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Netherlands

# **Polski Strajk: first strike amongst temporary workers, mainly Polish migrant workers, in AH and Jumbo distribution centres**

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**Since 25th June, approximately 150 temporary workers, mainly Polish migrant workers, have been on strike at the logistic platforms of Albert Heijn [major Dutch supermarket chain] to protest against the "sham collective agreement" and demand equal pay and treatment. [1]** The strike began simultaneously at the distribution centres in Pijnacker and Geldermalsen, then quickly spread to Zwolle and Tilburg.

On Monday 14th July, the strike extended to several Jumbo [second-largest Dutch supermarket chain] distribution centres. The number of strikers rose to approximately three hundred. After three weeks, the strike was temporarily suspended to allow for expansion of the movement. Additionally, it was imposed that consultation with the ABU [General Association of Temporary Employment Agencies] and the NBBU [Dutch Association of Mediation and Temporary Employment Agencies] would take place at the end of August to discuss a proper collective agreement, one of the demands.

For Karin Heynsdijk, leader of the FNV Flex union [Dutch trade union federation for flexible workers]: "These past weeks, something that no one would have believed possible has happened: temporary workers, almost all migrant workers, have mobilised to defend their rights. Despite intimidation from temporary employment agencies, despite their precarious position in the labour market and despite the financial risks they face."

"This is the first time that temporary workers have decided on their own to go on strike, and what's more, they are all immigrants," declares Cihan Ugural, FNV trade unionist.

The strike was organised by the strikers themselves, with support from the FNV Flex union. Paulina Nietupska is one of the strike leaders. She has worked for nine years as a temporary worker at the Albert Heijn distribution centre in Tilburg. "People must wake up. We are not slaves. We pay our taxes here, we send our children to school here and we come to live here. We are like the Dutch."

## **Against the "sham collective agreement" and for equal treatment**

The employers' organisations ABU and NBBU had previously concluded a collective agreement with the small LBV union [a lesser-known Dutch trade union], but this is completely unsatisfactory and described as a "sham collective agreement" by the strikers.

In the ultimatum launched before the strike, the union demanded a collective agreement providing equal pay for equal work, complete transparency on working conditions and better protection for migrant workers. According to the FNV union, the collective agreement that was signed allows temporary employment agencies to invent their own conditions "in the absence of any verifiable equivalence," according to a union statement. According to the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) [Dutch national statistics office], "temporary workers earn on average 37% less than their colleagues on permanent contracts. Even taking into account training and experience, a 13% difference remains."

There are also other differences in terms of social benefits. Temporary workers only receive 20 to 25 days of leave per year. They don't receive a 13th month [common European practice of paying an extra month's salary as bonus]. Permanent employees have breaks two to three times longer. And in April, temporary workers saw their bonuses and

holiday days reduced and their targets revised upwards. This, whilst temporary workers often work for years - 9 years in Paulina's case, mentioned above in this article, 10 to 15 years for others - in the same place and are in reality permanent employees.

And then there's housing. Being dependent on the temporary employment agency is already a problem in itself. Some rooms are decent, but others are really poorly equipped, where no one should live. They have, for example, rooms without windows and without access to daylight. Mould, which constitutes a health hazard, is also frequent. And this for rents that are no lower than market rates.

This mobilisation is very important, believes Cihan Ugural, from the FNV. "Whether it's schedules, pay, leave, maintaining salary during illness, etc. They see the difference with permanent employees every day."

## The strike's extension

Initially, the strikers focused on the distribution centres. They organised meetings there, conducted highly visible actions and shared their story with their colleagues. They also travelled by bus to other distribution centres.

But from 4th July, they also intensified their actions outside to be more visible and attract more media attention. On that day, strikers from Tilburg, Pijnacker, Zwolle and Geldermalsen gathered in Buizenpark in Rotterdam. This park is located next to the new immigration museum. The objective was twofold. On one hand, they attempted to present the museum with a banner on which the strikers had inscribed their names. Indeed, with this strike, migrant workers are writing a page of history, and in some time, this banner will become a museum piece. On the other hand, after two weeks of strike, they wanted to get away a bit from the deserted industrial zones and have a good time together.

On 8th July, more than a hundred Polish temporary workers on strike went to the headquarters of the employers' organisation VNO-NCW [Confederation of Netherlands Industry and Employers] and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment in The Hague [seat of Dutch government].

Under the slogan "Equal pay now! Stop de sjoemelcao" [Dutch: Stop the dodgy collective agreements], they made their demand heard to be treated the same way as workers on permanent contracts.

