Summary

‘For the People for Christ’s Sake’ – a history of the CNV

The hundred-year history of the Christelijk Nationaal Vakverbond (CNV) trade union in the Netherlands has been written in ‘For the People for Christ’s Sake’. This history shows that the CNV is a Christian-social movement that is actively involved in the development of Dutch labour relations. From its own ideological perspective, the Christian-social ethos, the CNV fulfils its own recognisable role in the field of labour and income. The CNV strives for co-partnership of employees in all policy areas that are significant to them. The CNV thereby emphasises personal responsibility and ‘self-help’.

The thread of this history is taken up in the second half of the 19th century, when interest in social issues arose within the Christian world. Influenced by Abraham Kuyper, neo-Calvinistic Christian-social thinking and within that spiritual trend, a social movement developed, which after a series of fundamental debates about the right to strike and the relationship between employers and their workers, led to the establishment of Christian trade organisations. In 1907, the Twente Christian textile workers union Unitas took the initiative to establish an inter-confessional trade union federation. This led to the foundation of the Christelijk Nationaal Vakverbond in the Netherlands on 13 May 1909, which functioned from 1 July 1909. The inter-confessional character was lost in 1912 when the Roman-Catholic Church forbade its members to join the CNV. In the mid-nineteen seventies, this inter-confessional character was restored when several Catholic unions joined the CNV.

The first ten years of the CNV were characterised by the national centralisation of various regional and local Christian unions. Besides the development of sectoral unions, attention was paid to the development of Committees of Local Christian Labour Organisations. As a result of the First World War, the still young Dutch trade union movement acquired a social position, partly as a consequence of government support to the unemployment funds of the labour unions. The labour union received a place in the High Council for Labour, which can be regarded as the beginning of the Dutch consultative economy. In those years, the CNV also developed a political strategy from the awareness that much of what was desired could only be brought about via political decision making. The core of the strategy is that trade union people must be members of the Dutch parliament because union members will vote for union candidates on the lists of the political parties. The strategy, where above all the ARP party played a role, failed in 1918 and set the tone for the following years.

In the 1920s, the CNV developed, with the emphasis on striving for a self-sufficient organisation. The acquisition of its own printing office and its own holiday
resort are examples of this. Policy orientation was expanded, particularly by Secretary Herman Amelink, through his advocacy for a public industrial organisation. He opined that the co-partnership of employees must not remain limited to their working conditions, but they must also be able to influence the socio-economic state of affairs in the sector in which they work. Amelink borrowed many of his ideas from foreign and Roman-Catholic thinkers, but gave it his own slant by advocating development based on society. The CNV also held fast in the 1920s to the social insurance ideas of A.S. Talma. Particularly with regard to the Health Act, the alliance continuously advocated the implementation of an act passed in 1913. The CNV thereby positioned itself outside the discussion of another, sectoral approach to the Health Act, which ultimately came into force in 1930.

In the 1930s, the Christian labour union was confronted with the serious consequences of the international economic crisis. The CNV opposed income deterioration as best it could and argued – next to others – for a better social arrangement, among other things by declaring collective labour agreements to be generally binding. The CNV, just like the ARP, advocated retaining the gold standard for a long time but shed no tears when it was abolished in 1936. The CNV joined the struggle against unemployment and in particular demanded attention for the consequences for the young and stressed the ethical aspects. Already at an early stage, the CNV resisted the rise of National Socialism; membership of the CNV and the NSB (National Socialist Movement) was regarded as incompatible.

On 10 May 1940, the German armed forces invaded the Netherlands, an incursion that led to the CNV abolishing itself on 25 July 1941, under threat of being co-opted by the Germans. The day-to-day work consequently ceased, but all ongoing developments continued underground. For example, the CNV formulated its definitive standpoint on the organisation of the statutory trade organisation in ‘the Guidelines’, and agreements on far-reaching collaboration were made with the two other trade union federations, the social-democratic NVV and the Roman Catholic Kab. On 25 July 1945, the CNV was newly established. The original number of members was soon reached and was followed by a growth in the membership. Via the Labour Foundation, the CNV was closely involved in the national recovery policy and for the time being accepted the controlled pay policy. On the basis of ‘the Guidelines’ they attempted to influence the legislation concerning statutory trade organisation – although the CNV did not succeed in convincing the ideologically allied ARP party. The CNV was also closely involved in the discussions on the style of the social security, maintaining the standpoint that not the government but the social partners are responsible for employees’ insurances.

