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THE SYNDICALIST CURRENT IN THE WAKE OF GLOBALISATION

Strikes and industrial relations in the port of Rotterdam, 1990-2010

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INTRODUCTION

For over a century, industrial relations in the port of Rotterdam have been atypical for the relatively harmonious and strongly regulated industrial relations' system in the Netherlands. Strike proneness of the dockworkers has been extremely high, and the wild cat strike, a mere curiosity in most industries, was quite common. In fact, small stoppages on the shop floor have been part of the regular pattern of employment relations. Moreover, the sector has over the years been quite influential and can be considered a counterpoint to the Dutch neo-corporatist 'polder model'.

This tradition can be traced back to the start of the labour movement, when the syndicalist union movement was quite successful in the ports. In the years immediately after the Second World War, when the neo-corporatist industrial relations' system was erected in the Netherlands, the syndicalist current popped up again in the harbour of Rotterdam. The same happened in the 'roaring' seventies, when several large scale and prolonged wild cat strikes occurred. The rapidly expanding process of containerisation lead to a large series of union organized work stoppages in the nineteen eighties, directed against forced redundancies, resulting in a series of social agreements implying job security for the port workers.

Strike proneness of dockers, longshoremen, port workers or whatever they are being called, is a well-documented international phenomenon. Commonly, in most accounts, the militancy of this occupational group is closely connected to general cargo (that is to say: break bulk) operations and work organisation: the casual nature of employment, fostering a 'casual frame of mind'; exceptional arduousness, danger and variability of work, attracting tough and virile workers; work gangs that foster solidarity and effort bargaining on the shop floor; relative autonomy of the workers in the labour process, attracting free spirited men who prefer dock work over the direct management control of the factory regime (Kerr & Siegel, 1954; Ter Hoeven, 1967; Miller, 1969; Mills, 1979; Finlay, 1988; Davies, 2000; Turnbull & Sapsford, 2001). With the introduction of the container essential elements of the work organisation in general cargo changed radically. From manual labour to highly mechanized systems; from work gang cooperation to individual tasks; from relative autonomy of the workers in the

labour process to automated process control; from an occupation to a formal role; from a dock worker to a terminal operator.

As Levinson (2005) has argued quite convincingly, 'the box' stood at the basis of 'globalisation', since it made the rationalisation of transport of goods worldwide possible on an unprecedented scale. The traditional ports industry was conceived as an inefficient bottleneck in the expansion of worldwide free trade and free market capitalism. The maritime transport industry, and ports in particular, therefore both are a cause and an object of globalisation. Expanding containerisation went hand in hand with globalisation of shipping lines and terminal operators and with public policy initiatives in ports for labour market and product market liberalization and privatization of state owned or state-run port services (Turnbull, 2000).

The question arises as to whether the militancy and the strike proneness of the workers in the port of Rotterdam, called by me the 'syndicalist current', endured the period 1990-20120, in the face of expanding containerisation and globalisation of terminal operators and shipping lines, and if so, in what form.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

The study is conducted from a strategic choice perspective in industrial relations (Katz & Kochan, 1992), with a strong focus on the shop floor level, since it is hypothesized that the dockworkers' subculture (Kerr & Siegel, 1954; Miller, 1969) was based on the relative autonomy of the dockworkers in the labour process (Finlay, 1988). In addition, the development of the institutional framework will be analysed, taking into account the developments in the external contexts, globalisation being the most prominent, and the strategic choices of the parties involved.

METHODOLOGY

Empirical evidence is based on several research methods. First, a database containing all strikes and stoppages in the port of Rotterdam over the full period 1890-2010 has been built.

This enabled for historical comparison of the research period (1990-2010) with former decades and, combined with the IISG (International Institute of Social History) national strikes database, for inter-industry comparison. Secondly, a case study analysis has been conducted at major container terminal operator ECT, including participant observation and forty structured interviews with terminal workers. Thirdly, interviews with trade union officials, works council members, employers, representatives of employers' organisations and Port Authority officials have been held. In addition, numerous secondary sources (newspaper articles, research reports, university papers) have been used.

