Higher education in resistance

Documentation of the action movement against the 2024-2025 budget cuts

Ewout van den Berg, Lisa Berntsen and Saskia Boumans (eds.)

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Timeline

16 May 2024

Coalition parties PVV, VVD, NSC and BBB reach agreement on broad outlines, including cuts to higher education.

2 September

Alternative opening of the academic year in Utrecht attracts hundreds of people. Organised through collaboration between eleven organisations.

14 November 2024

Student organisations continue cancelled demonstration in Utrecht and mobilise 8,000 people, with local alternatives in other places too.

25 November 2024

Demonstration against education cuts draws 25,000 higher education staff and students.

9-13 December 2024

Hundreds of UvA staff members walk off the job, demanding that the university sever its academic ties with Israel.

11 December 2024

Coalition slightly softens austerity proposals and thereby gains support for the plans from opposition parties JA21, CDA, SGP and CU.

10 March 2025

First day of relay strike action, Leiden University and Leiden University of Applied Sciences.

24 April 2025

12th and final day of action in the relay strike, Delft University of Technology.

10 June

National strike and demonstration, cancelled due to escalation of train strikes by the railway unions.

Introduct
ion

Ewout van den Berg, Lisa Berntsen and Saskia Boumans

In July 2024, a broad coalition of trade unions and various (local) action groups called for mass resistance against the biggest cuts to higher education in decades (AOb, 2024). In this collection, we bring together different perspectives from the action movement that emerged from this and thus document a living trade union history1. The contributions show the diversity of the movement by giving a voice to different members of the coalition about the struggle that took place in the academic year 2024-25. Together, this provides insight into the collective strength of the movement, which is based on both decades of and more recent trade union power building, specific action groups and the spontaneous willingness to take action that arose. While the coalition drew much of its strength from the complementarity between the mobilisation and representational power of (local) action groups and the organisational and negotiating power of trade unions, the collaboration was not without its challenges. The strength of one proved to be the blind spot of the other. Differences in organisational structure, tactics and message remained, even when united in a coalition. The contributions in this collection also clearly show how this created tensions, which were often overcome.

In the course of 2024, the PVV cabinet announced its intention to cut a total of one billion euros from higher education, mainly by cutting research funds, international programmes and introducing a penalty for students who take too long to complete their studies. At the opening of the academic year in September 2024, opposition to these plans was a widely supported message with which the new academic year. The widespread discontent became clear during the demonstration on 25 November 2024 at the Malieveld, where 25,000 higher education staff and students joined forces to protest against the Schoof cabinet's cuts.
A few months later, in March and April 2025, more than 30,000 people downed tools during the relay strike at Dutch universities.

The wave of protests against the dismantling plans is historic. Never before have so many higher education employees taken joint action to preserve scientific research and higher education. Higher education staff are not known for their willingness to take action, let alone go on strike, and the number of trade union members is limited. The fact that so many higher education staff were nevertheless mobilised is largely due to the cooperation between the FNV and AOb trade unions and various action groups, such as WOinActie, the LSVb and university-specific groups. The combination of the local mobilisation and organisational power of action groups and the more institutional organisational power and experience of trade unions mobilised higher education staff and students both nationally and locally. In this broad movement, differences were united – and sometimes set aside – for the common cause.

1 This publication is a follow-up to our meeting 'Lessons from the strike in higher education' on 25 March 2025. A report of the meeting can be found here: https://www.deburcht.nl/wetenschappelijk-bureau/nieuws/een-verslag-lessen-uit-de-staking-in-het-hoger-onderwijs

The contributions by Douwe Dirk van der Zweep of the AOb and Sander Nelissen of the FNV reflect how the course of action looked from the perspective of the two largest education unions. With their institutional position and resources, the unions played a central role in organising the mass demonstration in the autumn of 2024 and coordinating the local strikes.
in the spring of 2025. Locally, trade union members often played an active role in the mobilisation. The aftermath of the sudden cancellation of the demonstration in Utrecht in November 2024 underlined for the trade unions the importance of not taking decisions alone, but jointly with
the broader coalition. The fact that, a few months later, the day of action in June could not go ahead due to a strike by train staff shows that decision-making between trade unions can also be more collective and based on solidarity.

Several contributions show that keeping together the broad coalition that forms the movement in higher education is a challenge. At the same time, they also show the opportunities that exist for building collective (trade union) power within higher education.
The WOinActie action group, for example, has been a powerful mobilising force that academics have rallied behind. The red squares introduced by WOinActie, which people could pin on their clothing, were an accessible means of action that made people's willingness to take action highly visible in the workplace.
the workplace. This is remarkable in higher education, where political expression has long been exceptional. Although a willingness to take action to preserve high-quality higher education is not the same as a willingness to join a trade union, campaigning does appear to
a way to become acquainted with collective organisation and trade unions. Something that was unknown to many higher education staff before the action campaign. The trade union movement then has the task of convincing these action-ready people of the importance of collective organisation and trade union membership, so that the level of organisation in higher education increases. It is important for the activists to realise, for example, that striking has not cost them any wages so far, because the Boards of Directors of all Dutch universities are also opposed to
have spoken out against the cuts and actively supported the actions, but this may change. The strike fund set up by trade unions for their members may then be very welcome.

In his contribution, Gaard Kets convincingly argues that the success of WOinActie clearly demonstrates that other – non-traditional – forms of campaigning can be powerful and that
the trade union movement can tap into new target groups in this way. For example, by working with local action groups and collectives, such as 0.7 and HBOinactie. 0.7 has been active for years and is driven by the increasing precariousness in higher education due to the many temporary contracts,
This is what Tim de Winkel and Lotje Siffels write in a passionate argument. HBOinActie, on the other hand, was founded quite recently, in 2024, to also have an accessible action network at Dutch universities of applied sciences
, as Annemieke de Jong shows in her contribution.

Several contributions refer to international experiences with movement building through mobilisation and *organising*. OrganizetheRUG and the student union LSVb were both inspired by the online *organising for power* meetings based on the work of Jane McAlevey. In their contribution, Eden Young and Laurent Krook show how within
OrganizetheRUG collective power has been built up on the Groningen campus and how this formed the basis for the local relay strike. For the LSVb, building a movement is crucial to mobilise students to set the agenda, rather than reactively protesting against the next austerity measure, according to Jens Bosman in his contribution. The importance of collective

power-building at the grassroots level resonates in higher education is also evident from the contributions by Gaard Kets and Arnoud Lagendijk. Both refer to Eric Blanc's work on *worker-to-worker organising*, in which the power of power-building lies primarily in the democratic initiative of the workers themselves.

Many authors in this collection agree that higher education needs to be democratised. Tim de Winkel and Lotje Siffels, from the aforementioned collective 0.7, see no other future than a radically democratised university. Lagendijk and Kets add to this the importance of a democratic, grassroots-organised and driven trade union movement.

