

More Combative Than the Dutch?

*Belgian Frontier Workers in Industrial Action in the Netherlands
in the 1960s and 1970s*

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Abstract

This article examines the role of Belgian frontier workers in labor conflicts in the Netherlands during the 1960s and 1970s. Drawing on contemporary press reports, the study analyzes key cases, such as the Sphinx ceramics factory in Maastricht, the Etna factory in Breda, and the Clitex textile plant in Clinge. Belgian frontier workers frequently initiated or sustained strikes, often driven by grievances linked to their cross-border status, including unequal child benefits and exchange rate losses. Their activism exposed national differences in industrial relations, but there are no indications of a transnational transfer of protest culture.

From September 18 to 23, 1972, the synthetic fiber factory Enka in Breda was occupied to prevent closure. The successful occupation was the first of its kind in the Netherlands and acquired legendary status in the history of Dutch trade unionism and workers' activism. After the announcement of the closure in April 1972, it took the trade unions six months of hesitation and deliberation, and a lot of pressure from the workers, to take action. Breda being fairly close to the Dutch-Belgian border, Enka employed 220 Belgian frontier workers in a workforce of 1,723 in total. Some 80 Belgian militants were active in the occupation, with full support of the Belgian union *Algemeen Christelijk Vakverbond* (ACV). One of its officials criticized the delayed decision by the Dutch unions:

We Belgians are perhaps somewhat spontaneous, a bit more combative. With us, it would not have lasted six months to take action in protest against a closure of this magnitude. Belgians start a labor campaign with or without union approval.¹

Were the Belgians more combative than the Dutch? And if so, why? This is the central question of this article. It examines the role of Belgian frontier workers in industrial conflicts in the Netherlands in the 1960s and 1970s. Through case studies of industrial action in Dutch factories and workplaces, initiated or supported by Belgian workers, it highlights their militancy, and asks what this tells us about differing traditions of worker resistance in Belgium and the Netherlands. Focusing on cross-border interactions, this article is meant as a modest contribution to the growing body of research on comparative and transnational labor history.²

The argument unfolds in three parts. First, it sketches the scale and geography of Belgian cross-border labor, using statistical data from the Dutch *Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek* (CBS, the Dutch national statistics bureau). Second, it presents a series of case studies— including Sphinx (Maastricht), Etna (Breda), and Clitex (Clinge)— to show how Belgian workers participated in or led industrial actions. Finally, it reflects on the implications of these findings for understanding differences in national strike cultures.

Belgian frontier workers in the Netherlands in the 1960s and 1970s

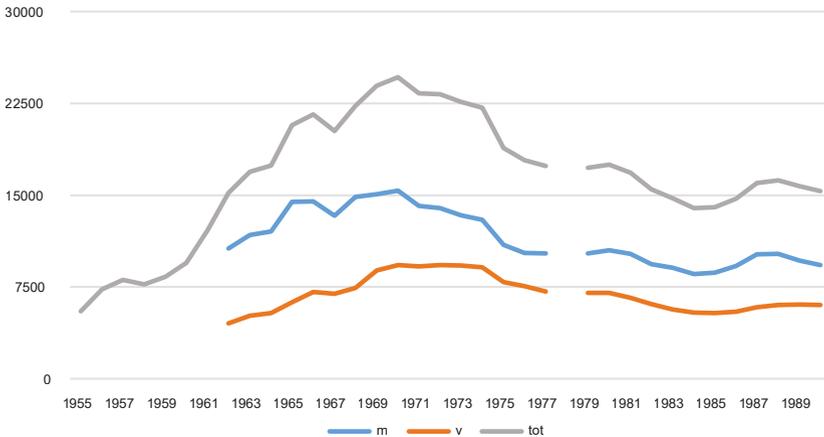
The large-scale commute of Belgian workers across the Dutch border in the 1960s and 1970s was a relatively new phenomenon. After the Second World War, and well into the 1950s, the movement had in fact been the reverse, mainly because of Dutch government policies to keep wages low.³ When in the 1960s, tight labor markets and industrial

1 Cited in Aad van Cortenberghe and Jeroen Terlingen, *Enka-dossier. Handboek voor bezetters* (Utrecht/Antwerpen 1972) 172.

2 Cf. Ad Knotter, *Transformations of trade unionism. Comparative and transnational perspectives on workers organizing in Europe and the US, eighteenth to twenty-first centuries* (Amsterdam 2018).

