

Collective and individual strategies to improve working conditions

Deteriorating and working conditions are among the more worrying developments in the post-fordist European labor markets (Kalleberg, 2009; 2018; Lohmann, 2009; Standing, 2011; Vosko, 2010). Scholars argue that as part of overall processes of liberalization, work is offering less security than it used to (Azmanova, 2020; Baccaro & Howell, 2011; 2017; Bulfone & Afonso, 2020; Rueda, 2014; Streeck, 2009; 2016). Different developments are pointed to as problematic. A first example is the flexibilization of the labour market. This has, among other things, resulted in an increase of workers holding temporary or flexible contracts (Barbieri, 2009; Dekker, 2017). In some sectors, such as the cultural and creative industries, workers on flexible contracts (including solo self-employment) nowadays exceeds those holding standard employment relations (Been & Keune, 2022). This development contributes to insecurity about work continuity among workers and decreases their bargaining position. Second, low wage work has been increasing (Been et al., 2021). The recent surge in inflation rates has increased the problem of insufficient wages as it rendered the salary levels of an expanding segment of workers problematic. This issue is evident in the growing number of workers who now depend on supplementary assistance, such as food banks¹. Third, mounting work pressure is frequently cited as a problem across numerous sectors, leading to fatigue, discontent, and burnout among workers (Chung, 2022; TNO, 2020). The recent resurgence of strikes across Europe, including countries with historically low strike rates like the Netherlands, highlights the urgent nature of workers' discontent regarding their working conditions. Moreover, the protests and demands put forth by trade unions have not been entirely unsuccessful, as evidenced by higher wages being agreed upon in recent collective labor agreements than was common in the decades before (AWVN, 2023).

The recent revival of strikes and possibly also trade union membership² might suggest that collective action and -organization are regaining popularity after decades of declining trade union membership rates (CBS, 2021). In the Netherlands, as in many other countries in continental Europe, collective bargaining for a long time served as the means to keep checks and balances between the interests of employers and employees. This institutional framework gained its grip on the labour market in the decades after the second world war (De Beer & Keune, 2018). For a long term, collective bargaining and collective action were the go-to instruments for workers to improve their working conditions. This turned around in the past decades which show across Europe a steady decline in trade union membership rates (Muller et al., 2019). In many of these countries, collective bargaining is still an important tool for regulating working conditions. The low trade union membership rates

¹ <https://nos.nl/artikel/2456653-veel-meer-klanten-bij-voedselbanken-dan-begin-dit-jaar>

² RTL nieuws <https://www.rtlnieuws.nl/economie/artikel/5359891/vakbonden-fnv-cnv-meer-leden-inflatie>

show, however, that few workers are actually personally using it as a tool to influence their working conditions (and that of their co-workers).

It seems that in the context of general tendencies in society, such as individualization and flexibilization, unsatisfactory working conditions were during the past decades, increasingly met with individual strategies to improve them. There is a wide area of options to do so. In line with Hirschman (1970), speaking up and/or trying to negotiate better conditions with your employer (voice) is a first option and leaving (exit) a job, sector or profession another one. In the context of a flexibilized and tight labour market, switching between employers might even be a very effective strategy to improve working conditions. It allows for rapid accumulation of a relevant network and skills and provides natural possibilities to negotiate better conditions (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Kovalenko & Mortelmans, 2014; Verbruggen, 2012). Especially when labour market shortages provide a good bargaining position.

The options of exit and voice might however not be equally realistic for workers across sectors. Those that have a high intrinsic motivation for the specific work they do, such as health care professionals, teachers and artists, might be less inclined. These professions are part of the group of professions we often refer to when we talk about 'labour of love' (Graham, 2022). On the one hand, workers in these professions are highly passionate about what they do. The flip-side it that they are often (relatively) badly paid and that work pressure tends to be high. These issues around working conditions are shared among workplaces and workers in these occupations. Therefore, either individual (re)negotiation or changing employers within their sector might not be effective strategies to improve working conditions. It is likely that these groups of workers have looked for alternative options to improve their working conditions. Health care workers in the public sector have been found, for example, to look for additional jobs in private health care institutes to supplement their income levels (Van Lerberghe et al., 2000) and workers in the cultural and creative industries find supplementary jobs outside their own sector, for example in a café, for the same reason (Throsby & Zednik, 2011). Recently, there are signs that self-employment has entered as a legible strategy in the Netherlands to improve working conditions in the context of a tight labour market, with several news articles mentioning the rise in solo self-employed nurses and teachers^{3,4}. Yet, at the same time recent strikes and protests in these sectors also indicate that both individual and collective strategies are used to address unsatisfactory working conditions. Even though collective and individual strategies can be seen as one pallet of options workers can chose from and that workers might weigh against each other, they are hardly studied together. Studies on collective action form a distinct body of literature from that on individual coping strategies. In reality, however, they cannot be seen as distinct choices of workers. The choice for certain individual strategies might, for example, be driven by disappointment of workers in how collective actors (e.g. trade unions) have addressed their problems through collective bargaining. Individual strategies might thus be a

³ <https://eenvandaag.avrotros.nl/item/zorgmedewerker-maaike-ziet-veel-collegas-zzper-woorden-waardoor-zorg-duurder-wordt-ze-verdienen-meer-en-kosten-dus-ook-meer/>

⁴ <https://www.gelderlander.nl/arnhem/explosieve-groei-zzpers-in-zorg-vele-duizenden-verpleegkundigen-begonnen-in-coronatijd-voor-zichzelf~a033dc3f/?referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fhartvoorzorg.nl%2F;https://www.rtlnieuws.nl/economie/business/artikel/4591781/toename-zzp-docenten-onderwijs-lerarentekort>

sign of cooperation problems within these institutions: employers are not able to provide employees with satisfying working conditions to keep them on board and trade unions are not able to negotiate satisfying working conditions with employers (organizations). *The first aim of this project is therefore to study collective and individual strategies hand in hand, focusing on how -and for what reasons- workers chose between the options they see to influence unsatisfactory working conditions and under which conditions they view options as legible and preferable.*