FOREIGN EDITOR'S REPORT: THE NETHERLANDS

Long-term Continuities in Labor History: The Case of the Dutch Republic

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International Review of Social History

It has long been the established view that a deep fault line runs through Dutch history, splitting its development into two distinct phases, namely before and after 1795, the year in which the country was occupied by French troops.

This "periodization" is based on two observations. In economic terms, the heyday of the Republic (the "Golden Age") is held to have given way to a period of decline, from which the country recovered only in the second half of the nineteenth century. In political terms, there is supposed to have been a reversal during the French occupation (the Batavian Republic), which brought an end to "regional particularism" and the power of the regents' oligarchy.

This standard interpretation, which was shared by nearly all historians, has been steadily undermined during the last ten to fifteen years. Although the French occupation is still acknowledged to have been an important step in the process of state formation, more and more attention is now being paid to aspects of continuity. Historians are now putting the economic decline in the eighteenth century into perspective,[1] pointing out that economic relations dating from the Republic lasted well into the nineteenth century.[2] This development has important consequences for labor history, since long-term continuities can now also be seen in labor relations and workers' protest.

It is beyond dispute that the Netherlands, or more particularly the provinces of Holland and Zeeland, showed characteristics of a capitalist economy as far back as the sixteenth century, even if there is disagreement about to what extent it was pure merchant capitalism, or merchant capitalism with significant elements of productive capitalism, or whether there was already "real" capitalism by this time.[3]

The economic heartland of this early capitalism was a small coastal strip with an area of some 15,000 square kilometers, where trade, industry, and modern agriculture were concentrated, and where, as early as 1700 or so, nearly half the population lived in towns of 5,000 or more inhabitants.

International Labor and Working-Class History
No. 44, Fall 1993, pp. 95–99
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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547900012254 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Within this heartland–where wages were significantly higher than in the neighboring areas–a labor market consisting of several segments developed between the 1580s and the 1630s, and persisted into the middle of the nineteenth century.

The first (and most intensively studied) segment consisted of urban crafts, mostly operating within a system of guilds, or at least under strict rules laid down by the local authorities. Much attention has recently been paid to the wage structure of this sector, a subject that long has remained neglected since the research by Nicolaas Posthumus in the interwar period.[4]

This situation changed in 1978, when Jan de Vries criticized Immanuel Wallerstein's theory that other countries were outstripped in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries by the north Netherlands and England, where a "medium wage level" developed.[5] Two points in De Vries's thesis were to play an important role in later discussions. The first was his assertion–based on his own research and data borrowed from Posthumus–that Dutch wage rates "were probably the highest in northern Europe." The fact that the Republic was nevertheless able to play a dominant role in the world market, according to him, was the result of relatively high labor productivity based on skilled labor and capital-intensive production techniques. The second was his assertion that "petrification" or "fossilization" of the wage structure occurred, which from about 1640 "through good times and bad, through rising and falling prices . . . showed no long-term changes until at least the end of the eighteenth century."[6]

The essay by De Vries sparked intensive research into the wage structure and the labor market during the Republic. The fact that Dutch nominal wage rates were very high in relative terms, and that wage rigidity prevailed from the second quarter of the seventeenth century until 1800, or even until after 1850, are scarcely contested nowadays. The constancy of nominal wages seems to have been made possible mainly by a policy of social closure in which entry to the labor market was strictly regulated and in which workers were excluded in time of need.

Thanks to the work of Rudolf Dekker, much is now known about forms of worker protest in the primary segment.[7] The oldest form of action–dating from before the period of wage rigidity–was the *uutganc* (exit), in which the workers dropped their tools, walked out of the city, and announced that they would only return when their wage demands and other demands (made to the employers or the town council) had been met. Textile workers in particular used this form of industrial action. The *uutganc* was practiced from the second half of the fourteenth century to the first half of the seventeenth. Its disappearance is explained by the fact that, following the victory over Spain and the consolidation of the Republic, competition between cities relaxed so that skilled workers from one city were no longer welcomed with open arms in another, and also by the fact that entrepreneurs began to organize. "Cities were more interested in

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maintaining a climate of industrial peace in the province [Holland] as a whole . . . Furthermore, the employers, namely the cloth manufacturers, had begun to organize since the beginning of the seventeenth century, both on a provincial and on a national scale, and threatened to exclude the protesting journeymen."[8]