Another recurring theme in the collection is resistance to the genocide of the Palestinians. With their camps in the spring of 2024, students not only put pressure on university boards to sever ties with Israeli institutions, but also established broader solidarity networks. Various contributions in this collection show how this international solidarity has had an impact on the movement against the cutbacks, although this was sometimes accompanied by discussions about the precise relationship between the two themes. In the collection, Lamia Tawam and David Hollanders draw lessons from the four-day strike in solidarity with the Palestinians at the University of Amsterdam in December 2024.

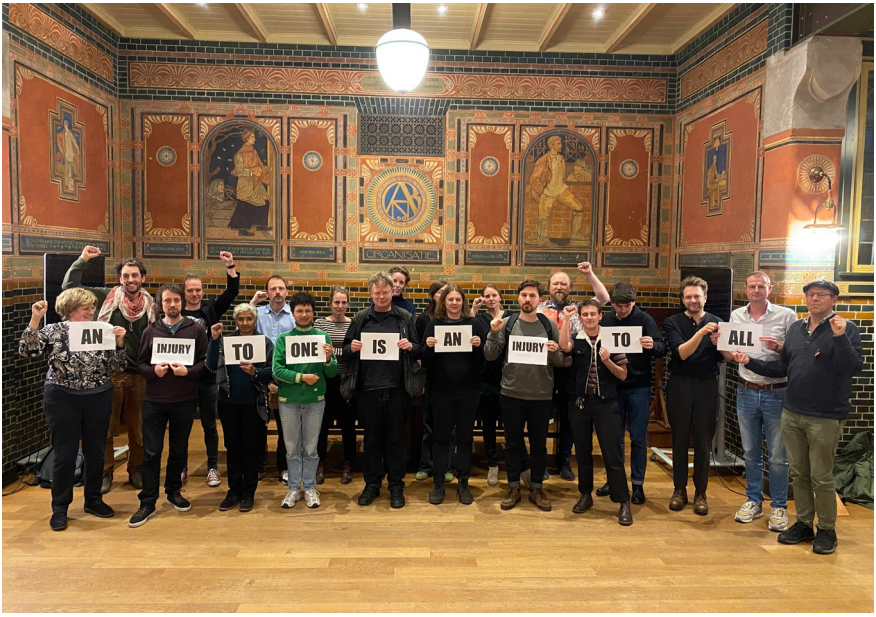
At the time of publication (August 2025), the outcome of the struggle against the cuts in higher education are still uncertain. Some of the cuts have been taken off the table, but not all, and the Schoof cabinet is outgoing, which means that political relations are shifting. This situation creates uncertainty, but at the same time offers new opportunities to show that the cuts in higher education are not are an arithmetic necessity, but a political choice. A choice that calls for a broader discussion and positioning on the role and value of higher education and research. Let us not forget that the Schoof cabinet also chose not to introduce a tax on the purchase of own shares for large companies, resulting in an annual loss of two billion euros (Fernandez and Schellekens, 2024).

A good understanding of the driving forces behind the austerity measures is important because it has consequences for what we can expect from the future and how we can arm ourselves against it. The first two contributions in this collection therefore focus on the background to the austerity measures. Rodrigo Fernandez shows how the austerity measures fit into a history of neoliberalism and financialisation. Higher education institutions are increasingly functioning as market players, driven by the growing importance of real estate in their business operations. Léonie de Jonge then places the austerity measures in an international perspective and reflects on the extreme right-wing nature of this. She shows that it is no coincidence that the cuts do not affect all studies equally, but are concentrated in the humanities.

Both analyses also provide starting points for and call for the cuts in higher education to be seen as part of a broader attack on public services such as primary education, healthcare and housing. The elections in the autumn of 2025 are a good opportunity to link various issues together.

Together, the contributions offer a nuanced and multifaceted insight into the complexity of the Dutch protest movement against cuts in higher education in the academic year 2024-2025. The number of perspectives is certainly not exhaustive, but it does provide a good picture of the main players. The struggle for good higher education and research is and remains of great importance for a democratic and just society. Part of that struggle is recognising mutual differences and overcoming them in solidarity. This makes us stronger and more resilient. We hope that this collection will contribute to this.

Ewout van den Berg (temporary researcher), Lisa Berntsen (researcher) and Saskia Boumans (director) work at De Burcht.



A small expression of our solidarity with education workers in the United States is this photo we took during the meeting on 25 March 2025 at the Burcht, where we discussed the strike actions in higher education. We sent the photo to our contacts in the United States. The slogan 'An injury to one is an injury to all' was popularised by the syndicalist trade union Industrial Workers of the World, which was founded in Chicago in 1905 and brought together workers from different sectors.

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Universities in crisis:

how cutbacks are undermining the business model

Rodrigo Fernandez

The Netherlands is preparing for the largest and most targeted education cuts ever, affecting all levels of education and research. These measures reinforce the neoliberal trend of financialisation and market forces, making universities increasingly dependent on foreign students, multinationals and private funding.

The first Dutch cabinet to include a radical right-wing party has decided to the largest cutbacks in education and research ever. The cutbacks affect all levels: from primary and secondary schools to vocational education, higher education and research. In short, the entire Dutch ecosystem of education, research and innovation is being cut back. Primary schools in disadvantaged areas are particularly hard hit by the cuts to the educational opportunities scheme, which will amount to 90 million euros in 2027 and then rise to 177 million euros annually (Ministry of Finance, 2025: 100).

There is, of course, much to be said about this. To begin with, the need for austerity measures is debatable at a time when the Netherlands' debt ratio is well below the EU standard and there are many investment issues to be addressed. Dutch public debt is less than half the European average (Eurostat, 2025). The costs and disadvantages of these austerity measures – the loss of future economic potential at a time of structural shortages on the labour market and the damage that the Netherlands will suffer as a location for knowledge economy companies – have not been investigated and did not play a role in the decision-making process. The Netherlands already falls short of the EU standard of spending three per cent of GDP on innovation (with a current percentage of 2.3 per cent), and these cuts will further reduce that percentage (Universities of the Netherlands, 2024).

Unlike previous Rutte cabinets, which spread cuts across various ministries to distribute the damage, this cabinet is implementing very targeted cuts in development cooperation and education. Of the more than fifty billion euros in cuts between 2010 and 2017, 2.9 billion (six per cent) ended up in education, culture and science (Netherlands Court of Audit, 2016). The 2025 Spring Memorandum predicts that the budget of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science in 2029 will amount to only 93.4 per cent of that in 2024 (Ministry of Finance, 2025: 101). While the total national budget shows an increase to 122.6 per cent in 2029. This reflects the extent of the long-term effects of the measures (Ministry of Finance, 2025: 58). With the shift in priorities towards higher defence spending (for 2025, this roughly amounts to additional annual expenditure of 19 billion) combined with maintaining the existing budgetary framework, it will also become more difficult for future cabinets to reverse the existing cuts.

