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The Role of the Dutch Trade Union Movement in Consumer Policy. A Note Spurred by Tonner's Article in JCP, 3, 1979/3 + 4

Abstract

In this note, the activities and goals of the Dutch consumer organization Konsumenten Kontakt are described. The organization has close links with the trade union movement. The author argues that although there are sometimes conflicts of interest between consumers and employees, these conflicts are better solved *within* an organization where both worker and consumer viewpoints are represented. Another strong argument for the trade unions being active in the consumer policy area is that the trade unions are the only organizations capable of organizing that part of the public which is in particular need of consumer protection.

In the Netherlands the trade union movement is not only interested in consumer matters, but has been, from the beginning of the consumer movement, actively participating in a consumer organization, the Stichting Konsumenten Kontakt.

As in various other countries, this participation by the trade unions has often been criticized. Recently Professor W. J. Slagter, President of the Commission for Consumer Affairs of the Social and Economic Council (SER; an important advisory committee of the Dutch government in social and economic matters), said that the interests of labour are in many respects incompatible with consumer interests. Consumers ask for lower prices, which often means importing products from countries where there are lower wages; and they want their shops to be kept open on Saturday afternoons. On the other hand employees, says Slagter, ask for a rise in

wages; they don't want cheap products being imported from abroad; and they want to have more leisure time, therefore shops must be closed on Saturday afternoons. Some months ago I heard the press-officer of the Consumentenbond (the "other" of the two consumer organizations in the Netherlands) say in a radio programme that Konsumenten Kontakt is not an independent consumer organization because of its affiliation with the trade union movement.

These arguments are not as true and compelling as they might seem to be at first sight. I hope to make this clear here.

"It goes without saying that the trade union movement should take a clear stand for the interest of the consumer. This follows from the objectives of the trade union movement," said the chairman of the Confederation of the Netherlands Trade Unions Movement, Wim Kok, in a speech on the 11th International TNO Conference in February 1978. I will briefly restate his arguments here.

The Dutch trade union movement consists of trade unions operating in industrial or other sectors; the individual unions are members of a co-ordinating federation to which are delegated those activities considered to be in the general interest of the members of the unions. This is so, for example, in the case with the promotion of the welfare and well-being of employees and their families, which includes the interests of these families in their social role as consumers. A trade union movement concerned with making real contributions to the improvement of individual welfare cannot confine itself to income policy. The purchasing power of the income inevitably influences the material welfare of the individual. The objectives of the trade union movement therefore form the triangle of "income improvement, income distribution, and purchasing power."

Are Labour and Consumer Interests Compatible?

Now that we have made clear the objectives of the trade union movement, we come to the possibility of combining the roles of the employee and the consumer. Those who think that these roles are incompatible will happily find themselves supported by Peter Drucker's study "The age of discontinuity" (1969). In this study Drucker pleads for a large number of specialized organizations within the community, each with its specific role, each with its own responsibility, and each acting on behalf of a specific, well-defined interest. This philosophy is called "neo-pluralism."

I do not favour this point of view, nor does the Dutch trade union movement. When we talk about "combining roles" we do not talk about different people, but about the various social roles played by one individual. If these roles come into conflict with each other, they do so even within a single individual. It is the individual who has to make the choice on the basis of his own preference. Because the trade union movement must take many interests into account, it offers large sections of the community the most appropriate framework within which the diversified sectional interests can be considered in a responsible manner. There is harmony within a conflict.

If consumer policy is to be based on the aforementioned neo-pluralistic model, it will tend to focus too much on narrow consumer interests, without taking into consideration possible negative effects from other economic, social, or political points of view. If we want to take into account the secondary effects of production

and consumption, we need a consumer policy formed within a broad economic and social framework. Such a policy goes further than measures concerning information, safety, freedom of choice, and legal protection. It also takes into account the consequences of production and consumption, such as environmental effects, shortage of raw material and energy, and the division of consumer goods throughout the world.