3 Willibrord Rutten, 'Buitenbeentjes. Nederlandse kompels in de Luikse kolonmijnen na de Tweede Wereldoorlog', *Studies over de Sociaaleconomische Geschiedenis van Limburg/Jaarboek van het Sociaal Historisch Centrum voor Limburg* LVI (2011) 3-53; Noël Cramer, 'Le travail frontalier belgo-néerlandais. Le cas du Maasland en Belgique et du Westelijke Mijnstreek aux Pays-Bas', *Espace, Populations, Sociétés* 2 (1984) 57-64.

Graph 1 Number of Belgian frontier workers employed in the Netherlands, 1955-2000



Source: CBS, Sociale en economische maandstatistiek.

NB: In 1979, CBS changed the reference date from December 1 to April 1. There are no figures for 1978.

unrest pushed Dutch wages upward,⁴ it became more attractive for Belgians to cross the border. The number of Belgian frontier workers in the Netherlands rose from 9,454 in 1960 to a peak of 24,645 in 1970.⁵ Thereafter the number declined, first gradually and then, after the economic crisis of 1974, more sharply to a level of 17,000-18,000 by the late 1970s,⁶ dropping further to 14,000-16,000 in the 1980s (graph 1).

There has been no systematic study of Belgian cross-border labor in the Netherlands, in contrast to Dutch frontier workers in Germany in this period (which was about the same size).⁷ Some key characteristics can be reconstructed from data published in the *Sociale en economische maandstatistiek* by the *Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek* (CBS). In the context of industrial action, it is significant that the vast majority of the

4 Ad Knotter, 'Geen makke schapen. Loonpolitiek, vakbonden en "wilde" stakingen in de aanloop naar de loonexplosie van 1964', *TSEG – The Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History* 18:2 (2021) 73-108.

5 The figures provided by the Belgian *Nationaal Instituut voor de Statistiek* differ somewhat from the Dutch: according to the *Statistisch Jaarboek van België*, the highest number was reached in 1972 with 27,547.

6 Cf. *De Volkskrant* 21-10-1975: 'Dit jaar ruim duizend Belgen hier ontslagen'; *Limburgsch Dagblad* 22-10-1975: 'Algemeen Christelijk Vakverbond diep in de zorgen. Belgische pendelaars met ontslag bedreigd'.

7 Sophie Bouwens, *Over de streep. Grensarbeid vanuit Zuid-Limburg naar Duitsland, 1958-2001* (Hilversum 2008).

Table 1 Belgian frontier workers employed by companies in North Brabant and Limburg in 1962

| Province/town | Company | Number of Belgians employed |
|----------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| North Brabant | | |
| Eindhoven | Philips (electronics) | 2200 |
| | DAF (automobiles) | 1000 |
| Breda | Hero (fruit preserves) | 900 |
| | HKI (synthetic fibers) | 200 |
| | Wittouck (sugar) | 200 |
| Tilburg | Volt (electronics) | 400 |
| Oss | Zwanenberg (meat) | 300 |
| | Hartog (meat) | 250 |
| Oosterhout | Excelsior (metal pipes) | 120 |
| Limburg | | |
| Maastricht | Sphinx (ceramics) | 1700 |
| | Mosa (ceramics) | 400 |
| | KNP (paper) | 180 |
| | Radium (rubber) | 100 |
| Geleen | Staatsmijnen (mining and chemicals) | 300 |
| Weert | Beeren (textiles) | 250 |
| Echt | De Valk (roof tiles) | 120 |

Source: De Gooi- en Eemlander 22-3-1962: 'Vakbondssectie voor grensarbeiders uit België'.

Belgian frontier workers were employed in manufacturing industries. In the early 1960s this proportion stood at 97 percent, declining slowly to 90 percent by the end of that decade. In the 1970s, the share dropped further to 80 percent, reaching 65 percent in 1990. This decline coincided with a rising number of women entering the service sector from around 1970 onward. Female employment rose from 30 percent of the Belgian frontier workers in the early 1960s to about 40 percent in the 1970s. While in the 1960s almost all women (92-97 percent) were employed in manufacturing, by 1990 this figure had fallen to only 45 percent, compared to nearly 80 percent among men.