FINDINGS

The port of Rotterdam in context

The port of Rotterdam, one of the largest ports in the world, and the largest in Europe is crucial to the Dutch economy. As a main port and major 'hub' in growing international logistic chains this causes an increasing structural power (Wright 2000) to labour. In the period 1990-2010 annual throughput increased with nearly 50% from 288 to 430 million metric tons, while the number of incoming sea vessels decreased from 32.000 in 1990 to around 30.000 in 2010, reflecting the ongoing increase in the size of the deep sea container vessels. The growth was mainly a result of the growth of container transhipment. New container terminals had been built, far away from the city, on the Maasvlakte reclaimed land area, close to the sea. In numbers it nearly tripled from 3,7 million TEU (Twenty Equivalent Units) in 1990 to 11,1 TEU in 2010; in weight, the increase was from 39,3 to 112,3 million tons (figure 1). Simultaneously, the break bulk throughput, handled in the old city ports, where the heartland of militant unionism in the seventies and eighties was located, declined more and more.

Figure 1. Cargo throughput port of Rotterdam, 1990-2010 (mln metric tons)			
	1990	**2000**	**2010**
Bulk goods, dry	95,0	90,6	84,6
Bulk goods, wet	134,6	147,8	209,4
containers	*39,3*	*65,2*	*112,3*
roll-on/roll-off	*7,2*	*10,0*	*16,7**
break bulk	*11,7*	*8,8*	*6,9*
General cargo subtotal	58,2	84	135,9
TOTAL	**287,9**	**322,3**	**429,9**
Source: Port of Rotterdam *Influenced by statistical changes: some minor ports (Hook of Holland and Vlaardingen have been added.			

In the light of globalisation it is important to note, that ECT, by far the dominant container operator in the port was acquired in 1999 by Hong Kong based global terminal operator Hutchison Whampoa Port Holdings (HPH). Therewith it became part of the global network of HPH. Simultaneously, the world's largest shipping line AP Möller Maersk started its own dedicated terminal (APMT), splitting it off from the ECT Delta terminal where the Maersk vessels formerly had been handled.

In spite of the growth of the throughput volume the employment dropped with about 30%, from 11.000 in 1990 to 7.500 in 2010 (figure 2). In line with the decline of transhipment volumes, employment in break bulk operations declined form 1.600 workers in 1990 to 440 in 2010, divided over some small to very small stevedoring companies. In fact the 'union free' company Steinweg Handelsveem, in official statistics usually recorded as a warehouse (*veem*) and not as a stevedoring company, ended up in 2010 as being the largest break bulk stevedoring company in the port. At the same time the number of workers in the labour pool declined sharply. Initially, the workers in the labour pool worked mainly in break bulk, but gradually the pool moved into container operations as well. Nevertheless the decline was not halted and the pool bankrupted in 2009, partly as a result of the ending of government subsidies for idle working hours. At the same time several private lashing companies started doing common stevedoring activities at the container terminals, gradually evolving into an alternative to the labour pool.

Figure 2. Dock workers in the port of Rotterdam			
	1990	**2000**	**2010**
Break bulk	1.625	976	440
Labour pool SHB	1.648	905	0
Container terminals	2.949	3.014	3.537
Roll-on/Roll-off terminals	377	338	648
Dry bulk	2.373	1.457	1.074
Total stevedoring	**8.972**	**6.554**	**5.699**
Tank storage	1.509	1.296	1.228
Lashing	464	268	626
Grand total	**10.945**	**8.118**	**7.553**
Steinweg Handelsveen (warehouse)			*738*

On the other hand, the enormous increase of container throughput did not lead to a corresponding increase in employment. Employment rose with 20%, while the throughput of containers almost tripled, thus causing a productivity increase of 250% in twenty years' time.

It goes without saying that in the technological context the development of container transhipment technology and automation stand out as the most important. At the new developed container terminals Automated Guided Vehicles (AGV) and Automated Stacking Cranes (ASC) had been introduced, in combination with automated planning and control systems (Van Driel & De Goey, 2000; Kim & Günther, 2007). The technology determines largely the labour process. Although sociotechnical experiments were introduced at ECT, we found that the terminal operators perform much routinized individual jobs with very limited autonomy. Typically, the older dockworkers at container terminals nowadays have the feeling to be go to 'prison', when they are going to work; only showing up for the relatively good money they earn.