Apart from the critical attitude towards the theory of neo-pluralism, there is one more important reason for the trade union movement to participate in consumer affairs. Surveys have shown that, in the Netherlands as well as in many other countries, the consumer movement as such, i. e., the organizations representing no other interests than consumer interests (in the Netherlands the "Consumentenbond"), primarily represents individuals with a secondary or higher education. The main activity of these specific consumer organizations such as the Consumentenbond has been the provision of information and guidance, especially that based on comparative testing. These consumer organizations address themselves to the public in such a way that they attract the sort of members who are capable of using qualified information. Individuals with a lower level of education, and very often a modest income, are underrepresented in these organizations, and their interests are not adequately looked after. As it is these individuals that are especially represented by the trade union movement, its devotion to consumer policy is a necessity.

The Organizational Background in the Netherlands

After having given some information about the theoretical background of the affiliation of the Dutch trade union movement to consumer matters, I would like to mention something about the way things have been put into practice. The Consumentenbond, the first specific consumer organization, was instituted in 1953. There were, however, various other organizations that, among other things, were interested in consumer affairs. They had many contacts with each other and with the Consumentenbond in order to co-ordinate their activities in matters such as price policy, consumer legislation, etc. This was how Consumenten Contact Orgaan (the name is now Konsumenten Kontakt) was founded. Participating members were the Consumentenbond, the trade union movement, the consumer co-operation, the Dutch Union of Housewives, and the Dutch Family Council.

To cut a long story short: In 1970 the Consumentenbond left the Consumenten Contact Orgaan. As the trade union movement could not come to an agreement with the Consumentenbond about the way it could participate in the consumer policy advocated by the Consumentenbond, it was decided to continue the work in Consumenten Contact Orgaan, which later changed its name to Konsumenten Kontakt. It was this organization that gained the support of the trade union movement as well as some other organizations (the Dutch Family Council, the Dutch Union of Housewives, the Workers' Broadcasting Corporation VARA).

Thus, since 1970 Konsumenten Kontakt functions as a second consumer organization with its own magazine *Koopkracht* (which means "purchasing power"), a magazine of a different character from the *Consumentengids*. There are about 35,000 readers, mainly members of the trade unions. A recent survey shows that the educational level of the readers of *Koopkracht* is clearly lower than the level of the members of the Consumentenbond.

Besides consumer information other important activities of Konsumenten Kontakt concern consumer representation, consumer protection, and consumer legislation. In several studies Konsumenten Kontakt has given an outline of consumer legislation on various subjects, such as unfair trade practices, misleading advertising, competition policy, energy policy, small claims courts, and class actions. This has led, among other things, to a law on door-to-door selling, and a law on misleading advertising. Price control is another important field of activity. This has even led Konsumenten Kontakt to the Administrative Court in a procedure against the Ministry of Economic Affairs. This Court (the Raad van State) passed judgement on the complaints by Konsumenten Kontakt, and a group of consumers represented by Konsumenten Kontakt, that the Ministry gives unmotivated and unjustified dispensations of price control measures.

Problems in the Co-Operation Between the Consumer and Trade Union Movements

The co-operation with the trade union movement has not always been an easy one. Harmonious as the triangle of income improvement, income distribution, and purchasing power may seem, the actual activities of the trade unions tend to concentrate on income policy, because this field represents their foremost and "hard" interest. One does not often fully realize the importance of consumer interests. While a decline of the price of coffee may have more effect on the purchasing power than a slight rise in wages, the latter is often preferred for psychological reasons.

The interests of the employees and the interests of consumers must be balanced. This balance can be reached only if, on the consumer side, there are specialists who are aware of the interests of this group of employees-consumers. Thus Konsumenten Kontakt provides these specialists, and they and the trade unions have been for years, and still are, in a process of mutual education.

There have been conflicts of interests during these years. There were trade union members who favoured higher prices because of a possible consequent rise in wages. But when informed by the consumer part of the organization that these wage increases would be paid out of their own pockets and those of their fellow-employees, they agreed to a better balance of interests. There are still conflicts. The consumer movement proposed a ban on door-to-door selling of certain contracts with savings banks. These contracts are less favourable for consumers (especially for consumers with lower incomes) than normal ways of saving. The only reason for the existence of this sales method is that it exploits those consumers who do not know what they buy. A ban on this selling practice means that people may lose their jobs. The balance between the two interests still have to be struck, and it will be the task of the trade union movement to secure a fair balance.