Because the Belgian workers commuted on a daily basis, it is hardly surprising that they were employed primarily in the Dutch provinces adjacent to Belgium: Zeeland, North Brabant, and Limburg. A smaller number travelled further north to work in shipbuilding and metal

industries in the Rotterdam area, in the province of South Holland. Throughout this period, the regional distribution of Belgian frontier labor changed significantly. Only the share from Zeeland remained relatively stable, varying between 9 and 12 percent. North Brabant declined from 52-60 percent in the 1960s to 48-53 percent in the 1970s, while Limburg increased its share from 29-33 percent in the 1960s to 34-40 percent in the 1970s. In Zeeland, Belgian workers were almost exclusively employed in Zeeland Flanders, the strip of land between the Scheldt estuary and the Belgian border. In North Brabant, the city of Eindhoven stood out, employing 45-50 percent of all Belgians working in the province. Philips was by far the largest employer, with the number of Belgian frontier workers rising from 2,200 in 1962 to 3,000 in 1969.⁸ In Limburg, cross-border labor was heavily concentrated in Maastricht, accounting for 64-74 percent of Belgian workers in the province in the 1960s, 59-64 percent in the 1970s, and 52-58 percent in the 1980s. Table 1 provides an overview of the main companies employing Belgian frontier workers in 1962, illustrating the concentration of the cross-border labor force in several large factories.

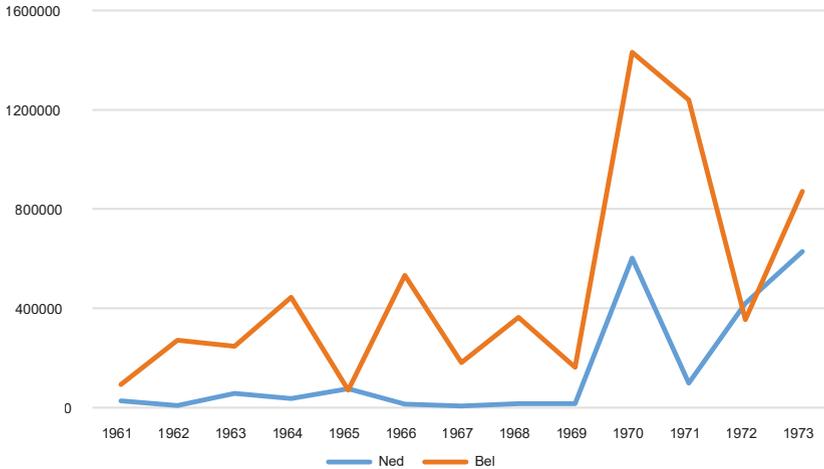
Were the Belgian border provinces more prone to strikes than the Dutch?

Comparative strike data for Belgium and the Netherlands leave little doubt about the contrast in being prone to strikes between both countries. In nearly every year throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, the number of strike days ('days lost') was significantly higher in Belgium than in the Netherlands (graph 2).

Within Belgium, the Flemish regions were considered less prone to strikes than Wallonia and Brussels.⁹ Yet available data reveal that the Flemish provinces bordering the Netherlands (East Flanders, Antwerp, and Belgian Limburg), home to most of the frontier workers, displayed a much higher strike frequency than their Dutch counterparts (Zeeland, North Brabant, and Dutch Limburg) (table 2). One of the reasons was that the core areas of Flemish strike propensity were situated in these provinces: the industrial city of Ghent, the port city of Antwerp, and the mining and industrial region of Belgian Limburg. In contrast, industrial

8 *Het Parool* 23-10-1969: 'Uitbreiding bij Philips-België leidt tot werk voor 1500 man'.

9 Kurt Vandaele, 'Les grèves en Flandre depuis 1966. Une région docile en "Colère Blanche"?', in: É. Arcq et al. (eds), *Dynamique de la concertation sociale* (Brussels 2010) 169-187.

Graph 2 Strike days 'lost' in Belgium and the Netherlands, 1961-1973

Sources: Jaak Brepoels, *Wat zoudt gij zonder 't werkvolk zijn? Anderhalve eeuw arbeidersstrijd in België, deel 2: 1966-1980 (Leuven 1981) 52*; IISH database *Labor conflicts in the Netherlands, 1372-2019*

relations in the Dutch border provinces were among the most peaceful in the Netherlands. Thus, while Flanders as a whole may have lagged behind the French-speaking parts of Belgium, its border provinces developed a more assertive strike culture than the adjacent Dutch regions. In this context, it is reasonable to expect a militant role for the Belgian frontier workers in the Netherlands. The following case studies provide Illustrations of this dynamic, including how it worked out in industrial conflicts involving Belgian workers.