Deregulation was (and still is) the key word in de political context of the industrial relations of the port. First, in 1995 the government decided to stop financing the idle hours of the labour pool. Due to the resistance of the unions, in the nineteen eighties, employers had not been able to dismiss redundant break bulk workers, so, the labour pool had been a refuge to them, 'freeing' the stevedoring from labour cost and providing job security for workers. In this way, the labour pool turned into the shrinking stronghold of 'old fashioned' dockworker culture. Although the end of government subsidies involved a 'dowry', the labour pool

winded up in a long death struggle, which ended in 2009 with bankruptcy. Secondly, in 2004, the municipal port authority was privatized into a private company owned by both the city of Rotterdam and the state of the Netherlands. Foremost motive was to 'enhance the commercial power of the port' in the shifting competition of global shipping lines, terminal operators and European ports. Consequently the policy of the port authority changed, from competition *between* ports (allowing virtual monopolies of terminal operators and maritime services companies in the port) to stimulating competition *within* the port. This enhanced competition between container terminal operators, resulting at a drive for flexibility of working hours of dockworkers and reduction of labour cost. Moreover, the position of the port authority vis-à-vis the industrial relations altered. As a municipal government institution the port authority had in the eighties en early nineties supported social dialogue initiatives and mediation in industrial relations and in some instances, like the above mentioned problems with the labour pool, even supported social solutions with financial means. After privatization however, *laissez faire, laissez aller,* was the adage, also in industrial relations, and thus the port authority completely withdraw from the troublesome field of industrial relations. The third major deregulation initiative was the European Union directive 'Port Package', aiming at deregulation and privatization of maritime industries in ports. This sparked of new European solidarities of dock workers, with warning strikes and demonstrations, with an active participation of Rotterdam, ending in a withdrawal of the directive (Turnbull, 2007).

Development of the strike pattern

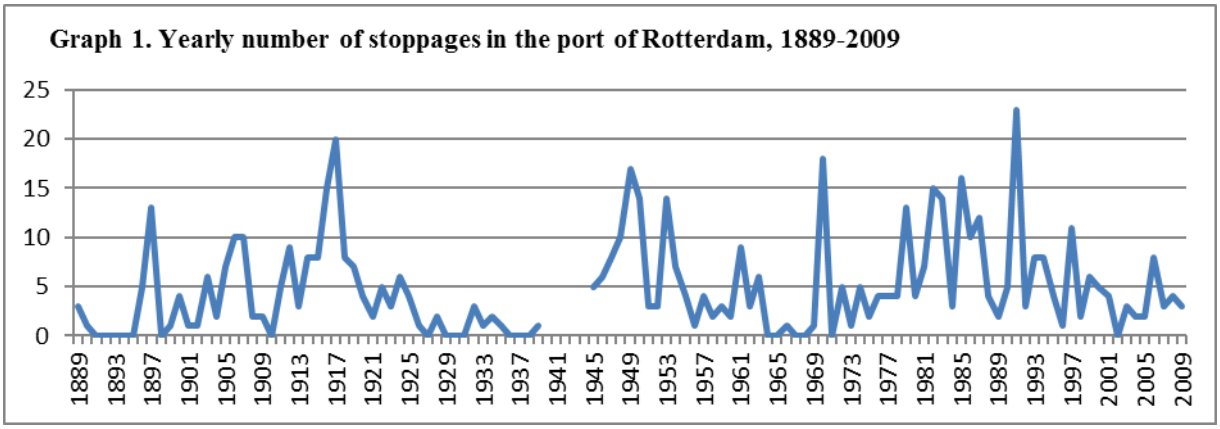
As has been said, the port workers in Rotterdam had quite a reputation in militancy and strikes. In the nineteen seventies the largest wild cat strikes ever took place in 1970 and in 1979, both with demands for higher wages. The first one had remarkable success and had a nationwide effect (the so called *wage wave*); the second failed. One of the effects of the wild cat character of the strikes had been that many union officials realized there had been a huge cleavage between union and rank and file, resulting in a new leadership and radicalized policies. Thus, in the nineteen eighties, a series of union led 'estafette strikes' aiming at job security for redundant break bulk workers, resulted in a virtual prohibition of forces dismissal in the port. The driving force of these events were the break bulk port workers, a category that would virtually disappear in the decades thereafter. How did the strike pattern evolve then?