Avoiding conflict of interests offers no solution. First one has to admit that even a specific consumer organization, one that has no links with the trade unions, must deal with divergent interests, and will have to find a balance between them and the clear-cut consumer interest. Even the aforementioned Consumentenbond would not propose to keep shops open on Saturday nights on the grounds that such opening hours would be unfair to the employees. Konsumenten Kontakt, however, represents a different group of consumers, consumers who are at the same time employees

in shops, or have a feeling of solidarity with those employees. When they make a choice, after having balanced the interests of employees and consumers, they often come to a different conclusion. This does not make their opinion less valid. On the contrary, it is a more valid opinion because it is a more balanced and a more responsible one.

Tonner, too, admits that there is a great gap between theory and everyday politics. Since we still struggle with this gap in the Netherlands, it would be a mistake to think that our situation is an ideal one. There has been a great improvement, however, during the last few years. The co-operation between Konsumenten Kontakt and the trade union movement has grown to be a more close and a more effective one. Nevertheless Konsumenten Kontakt has a difficult task to fulfil, especially since it has to deal with the interests of consumers with a lower educational level. Educating this group is very difficult, and consumer legislation may be a better way to protect these consumers than to try to make them read consumer magazines. This means that a consumer organization such as Konsumenten Kontakt has as its foremost task to work within the area of *consumer legislation* (and cannot be financially dependent on consumers' contributions as a consumer association). The trade union movement is the only organization which has succeeded in organizing that part of the consumer public in which Konsumenten Kontakt is interested. It provides Konsumenten Kontakt with the legitimation to represent these consumer-employee interests in matters of consumer legislation.

I hope, as Tonner does, that the trade union movement, and not only a few of those in an official capacity, but also ordinary members, will become conscious of their important function in consumer affairs.

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Zusammenfassung

Die Rolle der niederländischen Gewerkschaften in der Verbraucherpolitik. Seit Beginn der Konsumentenbewegung in den Niederlanden arbeiten die Gewerkschaften aktiv in der Verbraucherorganisation Konsumenten Kontakt mit. Entsprechend sehen die niederländischen Gewerkschaften ihre Aufgaben nicht nur im Bereich der Einkommens- und Verteilungspolitik, sondern auch in der Stärkung der Haushaltsmitglieder in ihrer Verbraucherrolle.

Häufig wird argumentiert, die Interessenkonflikte zwischen Arbeitnehmern und Verbrauchern schlossen eine Interessenvertretung durch ein und dieselbe Organisation aus. Dieser Meinung tritt der Autor mit folgenden Argumenten entgegen. Zum einen handele es sich bei dem Interessenkonflikt zwischen Arbeitnehmern und Verbrauchern um intrapersonelle Konflikte, die bereits jeder einzelne nach seinen eigenen Gesichtspunkten lösen muß. Deshalb sei ein möglichst breiter organisatorischer Rahmen am besten geeignet, die verschiedenen gesellschaftlichen Interessen miteinander zu verbinden. Zum zweiten könne die Einbeziehung von gewerkschaftlichen Gesichtspunkten mit verhindern helfen, daß sich Verbraucherpolitik allzu eng nach dem Konsumenteninteresse richtet und dabei wichtige andere, beispielsweise Umwelt-Gesichtspunkte, außer acht läßt. Schließlich könnten die Gewerkschaften auch besser die weniger gebildeten Schichten der Bevölkerung repräsentieren, denen die Bemühungen der Verbraucherbewegung ganz besonders gelten müßten, die sie aber nach den bisherigen Erfahrungen aus verschiedenen Ländern kaum erreichen kann.

Schließlich wird an einigen Beispielen gezeigt, wie das Verbraucherinteresse mit dem gewerkschaftlichen Interesse in Einklang gebracht worden ist oder gebracht werden kann.

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