Table 2 Number of strikers in the border provinces of Belgium and the Netherlands, 1960-1974

| Provinces | 1960-1964 | 1965-1969 | 1970-1974 |
|---|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| East-Flanders, Antwerp, Belgian Limburg | 50,903 | 44,765 | 268,244 |
| Zeeland, North Brabant, Dutch Limburg | 3,980 | 3,081 | 7,871 |

Sources: Statistisch Jaarboek van België; IISH database *Labor conflicts in the Netherlands, 1372-2019*.

Not used to the Dutch system of consultation: Strikes at the Sphinx-ceramics factory in 1961

In the 1950s, the Maastricht ceramics factories began recruiting Belgian frontier workers from nearby villages in Belgian Limburg. By 1960, the city's largest company, Sphinx-C eramique, employed 1,560 Belgians, more than 40 percent of its total workforce.¹⁰ In August 1961 a new tariff, announced for the foundry department ('faiencerie') in the Sphinx factory at the Boschstraat, was perceived as unfavorable by the 180 Belgian workers employed there. On August 30, in the buses transporting them from their places of residence, they decided not to go in. The next day, work was only reluctantly resumed, after several hours of consultations with Dutch and Belgian trade union representatives.¹¹ A regional newspaper framed the episode as a cultural misunderstanding: "The Belgians [...] are not used to the system of consultation, which in the Netherlands is successfully applied to these kinds of conflicts."¹²

Later that same year, on December 14, 1961, a second and much larger strike broke out. This time around 1,500 production workers at the Boschstraat factory (out of 1,800 in total) walked out in protest against a lower Christmas bonus than that for the administrative staff. Newspapers reported that the strike was initiated by the Belgian workers, and that the Dutch only followed their lead.¹³ It was called "decisive for the resistance in the Boschstraat that here, in contrast to other Sphinx-factories in Maastricht, the majority of the workers were Belgians".¹⁴ The strike ended when management agreed to pay an advance on the bonus, prompting most workers to resume work.¹⁵

10 Caspar Cillekens, *Last van het verleden. De Sphinx en Maastricht* (Zwolle 2024) 88-92.

11 *Limburgsch Dagblad* 1-9-1961: 'Honderdtachtig arbeiders erbij betrokken. Korte wilde staking op een afdeling van de Sphinx'.

12 *De Nieuwe Limburger* 31-8-1961: 'Na  en dag be indigd. Wilde staking bij de N.-V. Sphinx-C eramique'.

13 *De Tijd* 14-12-1961: 'Vooral Belgische arbeiders. 1500 stakers bij "De Sphinx" in Maastricht; 15-12-1961: 'Ondanks compromis nog staking bij "De Sphinx"'; *Limburgsch Dagblad* 15-12-1961: 'Op aandringen van de Belgische werkkrachten? Staking bij Sphinx-C eramique legt nagenoeg hele bedrijf stil'; *De Waarheid* 15-12-1961: 'Staking van 1500 man in Maastricht'.

14 *De Nieuwe Limburger* 15-12-1961: 'Wilde staking bij "De Sphinx". Arbeiders ontevreden over grootte kerstgratificatie. Vandaag het "verlossende woord"?'.

15 *Limburgsch Dagblad* 16-12-1961: 'Staking Sphinx is ten einde'; *De Tijd* 16-12-1961: 'Maandag wellicht bij "De Sphinx" iedereen weer aan het werk'.



Illustration 1 Workers on strike in 1961 at Sphinx in Boschstraat, Maastricht, Netherlands

Source: Unknown photographer (persbureau Het Zuiden)

Child benefits and *koersbonificatie*: Strike issues among frontier workers

Several labor conflicts in the 1960s and 1970s stemmed from the ambiguous legal and social position of the Belgians as frontier workers. Their cross-border status meant that they contributed to Dutch social insurance programs without receiving the benefits, a recurring source of protest. On October 23, 1961, 200 Belgian seasonal workers at the sugar factory *Coöperatieve Suikerfabriek* in Puttershoek (South Holland) walked out in protest against the deduction of the state pension premium (AOW), required by Dutch law, though of no use to Belgian citizens.¹⁶ Work was resumed only after intervention by the Belgian trade unions. On March 22, 1963, 60 Belgian workers at the *Drie Hoefijzers* brewery in Breda walked out demanding child benefits to be paid according to Belgian standards, which were considerably higher than the Dutch. After three days of striking, the management granted