In the period 1990-2009, the *strike frequency*, that is the plain number of strikes and stoppages, regardless of the number of participants or length, was 109, slightly less compared to the nineteen seventies and eighties. The average number per year amounted to 5.5, which is lower than the average of 1970-1989, but higher than in all the foregoing periods (figure 3).

Figure 3. Strike frequency

	1889-1914	1915-1940	1945-1969	1970-1989	1990-2009
Number of strikes	94	95	128	144	109
Average/year	3,8	3,8	5,1	7,2	5,5
Whereof wild cat	74	86	127	116	68
Wild cat percentage	79%	91%	99%	81%	62%

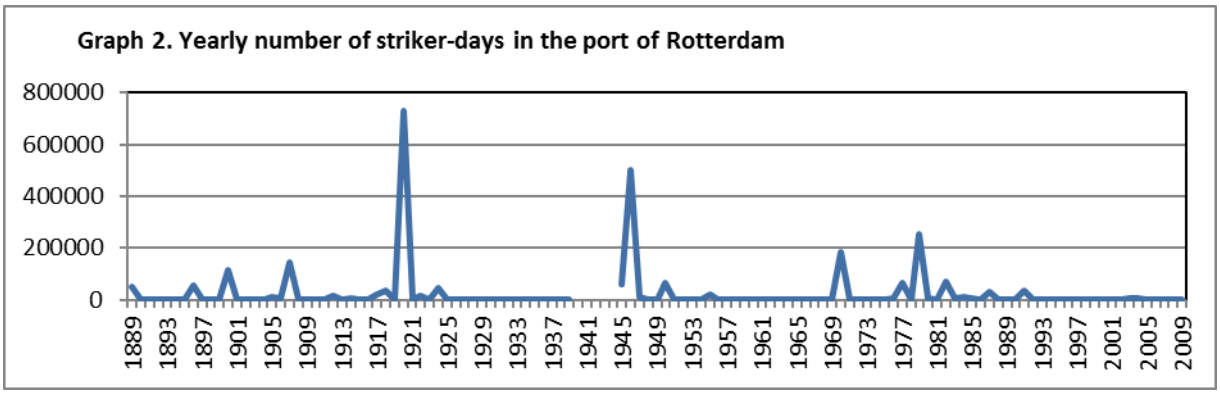
At face value it appears that one can speak of a historical constant pattern. If we break down the numbers, however, it turns out that two thirds of the 109 strikes and stoppages have been taken place in the nineteen nineties en only one third in de first decade of the 21st century. Nevertheless, the strike frequency can be compared to the pre-war years and the period 1945-1960. In these periods the occurrence of strikes was unevenly distributed as well. As a result the pattern appears to be very constant over the years (graph 1). In addition, one would expect that the percentage of wild cat stoppages would have been diminished after retaking of control by the union of the militancy in the port. Apparently, this did only partially occur. Still 62% of strikes and stoppages have been wild cats.



The figures concerning *strike volume* give a completely different picture. Clearly, the total number of striker-days, or 'working days lost' as it is called in official statistics[1], drops dramatically in the period 1990-2009, compared to all the foregoing periods in history (figure 4).

Figure 4. Strikevolume					
	1889-1914	**1915-1940**	**1945-1969**	**1970-1989**	**1990-2009**
Striker-days	406.325	867.268	735.153	641.255	36.244
Average per year/1000 workers	2.007	3.464	2.219	2.672	258

It is important to note here that the strike volume is severely influenced by a relatively few very large and prolonged strikes. For instance, the 1920 strike, not by accident occurring in post-war revolutionary times amounted to 730.000 striker-days, 85% of the total volume of the twenty-five year period between the World Wars. The same goes for the 1946 strike (486.000 striker-days) and the strikes in 1970 and 1979 (433.000 striker-days together). No such outstanding strikes took place in the period 1990-2009 (graph 2).



