of flexibilization in employment conditions.'¹¹² Moreover, in the

109 Ibid.; Van Dijk et al. *Precaire polder*, 95.

110 IISH, FNV, inv. 2585, Conceptnota Voedingsbond arbeidsvoorwaardenbeleid 1989, 1988.

111 Van Dijk et al., *Precaire polder*, 103-107.

112 IISH, FNV, inv. 2584, Uitgangspunten AVB 1987, 6 October 1986.

1980s, moreover, the women from the women's secretariat (in part the same women as from the Marflex group) were the ones who drafted procedures for collective labour agreement discussions, including sample agreements for flexibilization, and reviewed the results achieved each year.¹¹³ In addition, unions that regarded flexibilization as one of the priorities in employment conditions policy clearly had more female members, as Table 2 shows. The Abvakabo had a relatively high percentage of female members and found flexibilization to be urgent. Likewise, even though the Voedingsbond may have had relatively few women members compared with the Abvakabo, especially after the congress in 1988, this union considered women to be an important target group.¹¹⁴ After all, the Voedingsbond noticed that women in the food industry were particularly likely to work via on-call contracts.¹¹⁵ In the FNV as a whole, women were noticeably in the minority. In the 1980s the number of female trade union members did increase, as did the number of women employed in the Netherlands. To the FNV, however, women were still not the *core workforce*. As a result, their voice was less likely to resonate in policy, and protection of interests catered less to their priorities.

Table 2 Women within the FNV and its precursors

	Percentage of female members in different NVV/FNV unions			Distribution of the total number of female NVV/FNV members among the different unions, in percentages		
	1980	1986	1990	1980	1986	1990
Industriebond	5 %	6%	8%	15%	14%	15%
Bouw en Hout	-	-	1%	-	-	-
Voedingsbond	11%	14%	17%	4%	5%	5%
Abvakabo	22 %	26%	34%	43%	43%	45%
Vervoersbond	3%	3%	5%	-	-	-

Source: Corrie van Eijl, *Maandag tolereren we niks meer*, 334

113 IISH, FNV, inv. 2585, Draaiboek cao-onderhandelingen gericht op de verbetering van de positie van vrouwelijke werknemers, revised version 1988-1989, July 1988; IISH, FNV, inv. 2585, Brief C. Inja, 20 January 1987.

114 IISH, FNV, inv. 2585, Nota AVBVB 1990, December 1989.

115 IISH, FNV, inv. 2584, Notitie VB afroep en cao, 5 April 1984.



Illustration 2 Women demonstrating for true reductions in working hours in Utrecht, 26 March 1983 (source: photo by Marcel Antonisse, photo collection Anefo, National Archive).

Still, the tendency to defend the interests of the *core workforce* does not fully explain the disposition of the FNV toward flexibilization and reduced working duration and working hours. Equally importantly, Wasenaar received priority, because an agreement was there, and the organization was in transition in this period. For decades the FNV and its precursors had attributed great value to national agreements for Dutch workers. After the war, preference was given to the harmony model, which was based on wage policy in exchange for establishing social security and employment. In the 1960s and 70s conflict appeared to prevail more strongly. The 1980s started as a period of internal discussion about professionalization and centralization, the role of trade union democracy, and the trade union movement as a strident grass-roots organization. In response to the economic recession, the FNV staged protest actions *and* reached agreements.¹¹⁶ This attitude changed over the course of the decade. In 1987 the report *FNV 2000 was published* and marked the start of 'sweeping reorientation of the trade union confederation and the affiliated unions. The trade union movement was to become distinctive, in part by working hard on personal services to the members.¹¹⁷ With this plan, the FNV shifted its focus to professionalizing the organization and serving individual members. Likewise,

¹¹⁶ Van Dijk et al., *Precaire polder*, 47-48.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 72.

affiliated unions did more to accommodate centralization and professionalization. Relations between members and union officials and between union officials and the trade union federation became more business-like. The organization aimed increasingly at reaching national agreements, thereby further straining contacts with those at the base.¹¹⁸ In the years after Wassenaar, a stronger focus on and elaboration of policy on reduced working duration and working hours within the FNV became the top priority. Toward the end of the decade the Voedingsbond and the Abvakabo believed that curtailing flexible contracts required a central agreement, illustrating clearly the increased importance the FNV and its unions attributed to these types of agreements.

Conclusion

Reflecting on the 1980s enhances our understanding of flexibilization, neoliberalism, and how they related to one another. As a corporatist country, the Netherlands had less radically market-oriented trends at the time, according to the literature, although the first round wave of the strong increase in flexibilization occurred in the same period. This article reflects on the years following the Wassenaar Agreement to examine the disposition and strategy toward flexibilization among the FNV trade union confederation and unions. The role of the trade union movement is shown as meriting an independent explanation. In other words, we offer new insight into a factor that to date has been insufficiently addressed in the debate about the origins of the radical flexibilization of the Dutch labour market.