Despite the scale of these cuts, there has been no significant public debate or outrage about the measures outside the sectors affected. Public opinion seems to have embraced the VVD's message that cuts to education are necessary in order to avoid burdening future generations with problems. This new political context is the new normal that the education sector has to deal with.

The business model of universities cannot do without growth

The targeted budgetary measures are the result of the rise of the radical right and the failure of the dominant business model of universities worldwide.

Moreover, the impact of the cuts cannot be viewed separately from the earlier neoliberal trend of placing universities in a market environment and making them operate like businesses.

This shift is referred to as financialisation, because institutions are made dependent on banks and have to adapt in order to become 'bankable' (Froud et al., 2006). Gradually, the objectives and organisational structure of universities have been aligned with the wishes of banks (Fernandez and Hendrikse, 2013). One example is that banks require universities to build up financial reserves that are permanently withdrawn from
the core activities of the academy, namely education and research.

This business logic has made universities in the Netherlands and a number of other countries more susceptible to changes in funding, student numbers and
interest rates, as they are increasingly exposed to risk. Investments have been made that need to be recouped, which is not possible if revenue declines structurally. Staff may be made redundant and courses or even entire faculties may be closed down, while accommodation costs
and financing costs cannot simply be reduced. As a result, a larger proportion of total revenue is likely to be spent on accommodation (including depreciation) and financing in the future, putting education and research under greater pressure.

Growing dependence on foreign students and multinationals

The pressure to turn universities into businesses has been ongoing worldwide for more than fifty years and began in the Netherlands in the late 1990s. The impact of this varies between countries and institutions.

For example, the Netherlands does not have any listed universities or large numbers of private universities that focus on offering inexpensive education. Although some higher professional education institutions could be included in this category, these institutions do not compete with traditional universities, as is the case in Chile, for example (Rosenzvaig-Hernandez, 2022). Nor have Dutch universities (except for a brief venture by the University of Groningen) established campuses abroad. Among the HBO institutions, only NHL Stenden University of Applied Sciences in Leeuwarden (with campuses in Nigeria, South Africa, Thailand and Qatar) is engaged in generating revenue through commercial subsidiaries abroad (C-BERT, 2023).

However, Dutch universities, like universities in other countries, have focused on attracting more foreign students. In 2022, forty percent of all first-year students at universities were from outside the Netherlands (CBS, 2022). In the 2023/24 academic year, nearly 128,000 international students were studying in the Netherlands. This represents an increase of 140 per cent compared to the 2011/2012 academic year (CBS, 2025).

The proportion of foreign students in higher education rose from 2.7 per cent in 1997 to 13.7 per cent in 2023, the highest percentage in the EU (Our world in data, 2025). The number of foreign students coming from outside the European Economic Area, accounts for approximately twenty percent of all foreign students but, according to a recent study, generates nearly four hundred million euros per year in revenue for Dutch universities (Consultancy.nl, 2025).

Another way in which universities are being managed as businesses is is dependence on companies for funding. We see the consequences of this particularly in the United States, but it is also happening in the Netherlands. In the US, high expenditure Defence and aerospace have led to specific partnerships linked to these sectors, with mutual dependency. Stanford University, for example, received substantial funding from the military-industrial complex, resulting in a relationship of dependency (Harris, 2023). Similar dependencies also exist around tech and pharma companies.

The Netherlands does not have a dominant tech and pharma sector, although the bio-science park in Leiden operates according to the same model (Leiden University, 2024). The ultimate goal here is for a company to be bought up by one of the global pharmaceutical monopolies. The fuel for this model is patented intellectual property, while the underlying research is usually largely financed by public money. With public costs and private profits, you quickly have a nice revenue model.

Another way in which financial interests play a role in the relationship between universities and the business community is the demand for technical personnel by multinationals. Jongneel (2019) clearly shows how education and research at TU Delft has been influenced by Shell (Jongeneel, 2019). We also see funding flows from the business community at business schools (Crezee, 2017). The density of dual roles is particularly high in fields such as tax law, where, outside Leiden, there are almost no professors without an external appointment as a partner at a large consultancy firm (HOP, 2025). A final, recent example of a substantial third-party funding stream is ASML's funding for Eindhoven University of Technology (Brainport Eindhoven, 2024).

In total, universities received €327 million from the business community in 2023. The largest share went to TU Delft, around €57 million. So even though the Netherlands does not have a Stanford or MIT, the relative influence of large companies on funding and knowledge development is nevertheless striking.

How financialisation began in the Netherlands

Until the 1990s, Dutch universities enjoyed a period of steady growth and government support. The government played a central role in financing higher education, with universities receiving generous budgets to develop their teaching and research activities. Total expenditure on education in the Netherlands rose from 2.7 per cent of GDP in 1950 to 6.9 per cent in 1980, a provisional peak (CBS, 2024).

2 Ibid.
3 Calculation based on figures from: Dienst Uitvoering Onderwijs (2024) Accountability from XBRL: https://duo.nl/open_onderwijsdata/onderwijs-algemeen/financiele-overzichten/financiele-verantwoording-uit-xbrl.jsp

The increase in student numbers and the growth of research in the 1960s and 1970s led to the construction of new university buildings and campuses. The government financed these construction projects, allowing universities to focus on their core tasks: education and research. The property was owned by the Government Buildings Agency and the financing was covered by the financial management of the ABP (Fernandez, 2011).

The period up to 1970 was also characterised by the relative autonomy of universities, both in relation to the government and their own staff and students. The latter changed in 1970 thanks to the Academic Governance Act. The Act gave students and staff the right to vote on academic decisions. The Act also led to a decentralisation of decision-making, giving faculties more control over their own policy and strategy.

In the 1980s, the *no-nonsense* Lubbers cabinets implemented austerity measures, including in higher education. Despite these cuts, the government remained an important source of funding for the universities and the sector remained relatively protected from market forces. During this period, government spending on education fell to 4.6 per cent of GDP in 2000, only to rise again to 5.1 per cent in 2023 – the last year for which Statistics Netherlands (CBS) has data (CBS, 2024).

The barbarians at the gates: the Purple Cabinets

In the 1990s, inspired by neoliberal principles of market forces and decentralisation, a fundamental shift took place in Dutch university policy. The government sought to make higher education more efficient and market-oriented. A crucial moment in these reforms was the 1995 decision to transfer ownership of public real estate to universities (and other semi-public organisations). This measure had an enormous impact on the balance sheet of universities, which suddenly became responsible for managing and financing their own real estate.

The transfer of real estate had far-reaching consequences. Universities now had to invest in the maintenance, renovation and expansion of their buildings themselves. This led to greater dependence on external financing, such as loans and private investments.
The 1997 University Management Modernisation Act (MUB) strengthened the commercial management of universities, with a greater role for professional managers and a reduction in the influence of students and staff.