Since the frequency is quite constant over time, while the volume has dropped radically, it appears that the continuity is in the small strikes or stoppages. Figure 4 confirms this conclusion.

Figure 4. Size of strikes					

[1] The number of striker-days is calculated by multiplying for each stoppage its duration in days by the number of workers involved. In terminology I follow Hyman (1989).

	1889-1914	1915-1940	1945-1969	1970-1989	1990-2009
Duration					
> 1 day	29	32	20	29	21
≤ 1 day	65	63	108	115	88
Participants					
≥ 1000	7	12	17	18	10
< 1000	87	83	111	126	99
Volume					
Strikes ≥ 5.000 striker-days	6	7	8	10	3
Strikes < 5.000 striker-days	88	88	120	134	106

Looking at the *strike demands*, not surprisingly, one third of the stoppages (37 out of 109) concern wage issues. Wage strikes took place in break bulk and with the lashers, but in due time increasingly at the container terminals. Several wildcat strikes took place during collective bargaining, organized by shop floor militants in order to put pressure on the negotiations. The second category of stoppages was about job security (29 out of 109), many of them occurring at agribulk terminal EBS and labour pool SHB. Surprisingly higher, compared to previous years, has been the number (19) of political strikes. These concerned several protest strikes against government policies on sick-pay, retirement, budget cuts in social security et cetera, organized by the national union confederations, making use of the militancy of the port workers. In addition, in 2003 and 2006 demonstrations and union strike actions have been waged against 'Port Package'. The remaining stoppages concerned issues at the shop floor, discipline issues and other.

Remarkably, the distribution of stoppages shifts in due time from the break bulk sector in the old port basins to the major container terminals. In the period 1990-2010, ECT had to experience 24 strikes, of which 15 wild cats. Although ECT personnel policies had from the beginning been aimed at recruiting workers from outside the port, in order to avoid the traditional dock workers culture, they did not succeed in banning it. Management of Maersk' terminal APMT also had to cope with the traditional dock workers culture, like 'go-slow', putting pressure on the employer by using safety rules as a power resource and so on. In 2010 a two days spontaneous wild cat strike occurred against the dismissal of a crane driver who had caused damage; the discharge was withdrawn. Most recently, collective action is taking place at container terminals ECT and APMT, since employment is being threatened by the expansion of container handling capacity. Two new terminals are being built on the newly

Maasvlakte 2 reclaimed land area, a project of the port authority. Own of them (RWG) refuses up till now to negotiate a collective labour agreement.

Strategic choices

In this section we analyse the strategic choices of the major parties in the industrial relations system and the effects these had on the institutional frame work and bargaining structure, the strategic level of industrial relations (Katz & Kochan, 1992). The most influential strategic choice was made by the *employers' organisation* Scheepvaart Vereniging Zuid (SVZ), who decided to dissolve itself. The employers' organisation was established in 1905, because at that time several owners of stevedoring companies reckoned that the absence of a permanent organisation at the employers' side was one of the causes of the large amount of stoppages at the time. They negotiated collective bargaining agreements since then. Paradoxically, however, ninety years later, employers decided that the very fact that the SVZ was the power bastion of the 'port barons', attracted the port workers and their unions to mobilise and join for action. After the dissolution of SVZ in 1996, the general employers' organisation (AWVN) took over, but only in an advising role, the companies had to bargain and sign their own collective labour contracts, leading to a fragmented collective bargaining structure. While the dock worker power had the unintended consequence that the employers' organisation disappeared, the latter had at its turn an unintended consequence: the rise of pattern bargaining. In the collective bargaining cycle, unions targeted good profit making companies first to set the tone to the rest. In addition, focussing on company level urged unions to make coalitions with works councils, in some cases leading to conflicts with employers about the competencies of both employee representatives. Finally, in the port, HR policies of local management had never been at a sophisticated level (to use a euphemistic phrase), but with predominance of the company level in the industrial relations, the HR agenda became even more dominated by the zero-sum issues of collective bargaining.