A petition was presented to the VNO-NCW, which begins with the following text: "I'm fed up! I do the same work as my colleagues on permanent contracts. But I receive a lower salary, I have fewer rights and less security. This isn't fair. I demand equal treatment and I want to have my say about my working conditions. And this starts with an honest collective agreement." After presenting the petition, a discussion had to take place to see what the VNO-NCW leaders had to offer temporary workers.

The strikers then went to the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment. The situation of temporary workers was explained to two civil servants, including the spokesperson for Minister Eddy van Hijum [Dutch minister], notably through a speech by Paulina.

After a two-hour break in Koekamp park in The Hague, where the FNV had amongst other things organised a barbecue, the strikers continued their action by informing their colleagues at the Jumbo distribution centre in Bleiswijk about their strike and encouraging them to join them. The objective was to broaden the strike and strengthen it.

On 11th July, the strikers were supposed to go to OTTO's office [major temporary employment agency] to conduct an action there, but the most important temporary employment agency employing Polish migrant workers refused to discuss with the strikers, who are predominantly Polish.

The strikers then decided to go to the ABU and demonstrate there against the rigged collective agreement. But there too, the riggers refused to speak to the strikers.

## **OTTO and Albert Heijn's counter-offensive**

The temporary employment agency OTTO and Albert Heijn resort to various intimidation tactics and spread false information to counter the strike. For example, they told some that they could be dismissed or transferred if they decided to strike, that striking was "illegal" and that they were actually already treated equally. Furthermore, they called upon strike-breakers by transferring staff from other distribution centres to centres where the strike was ongoing. This practice has already been banned by the courts in the past.

The other temporary employment agencies concerned are Carrière, Covebo and Tempo Team [Dutch temporary employment agencies].

## **Jumbo joins the movement**

On 14th and 15th July, temporary workers from Jumbo logistics platforms also joined the strike, in Bleiswijk (Jumbo online), Breda, Veghel and Woerden [Dutch cities]. A picket line was maintained for several hours.

The strikers at Jumbo are also migrant workers, but mainly Bulgarians and Romanians. Contact with the Polish AH strikers was established because they live in the same workers' hostels. At Jumbo, it was the first strike, which encountered some organisational problems at the beginning. But with support from the Polish strikers and FNV flex, these could be resolved.

## **Strike not suspended, then suspended**

On Friday 11th July, the strikers went not only to the ABU, but also to the FNV. The FNV indeed wanted to suspend the strike due to the summer period. But as the strike was beginning to resonate, including in other companies, the strikers wanted nothing to do with it. That's why, after their visit to the ABU, they went to the FNV headquarters. After presenting their point of view convincingly, the strikers got their way and the strike therefore should not be suspended.

But during the past week, it appeared that the current strike rested on a narrow base and that it was necessary to extend it. It was therefore decided to suspend the strike from week 30 (21st to 27th July) in order to be able to focus fully on broadening contacts with other temporary workers. This means establishing contacts at workplaces and places of residence. From there, the movement can be broadened and strengthened if necessary.

With the negotiations that will take place at the end of August to achieve a good collective agreement, a first result

has already been obtained. In parallel, OTTO has distributed to its temporary workers a document containing concrete commitments.

The FNV is currently setting up an emergency service for temporary workers who participated in the first phase of the strike. If they are victims of intimidation or other abusive practices at their workplace, a reaction will be immediately initiated.

As Karin Heynsdijk, leader of FNV Flex, says: "What we have built these past weeks will not be abandoned. We remain organised, we remain visible and, if necessary, we will continue the strike. After August, we will return even stronger and with even more people."

Paulina Nietupska, strike leader, employed by OTTO at the AH distribution centre in Tilburg: "We went on strike because we want the same rights. The same work, the same salary and the same guarantees as permanent staff. And we won't give up until this is sorted out."

## Solidarity is essential

Precarious and migrant workers constitute an important part of the working class, often difficult to organise. The success of this strike can give a boost to this work. It is therefore essential to organise solidarity to support and strengthen the strike.

But mutual solidarity is one of the weaknesses of the FNV and the working class. This solidarity must be organised and encouraged. Members of the "Solidair met Palestina" [Solidarity with Palestine] network union have taken the first step by creating a "FNV Solidair Polski Strajk" application. This application is accessible to everyone. The objective is to organise and encourage solidarity from this group.

The strikers, who have temporarily suspended their movement, really need additional support. Additional pressure on temporary employment agencies and on Albert Heijn and Jumbo could contribute to obtaining a good collective agreement.

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Translated for [ESSF](#) by Adam Novak.

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[1] This article draws notably on the FNV statement concerning the strike suspension and on articles published by *Doorbraak* and *socialisme.nu*.