To date, scholarly studies on flexibilization have primarily considered structural changes said to make flexibilization inevitable and desirable (e.g. Touwen) and the economic institutions that made this possible at the highest (consultation) level (e.g. Sluyterman, Dekker, Keune, Boonstra, Thelen, Emmenegger). The trade union movement was obviously not immune to the discourse on the inevitability of flexibilization as a consequence of global economic developments, and the movement, as Keetie Sluyterman and Maarten Keune demonstrate, had to cope with diminishing leverage in negotiations with employer organizations and the government. Moreover, the power of the trade unions was challenged in the 1980s because of the economic recession that led

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 81-82.

to high unemployment and accelerated economic changes. The Dutch trade union movement, however, was not a homogeneous movement, and its role cannot be reduced to its formal influence on economic decision-making in nationwide agreements and policy. This article adopts a social-historical perspective to consider as well the far more complex independent organizational and social dynamics of the trade union movement. By comparing different trade union strategies on flexibilization – from nationwide agreements to strategy on collective labour agreements and employment conditions and protest actions – we situate the trade unions in the Dutch political and social landscape with respect to their multiple functions (or roles). Consequently, we give a more in-depth and a more historically contextualized explanation for the early flexibilization of labour relations in the Netherlands.

Research based on collective labour agreements reveals that the FNV noted the developments relating to flexibilization *and* afforded them extensive latitude. Trade unionists from different unions, different lobby groups, and different strata within the trade union movement were very clearly aware that rapid changes were occurring at the time. The FNV therefore devised its own view of work in post-industrial society: its opportunities and especially the problems brought about by specific forms of flexibilization and associated the rise of *external* flexibilization with the principles from the Wassenaar Agreement. The effort to achieve reduced working duration and working hours soon turned out to influence the increase in temporary staff, men and women working from home, those working on call, or staff working via temporary employment agencies. Even after observing these trends, however, the trade union movement did not revise its strategy with respect to *rwh* or *flex*. Voices from below that resonated since the mid-1980s had very little effect. In the second half of the 1980s (from 1986/1987) trade unionists (members and professionals) grew more interested, and flexibilization briefly figured more prominently in centrally coordinated employment conditions policy. But this interest was short-lived. Although at the end of the decade it became evident virtually no benefits resulted from the focus on reduced working hours, the central strategy was once again to concentrate on implementing the arrangements from the Wassenaar Agreement. Throughout the decade, the FNV used the resources available (national agreements, employment conditions policy, and protest actions) mainly to achieve reduced working hours and far less to counter flexibilization. In doing so, the organization focused progressively on the central negotiations and national agree-

ments. With the FNV devoting most of its time and energy to fulfilling the promise of reduced working duration and reduced working hours, employers prioritizing flexibilization encountered little resistance.

Not all unions agreed with the coordinated strategy with respect to *rwh* and *flex*. As a rule, unions that challenged flexibility were also more critical about the high priority attributed to implementing reduced working hours. Due in part to internal differences about both *rwh* and flexibilization, and because often women were not counted as part of the *core workforce*, this did not change. The Wassenaar Agreement and the focus on securing that trade-off (on the *rwh* matter the agreement had after all consisted of recommendations and promises) received priority. This choice left the FNV less time and attention to devote to flexibilization. Because the organization attributed ever greater importance to achieving objectives via central negotiations and agreements, contacts with the lower levels became increasingly strained as well. For these reasons, no actions were taken against the negative effects of the restructuring and flexibilization of the labour market. That policy afforded employers, who were strongly committed to flexibilization, the latitude they needed: they seized this opportunity to fill the emerging job vacancies with workers in flexible contracts. In 1996 the leadership of the trade unions eventually tried to achieve some regulation through a nationwide agreement. To date, academic literature focuses almost exclusively on this delayed reaction in the Flex Agreement of 1996.

This article has examined the trade union movement as a social movement to improve our understanding of the effects of ideas and policy and the role of social partners in bringing them about. Especially the combination of forces generated *from* and *by* an agreement among these partners at the highest echelons, as well as the internal dynamics within the FNV, determined the disposition of the trade union movement toward flexibilization of labour in the 1980s. Rather than the economic recession, the changing dynamics that resulted from the Wassenaar Agreement was the most important development for the FNV. The lesson for today's academic and social discussions about sweeping changes in the political economy over the past forty years – in particular the rise of neoliberalism – is that considering changing ideas and government policy alone is not enough. To get a more in-depth impression of the role of the Dutch trade union movement, follow-up studies might address the FNV congresses organized in this period and the debates that ensued there. They could, for example, analyse the effects of forms of trade union organization and action to address the changing

social-economic challenges confronting the movement. This article has considered documents such as draft and discussion memos debated at the congresses and amended as a result. The next steps might comprise examining congress proceedings, studying archival sources of companies and conducting interviews. Overall, research on the significant changes in the organization of work and the labour market over the past forty years will definitely benefit from greater attention to the trade union movement and its internal dynamics.

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