¹⁶ *Het Vrije Volk* 24-10-1961: 'Vakbond adviseerde werk te hervatten. Bij suikerfabriek in Puttershoek staken 200 Belgen'.

a special supplement to bridge the gap.¹⁷ In February 1963, the mere threat of a strike by the 45 Belgian workers at Berkvens' woodworking in Someren (North Brabant) was enough to push the employer into negotiations over higher child benefits.¹⁸ Compensation for lower child benefits was also one of the issues in a wildcat strike by several hundreds of Belgian workers at the Mosa ceramics factory in Maastricht on March 22 and 23, 1973.¹⁹

Another recurring issue in strikes involving Belgian frontier workers concerned compensation for losses caused by exchange rates fluctuations between the Belgian franc and the Dutch guilder. Following the devaluation of the guilder in 1949, Dutch employers were allowed to pay such a compensation, known as *koersbonificatie*, to offset workers' losses. Employers, however, were not obliged to pay a fixed rate and could adjust the compensation at will. After the revaluation of the guilder in 1961, for instance, the mining company *Staatsmijnen* in Limburg reduced the compensation from 20 to 16 percent, whereas Philips in Eindhoven chose to maintain it at 20 percent, in this way granting their Belgian employees a hidden wage raise.²⁰ Subsequent adaptations of the *koersbonificatie* by employers became a recurring cause of conflict in cross-border industrial relations. In September and October 1963, trade union meetings in the Belgian border towns of Assenede and Zelzate assembled around 700 frontier workers who threatened to strike in the industrial zone of Zeeuws-Vlaanderen along the Terneuzen-Ghent Canal (*Kanaalzone*). Their demands included full payment of the *koersbonificatie* and equalization of child allowances with Belgian standards.²¹ The outcome was not reported.

In August 1971, the Breda manufacturer of household appliances Etna announced its decision to abolish the *koersbonificatie* of 13 percent. The move was justified by claiming that the wage differential caused

17 *Algemeen Handelsblad* 25-3-1963: 'Staking bij De Drie Hoefijzers'; *Het Parool* 25-3-1963: 'Belgen bij bedrijf in Breda staken om kinderbijslag'; 27-3-1963: 'Belgische arbeiders hervatten werk bij bedrijf in Breda'.

18 *Nieuwe Eindhovense Courant* 13-2-1963: 'Bondsbestuurder Ketelaars: "Methode-Berkvens: verdeel en heers". Belgisch personeel stelt solidair'; 6-3-1963: 'Overeenstemming tussen N.V. Berkvens en K.H.B.'.

19 *Limburgsch Dagblad* 24-3-1973: 'Opnieuw wilde staking van Belgen bij Mosa'; *Tubantia* 26-3-1973: 'Gewijzigd actieplan industriebonden'; *De Tijd* 26-3-1973: 'Bonden schorten acties voorlopig niet op'.

20 *De Volkskrant* 28-3-1961: 'Valuta-toeslag voor grensarbeiders'.

21 *Het Vrije Volk* 1-10-1963: 'Belgische grensarbeiders willen werk neerleggen'; *Het Parool* 2-10-1963: 'Grensarbeiders zijn ontevreden. Staking Belgen dreigt in Zeeuws-Vlaanderen'; *De Gooi- en Eemlander* 12-10-1963: 'Grensarbeider wil koers verdisconteerd zien in loon'.

by the *bonificatie* had caused resentment among the Dutch workers. On August 18, 1971, a protest strike by 230 Belgian workers against this plan was followed by a four-day work stoppage between August 27 and 30, 1971.²² The strike ended abruptly after threats of dismissal by the management. At a union meeting in Turnhout, 64 percent of the workers voted to continue the strike, narrowly missing the required two-thirds (66 percent) majority.²³ A few months later, in January 1972, a similar conflict broke out at the *Machinefabriek Breda*. When the management likewise announced plans to abolish the *koersbonificatie*, the 80 Belgian workers responded with intermittent and go slow strikes. Once again, the unrest subsided after threat of immediate dismissal.²⁴ I found a last example of this type of strike in 1979: 180 Belgian women (in a workforce of 260) at Ericsson Telephone Company in Gilze-Rijen (North Brabant) walked out in demand of higher exchange rates and a *grensoverschrijdingstoeslag*, a 'cross border bonus', to adjust for lower price compensation in the Netherlands than in Belgium.²⁵ The outcome is unknown.