The Act was a response to calls for more decisiveness and strategic planning at university level and centralised decision-making in a professional board, consisting of full-time managers, supervised by a board of professional supervisors. It thus imitated the *corporate governance* of listed companies and fitted in seamlessly with making universities bankable (Engelen, 2014).

The increasing focus on real estate and financing led to a shift in the internal organisation of universities. There was a greater need for expertise in the fields of real estate management, finance and accountancy. The number of managers and specialists with a background in business increased, at the expense of academic staff (Engelen et al., 2014).

There was also a growing need for measurable performance indicators (KPIs) to assessing the efficiency and effectiveness of universities (SEO, 2001). This led to greater

bureaucratisation and a greater emphasis on output-based funding, whereby university budgets were aligned with the results achieved.

The financial crisis of 2008 had a significant impact on Dutch universities. Under the Rutte cabinets, further cuts were made, increasing the financial pressure on the universities. Minister Dijkgraaf in the last Rutte cabinet provided a brief respite from the financial pressure.

Austerity measures in the era of financialisation

Over the past twenty years, universities have performed well financially, despite financial constraints. The balance sheet, with the valuation of buildings on one side and debt on the other, has grown significantly since the transfer of the buildings. For example, the value of the tangible assets of universities in the Netherlands was 5.9 billion euros and the total debt was 5.4 billion euros. The total income of universities increased from 4.2 billion euros in 2004 to 9.8 billion euros.
billion in 2023. But the total costs increased even more: from 4.4 billion euros in 2004 to 10.1 billion euros in 2023. As long as everything continues to grow rapidly, there are few financial problems, but if growth slows down or turnover declines, sudden and rapid cutbacks will be necessary (Consultancy.nl, 2025). The question now is how this business model will respond to both a structural decline in funding due to the current cutbacks and the limitation of opportunities to supplement the budget with foreign students. Will this lead to further integration of the business community, for example? If so, this will put further pressure on academic autonomy, increase bureaucracy and undermine academic values.

Universities must stand for the broader principles that guarantee academic freedom and not limit themselves to protecting their economic value, as is currently often done by spokespeople for the Executive Boards. It is therefore important that the broad movement
In higher education, opposition to these cuts is joined by cultural organisations, public broadcasters, development organisations and primary education. The strength of all these so-called 'soft' sectors, which are affected by cuts and can easily be overlooked by the right wing of the electorate, lies in cooperation.

Rodrigo Fernandez is a researcher at SOMO, the Centre for Research on Multinational Corporations.

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Science under fire:

Why the far right is targeting universities

Léonie de Jonge

The cuts to higher education cannot be viewed separately from the rise of the far right. In other countries too, the far right is attempting to shape the character of higher education. Recognising this connection also has consequences for the way in which we can resist it.

When it took office, the Schoof cabinet announced unprecedented cuts to education and research.4 This despite the fact that this sector has been structurally underfunded for years.
The cuts go hand in hand with the announced Balanced Internationalisation Act, which aims to limit the influx of international students and strengthen the Dutch language and culture in higher education. In anticipation of these radical policy changes, university administrators in Utrecht and Leiden, among others, are considering scrapping entire bachelor's programmes (Cuppen, 2024). It is striking that the humanities in particular are being affected.

It is short-sighted to think that this intervention can simply be reversed by the next cabinet; restoring lost unique expertise and competencies would take decades (Nanninga, 2024). It is equally naïve to assume that these cuts and the closure of programmes such as Islam and Arabic or African Studies are unrelated to the far-right government policy. The Schoof cabinet's austerity agenda, partly shaped by
The Party for Freedom (PVV) fits into a broader pattern of extreme right-wing attacks on universities at home and abroad.

Universities as arch-enemies

Far-right parties and movements have a difficult relationship with universities. They see universities as symbols of internationalisation, the so-called 'left-wing elite' and social issues surrounding gender and diversity – all themes to which they are fiercely opposed. The PVV makes no effort to conceal this aversion. In June 2024
PVV Member of Parliament and education spokesperson Reinder Blaauw claimed that universities 'too often focus on equal opportunities rather than quality' and that 'activist woke culture' has been dominant in educational institutions for too long. In line with its nativist vision, the PVV states in its 2023 election programme that Dutch universities should be primarily intended for 'our children'. The party therefore advocates a drastic reduction in student migration and wants bachelor's programmes to be offered only in Dutch.

We find a similar discourse among other far-right parties in Europe.

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5 This contribution is an edited version of a previously published column. See: De Jonge (2025).

In its election manifesto, the Austrian FPÖ refers to 'ideologised' science, which goes hand in hand with attacks on gender studies and research into migration and racism.
Recently, the party demanded that scientific articles should henceforth be published exclusively in would be published in German. At the AfD party conference last month, Chancellor candidate Alice Weidel announced that a government under her leadership would close all Gender Studies departments in Germany: 'We will throw all these professors out'. Earlier, in a conversation with Elon Musk, she claimed that students at schools and universities 'would learn nothing but woke and left-wing gender stuff'.

Not a new phenomenon

The hostility of the far right towards knowledge institutions is not new. In recent years, there have been several attempts by far-right groups and politicians
to delegitimise and undermine academic institutions (De Jonge et al., 2021).
The suggestion that universities are strongholds of 'left-wing indoctrination' has been circulating for some time –
This is also evident in Dutch politics. In 2019, Forum for Democracy (FvD) set up a reporting centre where school and university students could report alleged political bias on the part of teachers. FvD was not alone in this: in an early version of its election programme for the 2021 general election, the BoerBurgerBeweging (BBB) also advocated a ban on teachers promoting their personal ideologies. In addition, the party proposed setting up a reporting centre where pupils and parents could report such cases.

In some countries, academic freedom has been structurally restricted by government intervention. In Hungary, the prestigious Central European University, founded to promote democracy and open society, was expelled from Budapest. Gender studies are now prohibited by law. In France and Denmark, too, research into topics such as migration, decolonisation and gender is under attack. Far-right politicians regularly label this type of research as 'activist' or 'pseudoscientific'. In the United Kingdom,
The Johnson government is introducing legislation against the alleged 'cancel culture' at universities. At the same time, partly in response to protest movements such as Black Lives Matter and Extinction Rebellion, the British government introduced a bill that significantly restricts the right to demonstrate. In reality, this policy seems primarily intended to redefine the boundaries of who can and cannot criticise those in power.

From the margins to power

The far right is becoming increasingly prominent on the streets and in the media, enabling it to influence the debate on education and educational practice. Thanks to electoral gains, the movement is also more strongly represented in institutional politics, including boards and committees that shape education policy. Perhaps the most striking example is
Donald Trump, who launched a frontal attack on American universities during his second term as president. His policies focused, among other things, on cutting financial support and banning foreign students from top universities. Although federal judges (temporarily) blocked some of these measures, they caused great unrest within
the academic world.