Facing the external context and the strategic decision on the employers' side, *union policies* evolved into a 'business unionism' American style. As has been mentioned, in de wake of the wild cat strikes in the nineteen eighties, the major union (FNV) adopted wild cat strike organisers from the shop floor in its ranks and radicalized its policies. In 1991 a major strike

aiming at one collective bargaining agreement for all general cargo operations, break bulk, container- and roll-on/roll-off terminals alike, failed, due to the resistance of workers at the container terminals, who did not fancy the traditional dockworkers' politicized action style of the break bulk workers, causing a cleavage between the two categories. In the newly adopted policy, direct interest representation and negotiations based on a power on the shop floor, was central. The local FNV union followed very much its own course, since it rejected the national confederations policy of concertation (the so-called 'polder' model) and infringed many times the wage deals made at national level. It launched the slogan *Proud to be a docker* (indeed, in English) as a central motto and developed its own house style, including bomber jackets and a logo with *Stronger trough struggle* ('Sterker door strijd'; ironically referring to the city shield of Rotterdam and the logo of football club Feyenoord) and the image of a clenched fist, used during the wild cat strikes of the seventies. Last but not least local union officials developed an extensive international network of contacts with the ITF (International Transport Federation) and with dock workers unions in the USA (ILA, ILWU, and Teamsters), the UK and Australia. Dockers and unions are very well aware of the fact that with the growth of world trade and the global stretching of logistic chains, their strike leverage has been drastically increased. However, in order to withstand divide and rule policies of the shipping lines and global terminal operators, international solidarity is a prerequisite for effective use of that potential power. In the campaign against Port Package the local FNV union played an important role, by organizing an international demonstration in Rotterdam, although the call for strike did not have great success, since dockers tend to go for their own 'direct interests' only.

It appears then, that the FNV union succeeded in making the bridge towards the port workers at the container terminals. Taken over the port as a whole, union density dropped slightly form 62% in 1987 to 58% in 2006 (which is remarkably high in the Dutch context). This reduction is mainly due to the fact that union density always has been highest in the break bulk companies, with more than 5.000 workers in 1987 (with 65% union density). As we have seen employment in this sector declined rapidly, tot 570 employees in 2006. At the same time union density at the container terminals rose from 47% in 1987 to 58% in 2006[2]. Nevertheless, the union had not been able to stop the fragmentation of the bargaining structure.

[2] These membership figures only refer to the FNV union. Figures of the CNV union and of some smaller local independent unions have not been available.

The dissolution of the employers' organisation intensified the tendency of decentralisation of the *bargaining structure*: it became completely fragmented (figure 5). Originally one collective labour agreement (CLA) was negotiated for all port workers, in all sector, from general cargo tot dry bulk transhipment companies. Container terminal ECT, established in 1967, developed its own CLA, due to 'differing organisation and working procedures'. In due time the number of sector CLA's grew (dry bulk transhipment companies, agribulk transhipment and storage companies, warehousing firms, inspection companies), each covering only several companies in the port of Rotterdam. After the disappearance of SVZ the 'sector CLA' was marginalised to a number of 3 (inspection, lashing and shovel subcontractors in dry bulk), covering a poor 750 workers. This extreme fragmentation of the bargaining structure did only occur in the relatively small sector of the ports in the Netherlands. Multi-employer collective bargaining, that is, sectoral collective labour agreements, supported by legal extension, is the rule.[3]

Figure 5. Bargaining structure.

	company CLA's		sector CLA's	
year	number	employees	number	employees
1950			1	10.000
1970	1	500	1	15.000
1989	16	2.887	5	5.849
2010	26	5.438	3	746

Naturally, the fragmented bargaining structure causes quite some problem for the unions. First and foremost, there is the permanent threat of the entering of new companies that refuse collective bargaining. As has been said, presently, the largest break bulk operator (originally a warehouse, buying off workers with high wages and certificates of shares) does not have a CLA. In addition, there already have been some cases where the union did not succeed in their demand for a CLA, notwithstanding organizing rallies. Presently a battle is emerging over the CLA at the newly built container terminal at Maasvlakte 2, affecting the existing ones, since the actions hit the handling of vessels of the shipping lines that invested in the new terminal, and will transfer shortly. Secondly, in contrast to the competing ports of Hamburg