Striking is a party: Belgian frontier workers participating in industrial action

In the neo-corporatist so-called polder model of industrial relations in the Netherlands, there were very few strikes called by the Dutch trade unions in the 1960s. One of the few exceptions was an eight-day strike at the Bata shoe factory in Best (North Brabant) in October 1967, organized by the Catholic trade union *Nederlands Katholiek Vakverbond* (NKV).²⁶ The 200 Belgian frontier workers at Bata, along with 170 Turkish workers, joined the strike without hesitation.²⁷ A union official

22 *De Waarheid* 19-8-1971: 'Korte staking bij Etna'; 27-8-1971: "'Wij laten niet aan lonen tornen'. Belgische arbeiders ETNA-Breda staken'; 30-8-1971: 'Etna-Breda Belgen zetten vandaag staking voort'.

23 *Het Vrije Volk* 31-8-1971: 'Staking bij Etna voorbij'; 'Etna ontwaakte na twaalf jaar. Belgen terug – als verliezers'.

24 *De Tijd* 25-1-1972: 'Belgen bij "Breda" met ontslag bedreigd'; *De Volkskrant* 26-1-1972: 'In machinefabriek. Belgen bedreigd met ontslag'; *Trouw* 27-1-1972: 'Belgen na conflict met fabrieksdirectie weer aan het werk'.

25 *Trouw* 19-6-1979: 'Belgisch personeel staakt voor betere wisselkoers'; *De Waarheid* 20-6-1979: 'Staking voor meer loon'; 21-6-1979: 'Staking vrouwen duurt voort'.

26 *Het Parool* 11-10-1963: 'Eerste "erkende" staking sinds 1960. Personeel van Bata Best staakt voor eigen c.a.o.'; *Vrij Nederland* 21-10-1967: 'Bij God en bij de Bata is alles mogelijk'.

27 *Nieuwsblad van het Noorden* 11-10-1967: 'Belgen en Turken doen ook mee. Ruim 900 stakers om CAO-geschil bij Batabedrijf in Best'.



Illustration 2 Staff at Bata Shoe Factory in Best on strike. Workers at the gate
 Photo made by Ben Mark, Anefo.

wryly observed, “With the Belgians, it is a peculiar thing. They find striking enjoyable. They say: we don’t have to work, it is a party.”²⁸

After massive unofficial strikes in the Rotterdam docks and shipyards in 1970, the Dutch trade unions adopted a more combative stance to restore contact with their membership. One initial manifestation of this shift was a nationwide construction strike in 1971. In the border regions, the Belgian frontier workers enthusiastically joined their Dutch colleagues: for instance, 160 Belgians at the construction site of the *Vijverdal* psychiatric center in Maastricht in May 1971. Strike pay was provided by the Belgian unions.²⁹ Other examples included 30 Belgian and 50 Turkish workers joining a strike at the Rilland-Bath sluice complex in Zeeland,³⁰ and 50 Belgians taking part in a strike at dredging works near Tholen, also in Zeeland.³¹

In 1973, the Dutch industrial unions launched selective strikes across the country, demanding equal pay raises (a fixed amount rather than a percentage). Belgian unions supported their members when they

28 Cited in *De Volkskrant* 12-10-1967: ‘De eerste stakingsdag bij Bata’.

29 *Limburgsch Dagblad* 18-5-1971: ‘Prikakties bij objecten van Wilma en Melchior’; 19-5-1971: ‘Werken bij Melchior en Wilma definitief plat’.

30 *De Waarheid* 5-5-1971: ‘Nieuwe stakingen op verschillende objecten’.

31 *Algemeen Dagblad* 15-4-1971: ‘Belgische steun voor baggeraars’.

were involved in these strikes, as for instance at the DAF automobile factory in Born (Limburg) on March 16, and the Sphinx and Mosa ceramics factory in Maastricht on March 26, 1973.³² Most of the striking Belgians simply stayed home: the buses that usually transported them to Born and Maastricht were reported to be “almost empty”.³³

A fierce mentality: Belgian frontier workers striking at Clitex in Clinge (Zeeland) in 1973