Why is the far right targeting universities?

What explains this systematic hostility? Why is the university a thorn in the side of the far right? Educationalist Anja Giudici (2020) investigated the historical relationship between the far right and education. Based on archival research, she shows that far-right organisations became obsessed with education in the post-war period. She examined the programmes of far-right organisations in France, (West) Germany and
Italy and discovered that they considered 'misleading education policy' to be the main cause of all social and political problems.

The period after 1945 saw a fundamental transformation of European education systems. These reforms were based on a broad consensus among traditional political parties on the principles that should underpin education policy, namely economic growth and social justice. There was also greater
attention was paid to cultural pluralism and the protection of the rights of marginalised groups. The ideology of the far right is diametrically opposed to these principles: it considers social inequality in society to be natural and desirable.

The core ideological elements of the far right today are nativism, authoritarianism and populism. Nativism asserts that 'non-native' persons and ideas pose a threat to the homogeneous nation state. Authoritarianism is the belief in a strictly hierarchical society. Populism centres on anti-elitism and the glorification of the people. Based on this definition, it is not surprising that universities are seen as arch-enemies by this movement. Moreover, schools and universities must educate critical citizens – a prerequisite for a democratic society. As Ingrid Robeyns, professor of Institutional Ethics at Utrecht University, put it sharply in NRC earlier this year: 'Democratically elected politicians with authoritarian aspirations are trying to undermine public institutions because they are crucial for finding the truth and protecting liberal fundamental rights' (Robeyns, 2024).

It should be clear that the cuts at Dutch universities can be seen as an extension of far-right ideology. In addition, the plans are also economically irresponsible. Investing in education and research means investing in knowledge and
the future – an investment that will more than pay for itself. It is highly ironic that the term 'innovation' appears no fewer than 85 times in the current government's programme
the current cabinet. The cuts to higher education and science strike at the heart of our society. They therefore require a strong and broad-based social response.

Don't panic, but organise

This calls for a more incisive analysis of what is really at stake. First of all, it is important to recognise that the attacks on science and higher education, in the Netherlands and elsewhere, are not isolated incidents. It is not just a matter of economic considerations or pragmatic policy choices, but of ideological struggle: a deliberate attempt to undermine the position of the university in society. The systematic infringement of academic freedom strikes at the heart of democracy. Universities play an essential role in
a democratic society – as breeding grounds for critical thinking and sanctuaries for

discussion and debate. Anyone who values democracy must therefore actively defend academic freedom – not just reactively, but on principle. This also means that resistance must be more than just criticism of policy.

Secondly, it is crucial not to anticipate repression before it actually occurs. Historian Timothy Snyder (2017) calls this *anticipatory obedience* – a reflex whereby individuals or institutions voluntarily adjust their attitude to align with the expected policy of those in power. In both the Netherlands and the US, we saw institutions reorganising out of fear, for example by removing terms or discontinuing courses even before the policy was officially introduced.

Finally, it is important to organise, mobilise and show solidarity.
The far right is trying to pit universities, programmes, staff and students against each other. There is a risk that institutions will go into survival mode in order to save their own university, programme or department. To break through this divide-and-rule strategy,
institutions must act together. Trade unions play an essential role in this: they are ideally suited to transform individual grievances into collective struggle. In doing so, alliances must be forged with other groups affected by far-right policies – migrants, people of colour, the LGBTQI+ community and other minorities. Strong resistance requires broad coalitions. In short: don't panic, but organise.

Léonie de Jonge is a professor of right-wing extremism studies at the University of Tübingen in Germany.

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AOb perspective:

actions in higher education - a long-term process

Douwe Dirk van der Zweep

For years, the General Education Union (AOb) has been campaigning alongside WOinActie and the FNV trade union for greater investment in higher education and a different funding model. In collaboration with various (local) action groups, a broad coalition has been forged since September 2024 and action has been taken to reverse the cuts in higher education.

The resistance to the current cuts in higher education by the Schoof cabinet is part of a longer process. As AOb, we have been active in academic education since 2020, when the trade union for science (VAWO) joined us. The VAWO had long been campaigning for more investment in higher education, a different funding model, less work pressure, more permanent jobs and democratisation of educational institutions. The AOb has continued this line of action. We also have good connections with networks in higher education. Several key figures in the AOb are not only active in our organisation, but also in WOinActie.
In recent years, we have carried out various joint campaigns with a *Tour of Academics* and, together with the chair of the Association of Universities (then still VSNU), we have approached the Hofvijver for additional investment in science.1 The previous cabinet led by Rutte responded to this; an additional billion euros became available, creating more scope for independent research.
to call for additional investment in science.1 The previous cabinet, led by Rutte, responded to this call; an additional billion euros was made available, creating more scope for independent research.

However, the Schoof cabinet reneged on the agreements made and implemented severe cuts. When we heard about the new austerity plans, it was clear to us that we had to take action again. In September 2024, we organised an alternative opening of
the academic year on Dom Square in Utrecht. We then invited other organisations (LSVb, ISO, FNV, PNN, fvov, 0.7) were deliberately invited to express their views. A high turnout was not the main objective, which was limited to a few hundred people, but rather the formation of an action coalition.

False start and Malieveld

During preparations for the alternative opening, we also decided to work towards a large and compelling campaign in October. We chose Utrecht because the city is centrally located and has a large university and college, but also because Dom Square and the narrow streets surrounding it provide a beautiful backdrop, even with a smaller turnout.

Our action was cancelled by us at the last minute. The triangle in Utrecht,
consisting of the mayor, the chief of police and the public prosecutor, indicated that if
we
went ahead with the demonstration, they would ban it because there was a

6 https://www.aob.nl/actueel/artikelen/alarmdag-universiteiten-een-nat-pak-voor-11-miljard

concrete threat of violence. De facto, the action was banned. As the practical organisers of the demonstration, the AOb and the FNV held talks with the authorities. In hindsight, it would have been better to hold these talks together with the other organisations. The fact that WOinActie supported us at the time kept everything together.

The cancellation put us in a difficult position. We were accused of naivety and insufficient solidarity with colleagues who wanted to demonstrate against the violence in Gaza at the same time.
The fact that the triangle in Utrecht ultimately facilitated an action on that same day fuelled the idea that we had called off the event for political reasons.

Looking back, the commotion that arose around this issue probably helped us to build up the national campaign on 25 November 2024 at the Malieveld. Ultimately, more than 20,000 staff and students took part in the demonstration. This is unique in higher education. In The Hague, we had a solicitor on standby to immediately review any potential ban from a legal perspective. If safety could not be guaranteed there, our right to demonstrate would be unduly restricted. I am pleased to say that our demonstrations have never gotten out of hand.

Normally, you build up from light to heavy. Because the demonstration in Utrecht was cancelled, the action immediately became very large, with 20,000 people gathering at Malieveld. That raised the question: what next?

