Precariousness in the Cleaning Business

Cleaners as the Vanguard of a New Trade Union Revival

Merijn Oudenampsen

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Working conditions in virtually all sectors of the labour market are under pressure at the current time. Focusing on the developments in the cleaning industry, sociologist Merijn Oudenampsen shows how, following the American example, cleaners have successfully started to mobilize in the Netherlands and have thus given a new impulse to the revival of trade unionism.

On 6 November 2007, around 50 people resolutely exit the metro at the Amsterdam Amstelveenseweg station. The group is garbed in bright orange trade union shirts and clown outfits, and carries banners, flutes and drums. A little later they are standing in front of the closed doors of the huge glass palace that serves as the headquarters of the Dutch ING bank. Never mind. A back door is still open. The last hurdle is a dividing door, kept shut by a few panicky guards, but after a bit of pushing and shoving they have to admit defeat. The noise of 50 frenzied demonstrators fills the chic foyer of one of the world's biggest banks. The absolute top and bottom of the Dutch labour market meet each other. For just a little while, roles are reversed. Cleaners express themselves and managers listen.

What happened at the ING bank would soon be repeated in the nearby ABN AMRO headquarters, in the Schiphol airport terminal, at ministries in The Hague, at the Dutch Railways in Utrecht and at a long list of other companies. It was part of a campaign in the cleaning industry, one of the sectors in which the position of employees has drastically deteriorated due to outsourcing and flexibilization. A new campaign strategy is engaged to attempt to offer an answer to the weakened position of the trade union in the service sector which is characterized by fragmentation and temporariness. It is one of the most promising initiatives aimed at finding an answer to what has become known to some as the new social question.

The social question dealt with in this essay is that of 'precarity'. Precarity is a neologism, a translation of the French *precarité*. It is derived from the Latin *precare*, to beg. According to Webster's dictionary one of the meanings of precarious is 'depending on the will or pleasure of another', in other words to possess something that is liable to be withdrawn at any moment.

Precarity is a problem that has announced itself in Europe under many different guises. At first sight, it presents itself in the media as a conflict of generations. In Germany they talk about the *Generation Praktikum*, abbreviated as *Generation P*, a young generation that lives from one internship to the next but fails to gain structural entry to the German labour market. In France, there is a similar sentiment among the *Génération Précaire*, which led in 2005 to a general youth revolt against the further flexibilization of the French labour market, the CPE (*Contract de Premier Embauche*). In Italy, Spain and Greece it is referred

to by the average monthly incomes that are earned: the 1,000, 800, or 700 euro generation. In all cases it concerns a generation whose future prospects look grimmer than those of their parents. It is not surprising that the recent riots in Greece were rapidly assigned a comparable meaning, with American social commentator Mike Davis noting a connection between the rage on the streets and a growing worldwide realization among young people that the credit crunch has surely robbed their future of any promise. According to these types of analysis, the feeling of a precarious life is pre-eminently that of a generation unfamiliar with the certainties of the 1960s and '70s – a job for life, a fixed contract – or even those during the years of crisis in the 1980s, when an unemployment benefit was one of the few remaining certainties for young people. A new generation has grown up in Europe, which, in contrast to their parents, lives on the basis of temporary arrangements as regards to work, housing, education and social security. It is principally this version of precarity that has been seized upon by social movements in Europe, the most important example being the annual Euromayday protests that have taken place in dozens of European cities in recent years.

Yet it is misleading to limit the issue to one generation. The impact of the restructuring of the labour market and welfare state retrenchment is simply too great and too generalized. A much more extended reality of urban precarity lurks behind the newspaper headlines about integration, the working poor and the new underclass, behind the tendentious articles on the uprising of the *banlieues* and the situation in American inner cities. We can read about it in the work of the sociologist Loïc Wacquant who has conducted research both in the USA and in France into what he calls 'urban marginality': an accumulation of deprivations that expresses itself via the convergence of class, ethnicity and living conditions. But the backgrounds of this social problem – which are often connected with education and the labour market – are outstripped and disguised by an all-pervasive problem of security and by the theme of ethnic/cultural segregation. In his book *Punishing the Poor*, Wacquant calls the current security policy in the USA a 'new policy of social insecurity'. He explains: 'The battle against street criminality becomes the screen behind which the new social question is concealed: the generalization of uncertain, precarious wage labour and the impact thereof on the living conditions and survival strategies of the urban proletariat.'