One of the central demands during the 1973 strikes in the Netherlands was equal pay for women. It was put center stage by women workers at the Optilon zipper factory in Winschoten (Groningen), who famously walked out in March 1973, in what would become an iconic strike in the history of the Dutch women's movement. Less well known, however, is that women at the Clitex textile factory in Clinge, a small village near the Belgian border in Zeeuws-Vlaanderen, also joined this struggle. They demonstrated in The Hague alongside the women of Optilon.³⁴ The strikers at Clitex belonged to the most militant in the country, reportedly because of the participation of the many Belgian frontier workers.³⁵

When the national leadership of the industrial unions unexpectedly called off all strikes over Easter 1973, the Clitex workers refused to comply. During what newspaper reports described as “an emotional meeting”, they voted to continue their campaign. Union officials attributed this defiance to “the fierce mentality of the Belgian workers in the company, who found it ridiculous to resume work”.³⁶ The strike eventually ended on April 19, when, “after much hesitation and resistance”, the 350 male and female workers at Clitex reluctantly gave in, though only because the unions refused to pay strike compensation anymore.³⁷

32 *Trouw* 16-3-1973: ‘Ultimatum aan vijftien bedrijven: DAF-fabriek Born staakt 24 uur’; *Limburgsch Dagblad* 16-3-1973: ‘DAF-Born staakt 24 uur’.

33 *Limburgsch Dagblad* 17-3-1973: ‘Nieuwe staking bij DAF-Born volgende week niet uitgesloten’; 27-3-1973: ‘Sphinx en Mosa model plat’.

34 *De Waarheid* 2-4-1973: ‘Vandaag stakingen bij ruim veertig bedrijven’; *Het Vrije Volk* 3-4-1973: ‘De vrouwen pikken het niet langer’.

35 Bert Breij, *Een kwestie van principe. Getuigschrift voor stakers* (Baarn 1973) 110; *Tubantia* 21-3-1973: ‘Bonden onderhandelen met Clitex Textiel’.

36 Cited in *NRC Handelsblad* 19-4-1973: ‘Werk hervat in 34 van 44 bedrijven’.

37 *NRC Handelsblad* 21-4-1973: ‘Laatste stakingen aarzelend afgelast’; *Het Vrije Volk* 21-4-1973: ‘Werk hervat in alle bedrijven’.

Striking in Belgium: Almost as normal as going to church on Sunday

The final example of Belgian militancy does not concern frontier workers, but rather a local strike in Herk-de-Stad in Belgian Limburg, by the female workforce of a clothing factory, owned by the patriarchal Dutch entrepreneur De Goede. In 1964 he had relocated his atelier from Rotterdam to Belgium, a move made by more Dutch clothing manufacturers at the time, seeking lower female wages and a more docile workforce.³⁸ On November 29, 1971, 108 of the 120 seamstresses at the company walked out in protest. The strike was actively supported by the Flemish Christian trade union *Algemeen Christelijk Vakverbond* (ACV) and received extensive coverage in the Dutch press. Journalists framed the dispute as a clash of national mentalities.³⁹ One Dutch reporter even joked, “Striking in Belgium is almost as normal as going to church on Sundays.”⁴⁰

Yet the core issue was not the Belgian strike propensity, but the women’s resistance to systemic patronizing and humiliation. The direct cause of the strike was De Goede’s refusal to grant two days leave for the local annual fair. This grievance was just the tip of an iceberg in complaints against his authoritarianism: “We are treated like toddlers. Anyone who talks or laughs while working is punished. Looking around, or going to the toilet during work hours, is penalized with lower premiums.”⁴¹ The main grievance, however, was low pay.⁴² The strike was accompanied by picketing, demonstrations, and even clashes with the police (*Rijkswacht*). To sustain their actions the women held dances to raise money for a trip to Rotterdam to protest in front of De Goede’s head office.⁴³ While on vacation in France, he continued to speak

38 Stichting Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek Vakcentrales, *Internationalisatie en confectie. Herstructurering, internationalisatie, multinationale ondernemingen. Een algemene inleiding en een case study van de Nederlandse confectie* (Utrecht 1976) 126-127.

39 *NRC Handelsblad* 3-12-1971: ‘Werkneemsters leggen werk neer bij Nederlands bedrijf in België’; *De Tijd* 3-12-1971: ‘Staking in België bij De Goede duurt voort’; *Limburgsch Dagblad* 4-12-1971: ‘Confectie’.

40 *Het Vrije Volk* 31-12-1971: ‘Een dagje achter een stakingsfront vol vrouwen. “Wij zijn niks, wij zijn Belgen”’.