Relay strikes

The experiences of POinActie in 2017 and 2018 in primary education were important in our decision to opt for relay strikes in higher education. The advantage of
a relay strike is that you can keep an issue on the agenda for a long time and that new people can join locally.

After Malieveld, half of the cuts had already been scrapped: the part that affected students, the penalty for studying too long. So the question was whether we could surpass the success of Malieveld with the relay strikes. After all, you are only as strong as your last action. The idea behind the relay strike was also practical: it ties in with the marathon mentality of the campaign, whereby you have to ensure that at important political decision-making moments – such as the Spring Memorandum or Prinsjesdag – our point is still on the agenda.

Our initial approach was to spread the relay strike over a long period: for example, once every three weeks or once a month in one university city.
If you can get people to take action, you can keep it going for a long time. It was the local fighting spirit of members and action groups that ultimately led to the relay strikes taking place closer together. Looking back on this period, I can see that this caused the snowball to roll faster and that we were able to mobilise more people as a result.

10 June; cancelled

After the successful relay strikes, we wanted to follow up by organising a national day of action on 10 June. This was just before the Spring Memorandum, which included the additional cuts, was debated. We hoped to once again take advantage of the fact that the coalition does not have a majority in the House of Lords.

We had an excellent programme planned for 10 June at Malieveld, with speakers from the education sector, as well as speakers who would explain the broader perspective (on right-wing populist policies) and how we could continue to build a coalition together.
The first setback was that there was less media attention than we had expected. The relay strikes had received quite a lot of attention in the regional media, but this was not the case nationally.

The second setback was the announcement of a regional train strike.
The Hague station would become inaccessible. The railway unions did not want to change their plans, forcing us to quickly relocate our action to Amsterdam and scale back our programme. Bus transport was arranged for the university cities affected by the train strike. And then the cabinet fell. We adjusted our programme again; after all, we had suddenly found ourselves in election season.

The third setback was that on Sunday 8 June, two days before our national day of action, the VVMC railway union announced that it was extending the strike to the entire Randstad conurbation.
The NS then decided to cancel all train services throughout the country. This meant that our day of action in Amsterdam was definitely off.

The follow-up: broadening the scope?

In our partnership, we have had and continue to have recurring discussions about broadening the campaign against cuts in higher education, both to other (education) sectors and thematically. We can broaden our scope by involving other education sectors and the entire public sector. And we can broaden our scope thematically by linking our fight against the cuts to the fight we are waging together against the extremist cabinet. This also brings the action against the violence in Gaza into the picture.

Politically conscious people are never concerned with just one issue.
It is a fact that many people who are active in our campaigns are also committed to ending the violence in Gaza. By joining forces, you can build more mass support
the idea. The desire to broaden our focus is often based on the idea that, as long as this government is in power, no fundamentally different plans are possible. And there is a lot to be said for that. Moreover, more and more people shared the feeling that we were not dealing with a normal cabinet. The slow-motion coup that is currently taking place across the ocean is influencing the way higher education views the Schoof cabinet. They see that the plans are deeply ideologically motivated. In fact, according to
Orban's or Trump's roadmap. That image became increasingly striking. I think they were right about that. We must abandon our reluctance to warn our members about the dangers of the far right to our constitutional state and democracy.

At the same time, there are risks associated with broadening our actions to other sectors and themes. Broadening our focus gives politicians the opportunity to *cherry pick.* Moreover, not everyone thinks the same way about all themes, fortunately. Broadening our focus may give members the feeling that you are wrongfully using 'their voice' for another theme. This will cause you to lose support unnecessarily. By keeping the focus on the main theme, you offer more people the opportunity to join and you may create more mass than with broadening.

Of course, actions can also coexist perfectly well. We can also reinforce the narrative in that

; it does not have to be at the same time and in the same field. For this to happen, colleagues in those sectors also need to say: we are going to take to the streets. The action taken by media workers at the Mediapark is encouraging in that sense. Ultimately, it is also up to colleagues in other sectors to decide whether they will take action and whether they want to join forces.

In the short term, now that the government has fallen, I think it is important to focus on the cuts in higher education in order to keep the issue alive. The fact that the campaigns against the pay gap after years of campaigning have been successful is, in my view, due to that sharp focus.

What next: employers?

We benefit from our demonstrations receiving broad support. For example, from the Association of Universities. A broad front of employers and employees working together tell politicians that education and science are an investment, not an expense. However, this requires that you also know how to find each other at other times. Here are a few examples of tensions that make genuine cooperation difficult.

Universities are anticipating the budget cuts that we oppose. They are also anticipating legislation that we are critical of, such as the introduction of the Balanced Internationalisation Act, which involves very painful measures being taken through 'self-regulation'. There has been no real discussion with the academic community about this.

The same applies to the funding model *itself*. We are in favour of democratising universities and introducing a different funding model, but we have not yet been able to take any significant steps in this direction with employers in the sector. Yet there is every reason to take major steps together , including financial ones. Instead of taking those steps, it seems as if the differences between the executive boards and employees and students are actually deepening now that universities and colleges are trying to curb protests by means of a demonstration protocol and adjustments to house rules

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This list could easily be extended. I have all the issues related to the collective labour agreement, for example, has not yet been mentioned. In short, there are plenty of opportunities for this collaboration to fail. However, my attitude is to try to bridge these differences in order to ultimately achieve more. This does require genuine discussions to take place on a number of topics. If we can only agree on the need for extra money, but cannot discuss the rest, then the common ground will ultimately prove too thin.

Douwe Dirk van der Zweep is the daily manager of the General Education Union (AOb) and a board member of the De Burcht foundation, which oversees the scientific bureau for the trade union movement.

Stop the Demolition!

A report from the perspective of the FNV

Sander Nelissen

Alongside the AOb, the FNV is the most important trade union in higher education. The union, with members at all higher education institutions, played a central role in the national coalition against the cuts.

The run-up to the national demonstration against the cuts on 14 November 2024 in Utrecht was chaotic. In a relatively short period of time, everyone had to be on the same page.
In addition to the message, the content of the day and the location, there was a lot of work to be done to to encourage colleagues in higher education and research to come to Dom Square. The FNV, together with all other partners, has really pulled out all the stops to make the mobilisation a success.

On the eve of the demonstration, a spanner was thrown in the works. During a meeting between the AOb, the FNV and the mayor of Utrecht, the mayor announced that she had information that some of the demonstrators would not shy away from violence. We were told that if we did not cancel the demonstration, the police would do so. We did indeed cancel the demonstration. Our considerations at the time were that it would send a strange signal if we were to allow the demonstration to go ahead against the advice of the police, and also that we did not want to expose our members to possible violence. The other members of the coalition read about this decision in the media, because the mayor immediately sent out a press release announcing the decision. This was, of course, very poorly received.
the coalition.