He is not alone in this. Other American sociologists, such as Philippe Bourgeois and William Julius Wilson, see casualization as the underlying cause of the urban crisis in the USA, that is, the restructuring of the labour market. Prior to the crisis of the 1970s, the bottom of the labour market was filled with low-paid factory work, where the relative ease with which trade unions were able to organize led to the accumulation of a minimal number of rights and securities. In the 1980s the service sector became the new motor of the economy, while industrial employment shrank drastically due to mechanization and outsourcing to low-wage countries. Previous certainties changed into uncertainties: low wages, inadequate contracts or none at all, flexible working hours and unclear social rights. Migrants, almost by definition, had to endure the most severe conditions, as has often been the case historically. But since then a place at the bottom of the social ladder has started to mean something quite different. In his book *The Corrosion of Character*, Richard Sennet points out that the social ladder has lost its rungs. The American dream of unlimited social mobility changed in the 1980s into a reality of dead-end jobs.

Instead of facing this problem, American public opinion has chosen to culturalize and moralize the issue. In brief, the core, according to the now dominant conservative discourse, is that the root cause of the problems of the urban poor is their sociocultural background, rather than structural social problems such as the labour market. An emphasis on the inadequate norms and values of marginalized populations reduces the issue to one of personal responsibility: the deserving poor enter the scene. Although the situation in Europe and in the Netherlands differs in many ways from that in the USA, the USA has had, as in many areas, a considerable influence on European policies. It is not

strange, then, that Wacquant observes that European poverty is becoming Americanized. Not so much with regard to reality but certainly in perception. The plight of first and second generation migrants in Europe is implicitly and explicitly compared to that of Afro-Americans and Latinos in the USA. Wacquant sees the entrance of the American concept of an 'underclass' in the European debate on urban poverty as a clear indication of this. Accompanying this concept are the culturalist and moralist biases that have also crossed the ocean. If we read Paul Scheffer, a prominent Dutch intellectual who has achieved considerable fame with his plea for a renewed 'offensive' to 'civilize' the ethnic underclass, or UK-based Theodor Dalrymple, who points to the 'culture of poverty' in the English working class, then we can see what a dramatic impact the USA has had on the European perception of poverty, and what a central position the 'culturist' vision has acquired in public opinion. Not for nothing, the credo of personal responsibility became one of the recurrent slogans of the Balkenende governments.

Laboratory

Fortunately, the USA does not only export the policies that are responsible for its most problematical social discrepancies. It also functions as a laboratory of revolt from below, the results of which find their way to other parts of the world as an antidote to dominant policy and business practices. One of the most important developments in this area is the organization of migrants in trade union campaigns that are totally different from existing union practices.

Until recently, American trade unions saw migrants and the flexible, atypical sort of jobs they are predominantly dependent upon for earning a living as unorganizable. Working in hotels, fast-food chains, grocery markets, cleaning companies and supermarkets, in domestic help and the many small convenience stores, dry cleaners and delis is an army of migrants whose working conditions seemed not to be an issue. Campaigns in the 1980s would drastically change this view. The Justice for Janitors (JfJ) campaign in Los Angeles was the most important example and has acquired an almost legendary reputation. The campaign was the subject of Ken Loach's film *Bread & Roses*, and Mike Davis described the miraculous transition from 'pariah proletariat' to 'peaceful guerrilla army' in his book *Magical Realism*.

The context for the new campaign was a sharp decline in the labour conditions of cleaners throughout the USA. Whereas cleaning had previously been organized internally, in the sense that cleaners were simply on the payroll of the company concerned, or of the manager of the building in which they worked, in the 1980s cleaning was farmed out to specialized firms. The wages and working conditions of cleaners became the main victim in the subsequent competition for cleaning contracts. It was necessary to invent a new trade union strategy, now that the cleaners were no longer to be found in just one building, but were spread out, flexibly, across the whole city. The answer of the Justice for Janitors campaign was closely linked to the specific social networks present in the Latino community of the cleaners. Visits were paid to churches and neighbourhood organizations, house calls were made and NGOs and political activists were involved in the campaign. An extended social network was mobilized. The background of the predominantly Latino cleaners played an important role. Many were veterans of social movements in Latin America, from El Salvador to Guatemala, and they were now implementing these experiences in the context of Los Angeles. The practice that emerged would later be called 'social movement unionism', in contrast to the dominant service model of 'business unionism', where the members have a passive role and the activity range of the trade union is largely confined to its own office. The targets of the new campaign were not the cleaning firms but the clients, the contractors of cleaning services. Confrontational demonstrations and the practice of 'Naming & Shaming' replaced the symbolic pickets that had previously been the usual repertoire of the trade union. The directors of the companies concerned were visited by cleaners at high-profile fundraising

events and luxurious networking dinners. The parties were gate-crashed by hordes of cleaners brandishing their mops and vacuum cleaners and demanding a living wage. The invisibility that had previously characterized the cleaners was replaced by their taking a role in the spotlight, particularly when in 1990 a cleaner protest was brutally crushed by the police, which was given full coverage in the media. It was not until 1995, five years after that event, that the JfJ campaign was able to announce a resounding victory. With 90 per cent of cleaners part of the organization, a new model was born, and for the Service Employees International Union, the most important trade union in the service sector, this would be the overture to its growth into the biggest trade union in the USA.