[3] Taken the economy is a whole, collective bargaining coverage amounts to 85%; confined to multi-employer bargaining the figure is 75% (Schilstra & Smit, 2005).

and Antwerp, that have legal protection of dock work in the port area, the labour market in the port of Rotterdam is formally 'free'. In principal any employment agency may offer port work services. Originally, in order to protect the workers of the labour pool after its privatization, the collective labour agreements contained an article that restricted the companies to hire flexible workers only from the labour pool. Since the labour pool bankrupted in 2009, it is increasingly difficult for the unions to keep unqualified, cheap labour of employment agencies out. For the same reason, the Port Package directive, especially the rules on self-handling of transhipment by the ships' crew, was seen as a direct threat to dock workers employment. Thirdly, the absence of a port wide social infrastructure implies a lack of bipartite institutions for training, safety and the like, which are quite common in other sectors, in the context of the Dutch 'polder model'. Representatives of employers and employees don't meet, apart from the zero-sum negotiations at the bargaining table; the only notable exception being the port workers pension fund. And, as is well known in organisation sociology, the more ties in a network, the more stability. The fragmentation of the bargaining structure thus urges the unions to constant alertness and action, operationalized by the FNV into business unionism.

CONCLUSIONS

The first conclusion is that the 'syndicalist current', high strike proneness and regular occurrence of wild cats, did not die out with the wave of containerisation, but changed in form. If we take strike *frequency* as the yardstick for strike proneness, which is quite reasonable, militancy of the port workers in Rotterdam turns out to be a historical constant. The occurrence of the wild cat stoppage appears to diminish slightly, though, showing the increased role of the union in worker protest. On the other hand, strike volume declined very drastically compared to all previous historical periods. Port wide massive and prolonged walkouts did not occur after 1991, partly as a result of the employers' strategic choice to dissolve the employers' organisation and to 'decentralise' collective bargaining. So, the unintended consequence of dock worker power in the seventies and eighties was the fragmentation of bargaining structure, in its turn resulting in the (by the employers) unintended consequence of pattern bargaining.[4]

[4] See Popper (1963) on the task of social science in the search for unintended consequences of purposeful human action.

Secondly, although the circumstances changed drastically with the advent of 'the box', the dockworker worker culture survived. This culture originated in the casual nature of employment in the early days of the port (before the Second World War) and the relative autonomy of the workers in the heydays of manual break bulk operations in the decades after the War. The introduction of the container is to be compared to the mechanization of the manufacturing industries, which took place half a century beforehand. It completely changed the work organisation and labour process. So then, how come that the culture survived while the conditions changed so radically? In the first place, the new conditions, brought about by the container and by neoliberal economic policies of deregulation and privatization caused new issues of contradiction and conflict, such as pressure for flexibility, job insecurity and instability of the bargaining structure. Secondly, although Millers theory of 'universal dockworker subculture' has been quite useful to understand the origins syndicalist current, it appears to be an ahistorical and static concept.[5] The author suggest the idea of a 'cultural lag', but that appears to shallow. Interestingly, the social science concept of 'dockworker culture' itself has been subject of an 'ideological struggle' in the port. Personnel management of container terminals wanted to exclude it (although they did not succeeded[6]), and the FNV union cultivated it ('mythologized' it in the eyes of the employers). A more dynamic concept of dock worker culture therefore is to be preferred, in which the mentality is created and constantly recreated by the actors, adapting to changing circumstances and interacting with other parties in industrial relations.

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[5] To be fair, the author notices this potential shortcoming himself (Miller 1969, p.314)

[6] Interesting to note: recruiting policies were aiming at the exclusion of dock workers from the break bulk companies, but, by contrast, did hire management and middle management coming from that line of business. Therewith they did not realize that a shop floor culture in labour relations is formed in interaction with middle management. So the break bulk type of labour relations were introduced in the container sector by the latter. In addition, as a result of takeovers of break bulk companies by container terminals, 'traditional' dockers flocked in also.

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