In addition to irritation about the way in which the other organisations had heard about
There was also dissatisfaction with the decision itself: why had we allowed ourselves to be stopped? We should have let the police ban it, was a widely shared opinion. The anger about the cuts now seemed to be directed partly at us. And soon stories were circulating that the unions were afraid of pro-Palestinian demonstrators. We did not recognise ourselves in this at all, as the FNV Education and Research team had been working for more than six months to set up a campaign to force the UvA's Executive Board to sever ties with Israeli institutions.

On the morning of 14 November, it turned out that the demonstration could go ahead after all (FNV, 2024). In short, we had been too naive and learned two lessons: we had to submit the decision to cancel the demonstration should have been left to the police, and from now on we would have to discuss everything with the coalition.

25 November: historic demonstration

The failed mobilisation in mid-November meant that we continued to organise our opposition to the cuts with even greater motivation. Soon, 25 November 2024 was set as the new date for a national demonstration. The new day of action two weeks later meant that we

had just a little more time to mobilise, and it expressed a widely held feeling that we would not be silenced. Despite the fact that the NS had the worst day of the year, no fewer than 25,000 people gathered at the Malieveld that day. It was simply fantastic.

Relay strike: for the first time in higher education

In December, the cabinet budget was finally approved with the support of the CDA, CU, SGP and JA21 parties. There was unrest in the sector and signs that the rank and file wanted to strike. That is why FNV Education and Research organised a three-quarters meeting on 13 January. A three-quarters meeting is a meeting of trade union members at which a vote is taken on a proposal to go on strike; if three-quarters of the members present support a strike, it will go ahead. At this meeting, the vote in favour of the strike was unanimous.

Attendance was relatively low, although all universities were represented. Traditionally, three-quarters meetings are only held in person in order to get a good idea of the support needed for a strike. Thanks to the strike at the University of Amsterdam in December to sever ties with Israeli institutions, we had learned that people at universities are only able to attend physical action meetings to a limited extent due to the high workload and the fact that they are working from home a lot. We were therefore pleased that the meeting was held in person.
ties with Israeli institutions, we had learned that people at universities are only able to attend physical action meetings to a limited extent due to the amount of work they do from home and the very high workload. We were therefore pleased with the unanimous support for the strike.
despite the low turnout. We also realised that in a sector such as this, we either have to accept a lower turnout than we would like in order to get a good sense of the mood, or we have to switch to hybrid three-quarters meetings.

It was an exciting time. As the largest union, we took a stand in favour of a strike.
During the coalition discussions, all partners also voted in favour of a strike. At some universities, such as the University of Amsterdam, Leiden University and Radboud University, there was already an active network of trade union members and staff willing to take action. At some other universities, there was a simmering
even less. This is not surprising, given that strikes are not common in academia. We therefore opted for a relay strike rather than a nationwide strike. This allowed us to devote more attention and time to mobilising each university individually, and successful strikes by the frontrunners could inspire the others.

During this campaign, employers and employees had the same goal, namely
get the cuts off the table. The umbrella organisation for universities, the UNL, supported the actions. But not all Executive Boards cooperated immediately. Some Executive Boards only announced their support to their staff at the last minute. Or they told their staff that they could only strike if they had nothing important to do.

That is not entirely how strikes work. At the same time, strikes are complicated in this sector. On the one hand, because lecturers feel a great sense of responsibility towards their students, but also because it is difficult for researchers, for example, to actually go on strike, as they cannot hand over their work and a strike mainly means that the work remains undone. We also noticed that strikes were mainly associated with sectors such as industry and public transport, and were not seen as a means of action that could be used in higher education and research to bring about change. During this period, we therefore talked extensively with the Executive Boards and our supporters about what the right to strike means and why it is important.

The relay strike was a phenomenal success. In total, more than 32,000 people took part.

10 June – cancelled strike

Thanks to the successful demonstration on 25 November and the successful relay strike in March, we managed to get certain cuts and plans reversed, including the penalty for students who take too long to graduate, the forty million cut in starter grants and the hundred million euro cut in the science fund. But the lion's share of the cuts still remained. That is why the coalition decided to organise a national strike day on 10 June with a demonstration in The Hague.

On 30 May, trade union members announced an NS strike on the same day for the Hague region. This was despite the fact that we had held consultations with FNV Spoor at a very early stage about our strike. We moved to Dam Square in Amsterdam and quickly organised buses for the demonstrators from the South Holland region. On 3 June, the cabinet fell. This suddenly gave us more scope to influence the Spring Memorandum with our strike. But on
On 8 June, the VVMC and FNV Spoor trade unions announced that there would be a strike throughout the Randstad. This was a huge setback, resulting from the fact that the FNV is not the only union representing railway workers and because the administrative situation at the FNV was unclear.

We wanted to continue our strike despite the rail strike, but with a smaller group. The AOb and several other partners preferred to postpone the strike until the autumn.
That is why we decided as a coalition to cancel the demonstration on Dam Square. We wrote: "Striking hurts, that's part of it. This time for us. We naturally fully support the right to strike and want to express our solidarity with the train strikers." Locally,
there were still some great initiatives. The coalition and its supporters were more understanding of the setbacks than they were when the event was cancelled in November. It is clear that there is now more mutual trust.

Coalition cooperation

Cooperation between unions and action groups is important to us and to higher education. Of course, it can be challenging at times. The FNV is a large organisation with a more or less institutionalised character. The action groups consist of networks with a more spontaneous and flexible character. As a trade union, we have a hierarchical structure, arising from our formal powers and legal status, which we want to handle with care.
This requires internal coordination and also means that, due to our democratic nature, we sometimes have to compromise. This makes us slower and sometimes milder than action groups.
The FNV is also an official discussion partner in various forums where it can make legally binding agreements. The action groups, on the other hand, operate more horizontally and are more flexible, making it easier for them to take a more 'extreme' position.

At the beginning of the action period, as the largest trade union and therefore the driving force behind the logistical operation, we had to get used to coordinating with so many parties. We noticed that
some action groups also had to get used to the position and status of a trade union. They were not always aware of the responsibilities and the way in which we determine our positions.
This led to a number of surprises, such as on stage during the strike in Leiden, where a WoinActie member announced a national strike day. Neither we nor others in the coalition were aware of this. This dynamic occurred several times with the
largest action group, WOinActie, an effective network without formal leadership. This caused

surprise, but not problems. We can conclude that we have a lot to offer each other if we respect each other's roles.

Collaboration with AOb

As a sister organisation, the AOb is also a member of the FNV. Since the failed merger between FNV Onderwijs & Onderzoek and the AOb, which resulted in the VAWO being absorbed into the AOb, the AOb also has members within academic education. Since then, the AOb has also been active within universities, both in terms of visibility and at the negotiating table. In practical terms, this means, among other things, that we
Two AOb colleagues are now members of the Local Consultation Committee, a consultative body at the university between the trade unions and the employer, who are also committed to a better future for the academic world. In addition to these forms of constructive cooperation, there is also mutual competition. Like the FNV, the AOb is trying to grow in order to exert more influence in favour of employees.

