

Book Review

Roeland Muskens (2015) *Collega's Wereldwijd, 1975–2015: Veertig Jaar International Vakbondssolidariteit (Colleagues Worldwide, 1975–2015: Forty Years of International Trade Union Solidarity)*. Amsterdam: Mondiaal FNV/Utrecht: LM Publishers. ISBN 9789460224126. 162 pp. Hardcover €24.50

Reviewed by Peter Waterman, The Netherlands

Introduction

This is a large-format, illustrated, full-colour, elegant, hardback publication, available to me, as a Dutch union member, for the surely-subsidised price of 13 Euros (plus postage). I look forward to this substantial volume appearing in English, thus making it available to at least some of the “colleagues worldwide” to whom it is apparently devoted. And, for that matter, available to a growing international body of labour scholars and activists critically engaged with internationalism.

I did actually initiate the first working relationship between our Labour Studies programme at the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague, and the forerunner of the Netherlands Trade Union Federation (FNV), the internationalism which this book celebrates. I set up the connection, struggling to make my very first public presentation in Dutch. But I fell out, quietly, with this national union centre within a couple of years, and the initial relationship was just as quietly taken over by two of my colleagues, unconcerned, I guess, with any hypothetical difference between international solidarity and development cooperation.

From International Solidarity to Development Cooperation

It takes but a few pages for this book to get from “International Trade Union Solidarity” on the front cover to “The Dutch Trade Union Movement Gets into Development Aid” in Chapter 1. It was precisely the ambiguities of this conflation that alienated me from the then “Third World” activities of the FNV.

Before leaping to the conclusion that the FNV doesn't know the difference between aid and solidarity, I should mention the introductory pieces. One is from the veteran social-democratic Dutch Minister of Development Cooperation (1973–1977, 1989–1998), Jan Pronk; the second is from the FNV Chairperson, Ton Heerts. Their introductions are actually hardly, if at all, aware of this difference to start with.

Pronk, who was always fast on his feet, does hit several twenty-first-century notes concerning, for example, the lack of Dutch solidarity with Greece, upon which the Netherlands, among others, has recently dumped a work-destroying neo-liberal policy. And he also connects international solidarity with the (shortcomings of?) solidarity within the Netherlands itself. Despite such sobering

notes, he not only praises the book as something that “opens your heart” but seems confident that the FNV can meet the new challenges and get “decent work” for everyone (in place of the tsunami of ... umm? ... indecent work?). In so far as he was co-responsible for the high point in state funding, one would not expect him to foresee anything other than a return to that golden age.

Heerts appears more self-imprisoned within late-twentieth-century development cooperation, having recently been in Bangladesh with a mixed union–employer–government delegation led by the social-democratic Minister Ploumen of Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation (nice combination!?). So his view of solidarity clearly requires lobbying and collaborating with Dutch capital and the state, while ending with the banal declaration that “International solidarity was, is and will in the future only increase”.

As long as the state funds it?

The High Price of No-cost, State-subsidised Labour Solidarity

Actually, it is difficult to see what proportion of the cases reported in this book have been paid for by the Dutch “liberal-democratic capitalist state” (these are my words, of course, for what the book calls “government”). I seem to recall from other FNV publications that over 80 per cent of its “development cooperation” activities were state-funded. But I think it is only in Chapter 5 of this book that annual sums of 70 million Euros are mentioned! But this information is only provided within a highly legal/technical discussion of the reforming and renaming of Dutch (state) development cooperation departments, the increasing role of the private sector and the question of “how critical the role of the union movement can be given the government’s policy” (p. 137). At least two things are missing here:

- 1) any discussion of the implications of such high state-dependency for “international union solidarity”, and
- 2) what the role of the Dutch shop floor is within this Byzantine bureaucratic complex.

Nowhere in the whole celebratory book, I think, is there any indication of the solidarity attitudes and solidarity behaviour of ordinary rank-and-file union members. Nor is there any indication of the *meaning* of such activity for these people. “Solidarity” is surely meant, after all, to transform those who express it, not only those who receive it.

Apart from the question of what sort of union activities internationally the Ministry is prepared to fund, come the implications of “funding from above” as against “funding from below”. To me it seems reasonable to assume that if one gets money poured over one’s head from above then the need to raise it from beneath one’s feet becomes less important – or at least less urgent. But there is another possible impact of funding from above: that in so far as they do not have to pay for it, members are less likely to ask what it is being used for.

Under the present conditions, international labour development cooperation or solidarity can become primarily the business of inter/national trade union offices and officers.

So What *is* the Difference between International Union Solidarity and Development Cooperation?