Given the rigidity of nominal wages, worker protests in later times mainly focused on price rises, threats of redundancy, and new labor-saving technology. In the course of the seventeenth century, they developed a new form of action: the strike, or *uytscheyding*.[9] The way in which the strike weapon was used often bore similarities to the early "modern" labor movement: a meeting was organized at which it was decided to stop work, spokesmen were chosen, on some occasions a strike fund was organized, strikebreakers were declared *vuyl* (foul), and so on. The strike tactic was often used in a strategically timely way. In 1628, for instance, "the Amsterdam cloth nappers went on strike at the moment that ships were ready to sail for the Baltic and Russia and the cloth sellers were anxious to load large quantities of finished cloth as quickly as possible."[10] It is noteworthy that, as far as is known, strikes in this period were exclusively a male affair, although many women were active in industry.

The second segment of the working class was formed by temporary workers drawn from the poorer regions and from abroad.[11] Jan Lucassen has shed light on the various forms of seasonal work and other forms of migration. His research has led him to the conclusion that the "Golden Age" would have been impossible without outside labor: for "each economically active person, born in the Republic, there was another, a foreigner."[12] Lucassen has paid particular attention to the seasonal workers, many of whom came from Germany or even farther afield, who helped with various tasks such as harvesting grain, flax, and potatoes; the excavation, dredging, and cutting of peat (a major energy source); and building.[13]

The secondary sector also experienced many industrial conflicts. Strikes, for example, were frequent among navvies, who built canals and dikes, and among turf diggers. These people generally came for a number of months, usually in the spring. "Their piece-wage was not fixed, but had to be paid on their arrival: the laborers wanted to receive as much as possible, while the employers wanted to pay as little as possible. The result was determined by the law of supply and demand, but not everything was on the employer's side; because the work was pressing, it was in the employers' interest to settle as quickly as possible. This trial of strength was often accompanied by a strike, usually of short duration. Hundreds of cases are documented, but the actual number must have been many times greater."[14]

A third segment of the labor market, whose boundaries with the second segment cannot always be sharply defined, consisted of seamen and soldiers, who together made up a large proportion of the working population. Temporary employment was found in this sector also. Personnel of

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the United East India Company, for instance, had to enlist for five years. Whaling crews signed on for the whaling season, while merchant and naval seamen engaged for the duration of a voyage. Comparatively little research has been carried out on labor relations and the labor market in this third sector.[15] Neither has there been much research into forms of protest, including mutiny.[16]

Workers in the Republic did not participate only in industrial disputes; they also took part in all sorts of riots, which Dekker divides (perhaps too sharply) into food, tax, religious, and political riots. Women often did play an important role in these protests.[17]

All this new research suggests that there were at least two direct links between the time of the Republic and the early "modern" labor movement of the late nineteenth century. In the primary segment, persistent forms of organization seem to have arisen. Organized interest groups (trade unions) were forbidden in the Republic. Accordingly, the social basis for actions was mainly formed by informal networks of workers, in certain cases extending over several cities. However, there were *bossen* (boxes), which were sickness or funeral funds. Lucassen distinguishes three great waves in which organizations were set up: the third quarter of the seventeenth century, 1698–1722, and 1740–75. When the guilds were liquidated (with difficulty) in the aftermath of the French Revolution, most of the *bossen* continued to exist, because the authorities feared that abolishing them would overstrain the charitable institutions. A number of these organizations probably contributed to the newly emergent trade union movement.[18]

In the secondary segment, the connection was the form of action itself. For example, the strikes by navvies and turf diggers mentioned earlier continued to occur regularly, right into the twentieth century, and formed the basis from which an embryonic trade union movement could have arisen from the 1890s onward.[19]

All in all, the Dutch labor movement appears to have had a long prehistory, whose existence has only recently become apparent.

NOTES

1. There are three hypotheses about the economic development of the Republic after its heyday in the seventeenth century. These are: a deep decline between 1670 and 1750, followed by a certain amount of recovery in the second half of the eighteenth century (Jan de Vries); stabilization or stagnation between 1700 and 1780, followed by absolute decline after 1780 (Johan de Vries); and economic growth between 1695 and 1805–1860 (J. C. Riley). Of these three assumptions, the second probably agrees best with the facts. See Jan Luiten van Zanden, "De economie van Holland in de periode 1650–1805: groei of achteruitgang?" *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* 102 (1987):562–609.

2. Jan Luiten van Zanden, *Arbeid tijdens het handelskapitalisme. Opkomst en neergang van de Hollandse economie 1350–1850* (Bergen, 1991), published in English as *The Rise and Decline of Holland's Economy* (Manchester, 1993).