Precarity in the Polder

In its earliest national iconography, used on coins, medals, pamphlets, building facades and seals, the Netherlands was symbolized by a garden of plenty, defended against foreign aggression by a roaring lion. Sometimes the garden alternated with a fat cow, but the message of prosperity was unchanging. That same period, the early seventeenth century, also contains the mythical origin of the Dutch political culture of consensus and division of power – the so-called polder model – arising from the collective battle against the continuous threat of inundation. It is these two elements, economic abundance and consensus culture, that have most likely resulted in the phenomenon of precarity being milder and more marginal in appearance in the Netherlands than elsewhere.

This not does not mean, however, that no comparable trends have taken place. Most of the general forms of precarity have indeed passed the Netherlands by, to a large degree thanks to the restraining influence of trade unions on the implementation of neoliberal reforms. The pie is divided somewhat more evenly, and in the Netherlands there was simply more pie to be divided up than elsewhere. And yet in recent years there have been signs of a reversal. One of the defining moments was in the autumn of 2004, when the first Balkenende cabinet became embroiled in a fierce conflict with the trade unions on pension reform and labour market flexibilization. The then minister of social affairs, De Geus, proposed undoing the strongest instrument of the trade unions, making collective bargaining no longer nationally binding, thereby threatening to blow up the entire Dutch corporatist model. The degree of representativeness and hence the legitimacy of the trade unions was publicly attacked by the government, with dwindling membership and an aging rank and file as the main arguments reiterated. Newspaper headlines like 'Trade unions a thing of the past ten years from now', 'FNV [Federation Dutch Labour Movement] in danger of ending up as a museum piece' and 'What use are trade unions for employees?' had already been typifying public opinion for some years. A big demonstration on the Museumplein in Amsterdam in the autumn of 2004 saved the face of the trade union, as well as its negotiating position, after which the union restricted itself again to its customary role of bureaucratic negotiator.

Five years on, and the episode is almost forgotten. But the crisis was only temporarily averted. With the so-called 'hot autumn' of 2004, tensions came to light that continue to play a role today. The trade unions were being increasingly perceived as protecting the interests of the older, aging generation of babyboomers, that is, the insiders on the labour market. Shortly after the protests on the Museumplein, a new trade union was launched, AVV [an Alternative Labour Union], which to a significant degree would articulate this criticism. The AVV talked about a conflict of generations whereby younger workers have to pay for the rights of the already established older generation, certainties they themselves lacked. In theory, then, the AVV was standing up for the rights of outsiders, freelancers, flex workers, temps and others, whose interests were being sidelined by the trade unions in favour of the insiders on the labour market, the union membership. In this sense, the AVV was the Dutch instance of similar political movements of precarity elsewhere in Europe. The French Génération Précaire, for example, also declared that they were no longer willing to be burdened with the pension costs of the already established babyboomers.

But while in France and other countries the further flexibilization of the labour market was contested by the 'precarious generation', the Dutch AVV turned out to be an avid supporter of the labour market deregulation. For Mei Li Vos of the AVV, the magical balancing trick that would bring the rights of insiders and outsiders up to par was to simply deregulate everything and everyone. The position of the AVV, not as an alternative to a trade union but as an anti-trade union, became even more clear through the explicit support it gained from employers and (neo)liberals. Since the AVV consisted of a group of media savvy, highly educated career makers, who projected their personal situation onto that of their entire generation, they systematically sided with the winners of flexibilization, the highly educated job-hoppers who have little to fear from the wondrous world of the deregulated Dutch labour market. This perhaps explains their blindness to the interests of poorly educated outsiders who have little or nothing to gain from a further deregulation of the labour market.

The stance of the AVV is a clear illustration of why precarity in the Netherlands has never really been placed on the agenda. The labour shortage in the Netherlands, especially for the highly educated, has resulted in a totally different attitude with regard to flexibility among the younger generation – jobs aplenty. At the bottom of the labour market, however, we see a different story. The cleaning sector example illustrates how flexibility and precarity in the Netherlands are connected with both the problem of integration and that of the future of the trade union.

Brave New World in the Cleaning Sector

As an ABN AMRO report recently announced, the cleaning industry has the doubtful honour of being one of the first sectors to 'profit' from outsourcing. Since the 1980s, Dutch companies that previously employed their own cleaners under fixed contracts have increasingly been outsourcing the work to specialized cleaning firms in order to save costs. This had led to extremely tough competition between the various cleaning firms in offering the lowest possible price – the reason cleaning is also called a penny market or a fighting market. And, just like in the USA, it is ultimately the 200,000 cleaners themselves who appear to be the biggest losers in this fight, seeing as the first item of expenses cleaning firms economize on are the terms of employment.