This is not a question this book is able to ask because it uses the terms interchangeably. I am sure that the FNV and its member unions are involved in solidarity activity with unions in Germany (next door) and the UK (across the North Sea), but these are disregarded here, though the FNV website does itself distinguish between the [work of FNV Mondiaal \(the subject of this book\)](#) and [FNV Solidarity Work](#). The latter is apparently paid for by a 0.7 per cent deduction from our membership fees. However, it appears that “Solidarity Work” can *also* be subsidised from state development cooperation funds!

Elsewhere, I have suggested that in discussing international solidarity we need to distinguish between Identity, Substitution, Complementarity, Reciprocity, Affinity and Restitution (Waterman, 1998/2001: 52). Actually, I borrowed all but the last of these from a Dutch writer (Vos, 1976)! Without going into detail about the typology, I suggest we can best understand what the FNV is doing in terms of a “Substitution Solidarity”. Substitution implies standing in for the Other, with this Other considered to be either too weak, too poor, too ignorant, too *under-developed*, and in general needing an Us to stand up for a Them. This also suggests a Unidirectional Solidarity, here going on the North–South (or North–West to Rest) axis and in the North–West to Rest direction.

There is little in this book about the Rest taking significant solidarity action (Complementary? Reciprocal? Affinity?) with the Dutch, at least not before 2035 (when I will be 99 years old). The 2035 date of a Reciprocal Solidarity comes in a couple of “fantasy football” interviews. The first (p. 51) is from a Dutch union leader, with an intriguing idea about the Brazilian CUT, the Indian SEWA and the United States SEIU supporting a united but marginalised Dutch union movement affected by a massive wave of “informalisation”. The second is from a union activist (p. 109) who can at least imagine a time in which – for unforeseen reasons but with the help of social media – worker self-interest would be surpassed by a movement called “Workers for Workers”.

Why only as fantasy? Why only in 2035? What if I die before the age of 99?

The lack of anything more than rhetorical South-to-North activity makes the recipients of Dutch union aid/solidarity not “partners” (in the language of this book) but, let’s face it, *clients*. So what we are talking about here is a patron–client relationship, with the clients doing what clients do: expressing their gratitude to the patrons. And the patrons basking in a self-congratulatory glow of well-doing.

Actually, there is nothing necessarily *evil* about Substitution Solidarity as long as one doesn’t take this part for the whole. And there are a series of campaigns reported in the book that are worthy of note, or, rather, of critical attention – for example, past FNV solidarity with Chile, South Africa and Poland. Or, more recently with Burma, for “Clean Clothes” (against extreme exploitation of textile workers in the Global South), in lobbying for International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention 189 for domestic workers, supporting a union of these in Lima, Peru.

But self-criticism, indeed self-reflexivity, is missing in this volume. Self-satisfaction, however, is not.

Exporting a European Labour Model (in Crisis) to a Majority World of Labour (also in Crisis)

Somewhere in this work my eye was caught by a reference to the Dutch “Polder Model” as something the FNV was promoting. Now, a polder refers to those extensive areas behind the dikes that were built by generations of Dutch labourers. In this case, the reference is to the consensus-based “social partnership” (capital + state + unions) constructed before globalisation, racial tensions, neo-liberalism, world capitalist crisis and austerity had begun to enter the consciousness of the Dutch union leadership.

Oh! Okay, now I have rediscovered the FNV’s “Polder Model Export Exercise” (somewhat concealed in the dark blue paper insert between pages 112 and 113). This is in an interview with Lodewijk de Waal, a top leader of the FNV and/or FNV Mondiaal around 1997–2005):

As Chairman of the FNV I travelled widely to peddle our polder model, also in the developing countries. Occasionally I went together with ... the then Chairman of the employers’ organisation. Many colleagues in other countries found this amazing, that we turned up with the employers. But when I explained that under our polder model the employers also behaved differently and that this had clear advantages for the unions, then they were mostly interested.

To which this promoter of decent Dutch multinational corporate attitudes adds:

If I asked in developing countries, then they considered Dutch multinationals always amongst the top five employers.

He goes on to praise one Dutch multinational, while making fun of a Vietnamese worker leader’s English. This comes from someone who does not himself demonstrate any particular capacity to pronounce Vietnamese – even incorrectly:

In Vietnam I visited a Heineken plant. Here also things were in excellent order. At the end of the visit the chair of the works council took me apart and whispered: ‘Blewely bettel than Govenlment’. Haha.

Do I lack De Waal’s particular sense of humour? (Yes!) Do I doubt his Pidgin English? (Yes!) Are we not moving here from mere paternalism to something darker? Because a phonetic guide to Vietnamese does not render “r” as “l”. Perhaps De Waal is here confusing Vietnam with China? But laughing at a foreign unionist’s pronunciation of English is surely way out of order for anyone with pretensions of carrying out solidarity – even diplomatic – work.