3. For an overview of some main themes of the discussion, see Marcel van der Linden, "'Vaderlandse geschiedenis,' anders gezien. Het marxisme, de Opstand en de Republiek,"

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Kritiek 1 (1991):107–38; idem, "De voorgeschiedenis van het industrieel kapitalisme in Nederland," *Kritiek* 2 (1992):273–81.

4. N. W. Posthumus, *De geschiedenis van de Leidsche lakenindustrie,* 3 vols. (The Hague, 1908–1939).

5. Jan de Vries, "An Inquiry into the Behaviour of Wages in the Dutch Republic and the Southern Netherlands, 1580–1800," *Acta Historiae Neerlandicae* 10 (1978):79–98. Wallerstein's thesis can be found in his *The Modern World-System,* I., *Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York, 1974), 84.

6. De Vries, "An Inquiry," 82, 89.

7. For a summary in English of Dekker's research in this area, see his article "Labour Conflicts and Working-Class Culture in Early Modern Holland," *International Review of Social History* 35 (1990):377–420.

8. Rudolf Dekker, "Handwerkslieden en arbeiders in Holland van de zestiende tot de achttiende eeuw: Identiteit, cultuur en protest," in *Cultuur en maatschappij in Nederland 1500–1850,* ed. Peter te Boekhorst, Peter Burke, and Willem Frijhoff (Meppel, 1992), 109–147.

9. "[The] English word *strike* was originally a Dutch seaman's term, *strijken,* meaning striking the sails of a ship." Dekker, "Labour Conflicts," 419.

10. Dekker, "Handwerkslieden en arbeiders," 139.

11. This second segment together with the first in fact formed a single split labor market. Light is shed on the relation between the two segments by Marco H. D. van Leeuwen, *Bijstand in Amsterdam, ca. 1800–1850. Armenzorg als beheersings- en overlevingsstrategie* (Zwolle, 1992); and Ad Knotter, *Economische transformatie en stedelijke arbeidsmarkt. Amsterdam in de tweede helft van de negentiende eeuw* (Zwolle, 1991).

12. Jan Lucassen, "The Place of Labour. Early Modern Economic Development of the Netherlands in a European Perspective," paper presented at a seminar of the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study, Wassenaar, 25–26 November 1992. Also see idem, "The Netherlands, the Dutch and Long Distance Migration: Late Sixteenth to Early Nineteenth Centuries," in *In Search of a Better World: European Overseas Migration 1500–1800,* ed. N. Canny (Oxford, forthcoming).

13. Jan Lucassen, *Naar de kusten van de Noordzee* (Gouda, 1984); a slightly shortened English version was published as *Migrant Labour in Europe 1600–1900: The Drift to the North Sea* (London, 1987).

14. Jan Lucassen, *Jan, Jan Salie en diens kinderen* (Amsterdam, 1991), 36.

15. The first signs of change are Jaap R. Bruijn and Jan Lucassen, eds., *Op de schepen der Oost-Indische Compagnie. Vijf artikelen van J. de Hullu* (Groningen, 1980); Paul C. van Royen, *Zeevarenden op de koopvaardijvloot omstreeks 1700* (Amsterdam, 1987); and idem, "Manning the Merchant Marine: The Dutch Maritime Labour Market about 1700," *International Journal of Maritime History* 1 (1989):1–28.

16. But see E. S. van Eyck van Heslinga, *Muiterij. Oproer en berechting op de schepen van de VOC* (Bussum, 1980).

17. Rudolf Dekker, *Holland in beroering. Oproeren in de 17de en 18de eeuw* (Baarn, 1980); idem, "Women in Revolt. Collective Protest and its Social Basis in Holland," *Theory and Society* 16 (1987):337–62.

18. Lucassen, *Jan, Jan Salie en diens kinderen,* 28–37; Jacques van Gerwen and Jan Lucassen, "Mutual Societies in the Netherlands from the Sixteenth Century to the Present," paper presented at the conference "Un passé riche d'avenir," Paris, 1–3 December 1992.

19. See, for example, Kerst Huisman, " 'welke dan gewoonlijk de oproerlingen zijn . . . ' De spontane stakingsbeweging in de Friese venen tot 1888," in *Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis. De apostel van de Friese arbeiders,* ed. J. Frieswijk, J. J. Kalma, and Y. Kuiper (Drachten and Leeuwarden, 1988).

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