41 Cited in *De Tijd* 6-12-1971: ‘Staking in Nederlands confectiebedrijf. Belgische ateliermeisjes voelen zich als kleuters behandeld. Wie buiten de pauze naar het toilet gaat krijgt straf’.

42 *De Volkskrant* 10-12-1971: ‘Belgische meisjes gaan betogen. Nederlands atelier voorlopig nog dicht. Directie wuift grieven weg’.

43 *NRC Handelsblad* 10-12-1971: ‘Vrouwen in opstand bij kledingbedrijf’; *De Tijd* 10-12-1971: ‘Rijkswacht grijpt in. Rellen rond bedrijf De Goede in België’; 18-10-1971: ‘Modinettes Herk-de-Stad staken door’.

contemptuously of the strikers, even threatening to relocate his factory to France.⁴⁴ On January 17, 1972, though, after seven weeks of steadfast resistance, he capitulated completely: all demands were granted. Work was resumed. The journey to Rotterdam was turned into a celebratory excursion.⁴⁵

Conclusion

From the above examples, it appears that the Belgians were indeed more combative than the Dutch. In the Dutch border provinces, dominated by confessional unions such as the *Nederlands Katholiek Vakverbond* (NKV) advocating industrial peace, there was little tradition of industrial action. Across the border, the Catholic union ACV dominated the labor movement as well, but the ACV was more militant than its Dutch equivalent, reflecting Belgium's more confrontational strike culture. It was not until the 1970s that more radical voices began to emerge in the Dutch Catholic unions, for instance in the Breda branch of the NKV industrial union, which in 1972 pushed for the occupation of the Enka factory in 1972, initially against the will of the NKV leadership.

During the peak years of Belgian cross-border labor in the Netherlands in the 1960s and early 1970s, Belgian frontier workers initiated or took part in strikes for various reasons. Some were directly tied to their cross-border employment status. Belgians wanted to be compensated for wage differentials caused by lower child allowances in the Netherlands and fluctuating exchange rates. Once allowed, the *koersbonificatie* was considered a fixed part of the wage, an acquired right. Once the effect of changing exchange rates was undone, employers wanting to abolish the *koersbonificatie* met with fierce protest. In other strikes, Belgians were reported to take the lead or encourage their Dutch colleagues to persevere. In strikes organized by Dutch unions, they wholeheartedly followed the call, as did in most cases migrant workers from other countries.⁴⁶

44 *De Volkskrant* 15-10-1971: 'Bedrijf dreigt met verhuizen wegens staking'; *NRC Handelsblad* 16-12-1971: 'De Goede wil vluchten voor stakende meisjes'.

45 *De Volkskrant* 14-1-1972: 'Bedrijf geeft toe na lange staking'; *NRC Handelsblad* 15-1-1972: 'Belgische modinettes bekeren Rotterdammer'; *De Tijd* 18-1-1972: 'Modinettes weer aan het werk'.

46 Ad Knotter, 'Unwanted guests. Migrant strikes in the Netherlands, 1961-1974. Hidden histories of resistance and repression', *Journal of Migration History* 11 (2025) 258-290.

Although in some cases the Belgians brought their Dutch colleagues to action, frontier labor did not act as a conduit for the transfer of repertoires of contention. In most cases, the Belgians acted on their own, for specific demands connected to their status as frontier workers, or they participated in strikes organized by Dutch trade unions with a remarkable combativeness. It is highly significant that Dutch newspapers reported how the Belgians were prone to strike with some amazement, as belonging to a different culture. This seems to be a case of heightened perception of national difference caused by commuters crossing the border, as observed by Sophie Bouwens in her dissertation on cross-border labour from South Limburg to Germany.⁴⁷ It highlights the differing traditions of worker resistance in Belgium and the Netherlands. The Dutch practice of consultation and moderation in industrial relations, since the 1990s referred to as ‘polder model’, was undermined in the 1960s and 1970s by industrial actions,⁴⁸ but there are no indications that the Belgian frontier workers contributed to the growing militancy of Dutch workers and trade unions in this period.

About the author

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⁴⁷ Bouwens, *Over de streep*.

⁴⁸ Ad Knotter, ‘Undermining the “Polder Model”. Workers’ militancy and trade union leadership in four Dutch wildcat strikes, 1963-1970’, *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations* 44 (2023) 43-61.