To give him some due, Lodewijk de Waal does admit to those shortcomings in solidarity between Dutch workers earlier referred to:

It is sometimes even difficult to find solidarity with colleagues close by: there are few workers in Amsterdam who declare themselves in solidarity with actions taken in the harbour of Rotterdam.

Maybe the FNV should now reflect on and address this local problem while concerning itself about solidarity with workers in the Global South? But, then, would they get a subsidy from the state to do so? And from which ministry? Or which department of which ministry? And which *loket* (pigeon-hole) in which department?

In the meantime, maybe the FNV should be going beyond exporting a model in some crisis to unions in the Global South (or Non-West) which are also in crisis? Maybe it should be reflecting on the following:

- 1) The weight of the global working class has decisively shifted from the North-West to the Rest.
- 2) The polder model is also a polder moment, and it relates to the past, not the future.
- 3) It has disarmed the Dutch unions, which do not yet have adequate means or understandings to confront a more aggressive capitalism, state-imposed austerity, the informalisation/precarisation of labour.
- 4) It is therefore exporting to Indonesia, Peru or South Africa a past North–West European model, quite inappropriate for meeting their needs today.
- 5) Finally, this effort stands in the tradition of nineteenth-century European Christian missionary activity, rather than an international labour solidarity constructed out of a global social dialogue, in which the experiences of the “majority world” have much to teach the “minority world”. And not only in 2035 (Featherstone, 2012).

Also Missing: Solidarity with Palestine

The absence of Palestine, its workers, its people, its unions from this book can hardly be because of a lack of FNV interest in Palestine, or even of a certain capacity for criticism of Israel. Already in 2007, a Palestinian website was reporting [increasing Dutch union pressure on Israel](#). And, in 2014, a new FNV Palestine Workgroup was reporting on a delegation [to Israel/Palestine](#) that was highly critical of Israel and favourable to the Palestinian union federation, the PGFTU.

The FNV Workgroup has its roots in a longer-standing workgroup of the ABVA-KABO (the civil servants’ union, of which I am a Retired Member, if only marginally active). So it would seem to provide an example of a trade union solidarity activity that was created bottom-up and over many years of effort. Despite the obvious parallels with the FNV’s campaign of solidarity with the black trade union movement in apartheid South Africa (covered on pages 35–39), it seems not to have fit into the state-funded development-cooperation focus of *Colleagues Worldwide*. Maybe there is no ministerial funding *loket* for Palestine?

In the meantime, I note that David Featherstone, in his work on international solidarity, lays stress precisely on

...the importance of solidarity as a practice that can be forged ‘from below’ or through ‘pressure from without’. Such solidarities can be powerfully shaped by working-class groups and movements. This asserts the importance of marginal groups in shaping practices of solidarity. It is a direct challenge to assumptions that subaltern groups ... lack the capacity or interest to construct solidarities (Featherstone, 2012: 5).

This would seem to fit the model of the Palestine solidarity campaign mentioned above. And it may well have been the case with other solidarity campaigns of the FNV and its forerunners. But this book is produced by and concentrates on offices and officials. Which leads to my next point.

An Institutional and Institutionalised Internationalism

I have already suggested that this book expresses a nationally institutionalised expression of a union internationalism, both formalised and centralised, something subject to bureaucratic procedures both within the Dutch unions and in their bureaucratic-technical negotiations with Dutch state funding agencies. But the book reveals that this institutionalisation goes beyond the frontiers of a “nice” capitalist state full of “nice” capitalists.

This professionalisation of international solidarity has also marked the annual FNV events for members interested in solidarity activity. I couldn't work up the courage to go to the 2015 – *Kloek Boek* – event, having experienced two previous ones. These involved, diversely, a professional “big name” TV presenter cheering on the audience, or a small team of animators (I suppose) connecting us all with elastic band to, no doubt, give us a feeling of the ties that bind. On one of these occasions we had a lecture on the history of Dutch trade union development cooperation by Peter van Dam, an Assistant Professor on Globalisation, Religion and Transnational Civil Society. He was from the University of Amsterdam, but could have been from the University of Polderland. He was not going to rock any boats – or perhaps we should say canal barges? – and he didn't. Such events infantilise the well-meaning union activists involved, transforming what could be a consciousness-raising event into an entertainment.

I am not sure whether another world of Dutch union solidarity activity is, in the short run, possible but it is surely, in the long run, necessary. Although one would like to see it go way beyond the wage-employed and union-organised, couldn't it initially be called “Workers for Workers”?

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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