In the beginning of the 1950s, the much-desired Industrial Organisation Act was finally created. In practice, its implementation was very disappointing and slow, the CNV’s views about co-partnership in enterprises were overturned. The CNV regards a company as a collaborative venture between people and from that perspective, employees must also be involved in the formation of business strategy. The distribution of the strongly growing prosperity made a further extension of the social security act possible. The CNV attempted to break free from the strictly
controlled wages policy. After the collaboration with the other trade union federations broke down in 1954, it was restored in 1958 and there started a long period in which ways were sought to intensify collaboration. Particularly CNV Chairman M. Ruppert attempted to strengthen the position of the CNV by taking control of the ARP, a political move that ultimately failed due to its over-ambitiousness.

In the 1960s, the economy seemed to be skyrocketing: wages continued to increase, partly as a result of the shortage on the labour market, and the free Saturday was introduced. Within the CNV, as a consequence of the labour shortage, a discussion about the position of working married women was initiated. Over the years, their participation in paid professional employment led to a comprehensive change in culture. The CNV also ultimately opted for the employees council as the co-partnership form for employees in companies; the Industrial Organisation Act was abandoned on the basis of the disappointing experiences. The strong social shifts made the CNV express its views for the first time in a vision programme, in order to establish its own identity.

The oil crisis in 1973 was seen by many as the beginning of a long-term economic crisis, which was coupled with rapidly increasing unemployment. The CNV at first wished to combat unemployment above all by Keynesian means, but over the years, just like the other trade union federations, it developed ideas about the reduction of working hours, such as a 36-hour working week and arrangements for early retirement. The CNV resisted the decline of the social security system, by which the victims of the economy were punished once again in their income. The search for forms of collaboration between the three Dutch trade union federations ground to a halt at the beginning of 1974: the CNV wished to retain its own Christian-social character and would go no further than a federation, while the NVV and the Roman Catholic NKV were striving for a merger.

In the early 1980s, the economic crisis deepened, which partly translated into a debate about the affordability of the social security system. The CNV resisted the deterioration of the policy conditions and therefore argued anew that the social partners should be responsible for employees’ insurances. The CNV cooperated with the reorganisation of public employment in the Netherlands, where a national agency was converted into a tripartite governed public organisation. In this period, the CNV was confronted with a considerable loss of membership and this led to the intensification of individual services to members, with which a trend was set that would be reinforced in the following decades.

In the 1990s, the executive positions of Dutch labour unions changed. From 1994, so-called purple (liberal-social-democratic) cabinets operated, which strongly focused on establishing the primacy of politics in the field of employees’ insurances and labour-market policy. Over a period of ten years, the labour unions lost their executive positions in the areas of social security and labour-market policy and reverted to hardly relevant advisors, although their position in the SER and the Labour Foundation were retained unimpaired. The CNV decided to undergo a comprehensive internal rearrangement of tasks, where the unions
above all focused on the sectors and the trade union federation on the regions. In
the second half of the 1990s there was an experiment with a new set-up for the re-
gional work – an experiment that cost a great deal of money and did not yield the
desired results.

The new century started with great optimism about the future of the economy,
but as the economic situation turned around, a period characterised by social un-
rest commenced, partly under the influence of international terrorist attacks and
internal political assassinations. The labour union became involved in a mass con-
fl ict with the cabinet about the consequences of an aging population and disabil-
ity. After the largest union demonstration ever, at the end of 2004, an agreement
was reached in the best polder traditions.

To conclude this study of the history of the cnv, we answer the central ques-
tion: has the cnv been what it wished to be in the course of its history, namely a
Christian-social movement? This question is answered affi rmatively. This history
demonstrates that the cnv is a Christian-social movement, which has advocated
the co-partnership of employees in the fi elds of work and income with varying
results. The cnv has contributed towards the development of Dutch society in the
20th century from its own principles. In some cases, the position of the cnv made
certain developments possible, in other cases, new developments are being initi-
ated as a result of the cnv’s position. That latter particularly applies to the increas-
ing attention for the combination of family and work and for the restructuring of
the disability insurances. The co-partnership of employees and their representa-
tives has increased considerably compared with the beginning of the 20th century,
but particularly in the 1990s, a great deal of that position has been lost. It seems
that the cnv has over time been a fl exible organisation, which has constantly suc-
cceeded in adapting to important socio-economic developments and the prefer-
ences of its members. Despite its fl exibility, the cnv is in danger of losing its posi-
tion, because in the latter years of the 20th century and at the beginning of the 21st
century, the degree of organisation has declined considerably, partly as a result of
its too limited recognition in the daily lives of people and as a consequence of the
fact that the political establishment has forced the labour unions out of a series of
relevant, executive positions.