That has happened in different ways. On the one hand, simply by paying lower wages; gross wages are now between 9 and 10 euros per hour and are among the lowest in the country. On the other hand, by increasing the work pressure – fewer cleaners per square metre – and by cutting the work up into short shifts. Many cleaners now travel several times a day from building to building. They work two hours here, three hours there, and they are not paid for the time in between. Absence through illness is restricted as much as

possible since the cleaners have to pay the first two days of sick leave out of their own pockets. Cleaners also largely work part-time, and at abnormal times. The result is invisibility: they work in the late evening and in the early morning and don't see the rest of the (office) personnel. The cleaners do not get to see much of each other either, which means that they build up few social relationships that could be helpful in demanding improvements. The legal status of cleaners is so uncertain that many do not dare to express themselves critically when at work. All this was partly made possible because of the almost total absence of the trade union, which, with membership at 7 per cent, fulfilled little more than a symbolic role. As a result, many cleaners are part of a new and growing stratum of the Dutch working poor. Most cleaners are women and in the urban conglomeration the majority are first or second generation migrants and very poorly educated: many have had no more than a basic education and often speak little or no Dutch.

The cleaning sector has long been a sort of free haven in the Netherlands, a laboratory for implementing American business practices like flexibilization and outsourcing. But the answer to this development also comes from the USA. A campaign by the Dutch Labour Federation is now copying – with success, it seems – the method of the Justice for Janitors campaign. Known as Organizing, this method breaks through the commonly held view that the trade union is a product that simply needs to improve its marketing techniques – the union as a bureaucratic service provider. Organizing combines a return to the time-honoured trade union practice of organizing workers on the shop floor, with modern registration and management techniques derived from American election campaigns.

In 2007, the Dutch Labour Federation started a national campaign for a new collective labour agreement. To start with, a number of strategic companies and locations were identified where a large number of cleaners were working. Then in various places – The Hague, Schiphol, Utrecht and Maastricht – trade union organizers were mobilized to actively contact and bring together dissatisfied cleaners. Buildings were visited, cleaners contacted, and meetings organized. In short, the campaign built up a social network of cleaners, and made efforts to involve local churches, neighbourhood organizations and activists.

One of the problems of outsourcing is that the market conditions are such that cleaning firms are forced to keep wages low since they would otherwise lose contracts. Their clients have the power to change things, to increase the budget, but they almost always deny that they have any responsibility. Just as with Justice for Janitors, it is not the cleaning companies themselves that are the target of the actions in the cleaners' campaign, but their clients. These actions make use of an escalation tactic whereby companies first receive a letter requesting them to publicly support the cleaners' wage demands. Rarely is a response given. The next step is a visit by a delegation of cleaners demanding a discussion with the management, who usually deny having any responsibility. Cleaners then start distributing flyers outside the premises, followed not much later by small- and larger-scale actions: pickets, sit-ins and noise demonstrations. Examples include the aforementioned occupation of the ING headquarters, or the award of the 'Golden Turd' to the Dutch Railways as the worst employer in the cleaning business.

Most of the companies that the campaign confronts are not aware that they bear some responsibility for the activities that they outsource. Even though they are doing it for such a low price that it is impossible for people to earn enough to live on. Some revelations are shocking. The Ministry of Social Affairs, for example, discovered that it had outsourced its cleaning to a company that was violating basic human rights by refusing to grant cleaners the right to organize themselves. But the fundamental idea that the wages paid at the bottom of the labour market are impossible to sustain a reasonable standard of living was a new one for many people who were confronted with the campaign. After an escalation of

actions taken in December 2007, an initial and unexpected victory came in January 2008, in the form of a much improved collective labour agreement. That one of the aims achieved was the free provision of Dutch language lessons makes it clear that the symbolic meaning of the cleaners' campaign goes further than just that of income. Like the American campaigns, the cleaners' campaign in the Netherlands is thus also an attempt to shift the discussion around citizenship and integration from the cultural domain to that of the labour market.

Cleaners have become a forerunner in the renewal of trade union activism, making it relevant for labour relations in the twenty-first century. The campaigns have become a sort of social glue that binds together the most diverse ethnicities in circumstances of extreme fragmentation. The motto of the anti-globalist movement 'let our resistance be as transnational as capital', has, for the cleaners' campaigns, turned into an everyday practice.

Merijn Oudenampsen (1979, Amsterdam) is a sociologist and political scientist. He is affiliated to Tilburg University, doing a PhD research project on political populism and the swing to the Right in Dutch politics. He was guest editor of the 20th edition of the art journal *Open*, titled the *Populist Imagination* (NAi 2010). He edited a volume titled *Power to the People, een anatomie van het populisme* (Boom | Lemma 2012). His essays and other texts are archived on merijnoudenampsen.org.

Tags

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