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Netherlands

Opposition victory in Dutch public sector union

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On 19 and 20 May Abvakabo FNV - with over 350,000 members the largest trade union in the Netherlands' public sector - held its congress, which meets once every four years. Besides local, provincial and national civil servants, Abvakabo members work mainly in sectors that are now wholly or partly privatised, such as health care, public transport, the post office, energy and telecommunications. Roughly 15 per cent of the country's two million public employees are unionised.

"Bridge-builders"

The pre-congress debate was dominated by talk of renewal. The incumbent leadership had taken a turn in recent years towards an organisation based on 'customer service' and marketing. The union was increasingly being run like a company, with a managing director at the top and a policy that crept ever further in the direction of consumerism. Active members had less and less to say about the union's course. In response a core group of active members organised themselves under the name 'kloofdichters' ('bridge-builders', or more accurately 'gap-closers') and drafted a programme for a democratic, militant union. To put their ideas into practice they put forward a slate for union leadership.

Tension

The tension at the congress was palpable. No one knew for sure what the relationship of forces was.

Thematic meetings initially debated and voted on the union's course and the organisation that was needed to follow it. Many of the kloofdichters' proposals were adopted, often over the open opposition of the incumbent leadership. At some points the proposals were made even more radical. For example, one resolution called for the 'Balkenende standard' (named after the current Dutch prime minister) for maximum salaries in the public sector - 20 times the minimum wage - to be replaced with a salary ten times the lowest pay scale in the union contract, so as to make income equality more of a concrete demand. And the importance of rank-and-file activism received additional emphasis. Members' democratic control was strengthened, the power of the director scaled back. In short, the congress consistently took positions that would make Abvakabo FNV a more militant and democratic union.

Outburst of relief

Still, when it came to the leadership election that closed the congress, many delegates were holding their breath. Would the kloofdichters actually manage to get elected to leadership?

The leadership body consists of a total of 15 people, including four paid posts for the day-to-day leadership alongside 11 slots for unpaid active members. For the four paid posts, the four official candidates were opposed by three candidates close to the kloofdichters. There were 27 candidates for the 11 other slots, including the 11 on the kloofdichter slate.

The result was that incumbent union president Edith Snoey was re-elected by a narrow majority, but two opposition candidates were elected to paid posts. To the 11 unpaid slots, no fewer than seven kloofdichters were elected. This meant that most of the incumbent leadership was tossed out, with at least nine of the 15 members of the new leadership committed to radical renewal.

A big job

The new leadership now faces the task of preparing the union for the massive attacks on social programmes, wages, working conditions and pensions that clearly lie ahead. They have to defend the public sector from yet more liberalisation. This means increasing the rate of Abvakabo membership in the public sector, and activating the members so they will fight back in defence of their interests when a fight-back is needed.

The union's ability to organise resistance and move onto the offensive will in any event be greater now that a majority of its leadership consist of activists who put a premium on militancy and don't flinch from confrontation. Who knows, they may even set an example for other Dutch unions!