In a sector where we collectively have a degree of organisation of around fifteen per cent, there is still much to be gained. A little competition can therefore do no harm and ensures that we both step up our efforts. We can safely say that we are pleased with the collaboration and proud of how we, as trade unions from the same family, have supported this campaign.

Mobilisation

The unanimous support of our members for a strike at the three-quarters meeting in January was very important, but getting the rest of the membership to believe in it requires a lot of talking and convince. The partnership, each member representing a network of passionate, activist-minded colleagues, played a crucial role in mobilising support for
the relay strike. In addition, the students were very important to the success of
the mobilisation. They ignited the activist flame in 2024 with the pro-Palestine protests, and their fire proved contagious for the older generations. Another factor was that, thanks to the students' support, many staff members who feel responsible for education felt freer to stand up for their own interests. It was great to see that students remained just as active even after the withdrawal of the long-term study penalty.

WOinActie also played a major role in the mobilisation. This network, founded in 2017 to reduce budget cuts and lower workloads, among other things, can count on enormous sympathy and support, which we noticed once again. The red square adopted by WoinActie from
the 2014 student movement, once again played an important role as a symbol of solidarity and resistance (FNV universities, 2024).

As FNV, we have a relatively large membership base. Our network is both informal and formal. For example, we have executives who sit on works councils, university councils or local consultation bodies. Within these bodies, the discussion partners are often colleagues in management positions, which meant, for example, that a trade union member active in the Local Consultation Committee was able to urge the Executive Board to publicly support the strike. These kinds of formal positions also made it easier to use university communication channels such as
the intranet, screens within the institutions, notice boards and coffee machines as a mobilisation channel for the actions.

The FNV also has trade union officials and employee representative groups at almost all universities. The trade union officials often have consultation hours, a newsletter and a network that they could use as a mobilisation channel. The company member groups also formed an important hub in the networks and contributed to the mobilisation.

At each university, the action committees were formed by the most motivated people: FNV members, Woinactie members, AOb members, students or others. The success of such an action committee depends on a group of highly motivated people who, with their passion and enthusiasm, know how to inspire others.
to get involved. We noticed that many active colleagues who were not members of a trade union gradually realised that the trade union has the structure and resources to put its words into action. For example, because we have a strike fund and offer legal assistance. Further awareness of the central role of the trade union in improving working conditions and terms of employment resulted in us signing up many new members.

We also noticed that people's idea of what a trade union is has changed. Trade unions have their roots in the era of industrialisation, when workers often performed heavy physical labour. But times have changed, and workers who now benefit from a collective voice can be found in all kinds of jobs and sectors. The old image of the workers' trade union does not quite fit in with this. As a trade union, we therefore face the challenge of further changing this image. so that people see that it is also useful for them to become members and realise that the collective is ultimately in their own interests too. Historically, universities have often been at the forefront of cultural change. The fact that we have grown so much within higher education is hopefully a sign that the trade union movement is also growing again in other sectors.

Sander Nelissen is sector advisor for FNV Education and Research.

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The HO action plan:

A catalyst for a more activist trade union movement?

Arnoud Lagendijk

“Unionisation, at its core, is about developing relations of trust between co-workers through countless conversations to help people see how their problems at work can only be resolved through collective action” (Blanc, 2025: 78).

In 2017 and 2018, the teachers' action group POinActie initiated strikes against work pressure and salary differences in primary education, a struggle that was subsequently taken up by the General Education Union (AOb). An important effect of this was that the trade union became more activist (Eshuis, 2020; Verhagen, 2020), with more scope for initiatives from the shop floor, including a move towards 'worker-to-worker organising' (Blanc, 2025). Inspired by POinActie, WOinActie began its fight against work pressure, underfunding and an increasing corporate culture at universities in 2018. Like POinActie, WOinActie wanted to make a stronger voice (Bod et al., 2020) than the trade unions, which mainly limited themselves to collective bargaining and implementation. In 2024-2025, WOinActie played a major mobilising role in organising demonstrations (three national, two local) and one-day strikes (13 local, one national). The central question here is: to what extent did this course of action encourage the trade unions to engage in more activism and 'organising'?

The debate about a more activist trade union movement is already more than fifty years old, fuelled by the typical Dutch 'polder culture'. In that polder, as Eshuis (2020) explains, Dutch trade unions focused primarily on the macro level (national politics) and meso level (collective bargaining agreements). In particular, the post-war 'historic compromise' gave trade unions a strong voice in national politics and collective bargaining agreements, in exchange for accepting the capitalist economic order and peace in the workplace. Trade union work thus became primarily something for the workplace and hardly ever *with* or *from* the workplace. For employees, trade unions thus became primarily a part of the (polder) consultation process, representing the interests of employees on their own initiative. The influence of employees was therefore mainly limited to voting for directors and motions, supplemented here and there by a limited role for local 'company networks' (Schilstra and Smit, 2005). This led to a 'democratic deficit' (Eshuis, 2020), with only democratic decision-making on broad outlines.

Various social trends have widened the gap between trade unions and employees: individualisation, growth in SMEs and self-employed workers, more (business) services and increasing levels of education. In response, trade unions have further 'modernised' themselves towards professional lobbying and service-providing ('ANWB') organisations, whereby members 'purchase' legal assistance and representation of interests (Verhagen, 2020). As in the United States and the United Kingdom, trade unions have started to focus strongly on 'visibility' and promoting central *frames* (Blanc, 2025). Trade union work thus largely shifted

from voluntary to paid staff. This led to a sharp increase in costs, precisely at a time when membership numbers were declining (Eshuis, 2020).

This democratic deficit, declining membership and financial shortages led to renewed interest in more grassroots organisation at the beginning of the 21st century. Trade unions immersed themselves in *'organising',* a method that had spread from the US to mobilise and unite (potential) members from the bottom up (Williams, 2015). Blanc (2025) describes how *organising is being used* in several industries in the The US has seen a turnaround, with grassroots initiatives, high commitment and perseverance from volunteers, local organisational capacity and two-way communication, resulting in more members and lower costs. Instead of formal visions, strategies and structures, organising builds on a sense of community, shared concerns and ambitions, solidarity, trust and small-scale, deliberative democracy.

What are the success factors for *organising*? That depends on the context. Grassroots *organising*, such as POinActie or WOinActie, thrives on the dedication and abilities of individual members and 'spontaneous' social cohesion and direction. From a trade union perspective, Blanc (2025) emphasises four points of attention:

1. Investment: Although *organising* can yield significant returns in the long term, it first requires substantial investment and new ways of working. Moreover, success is not guaranteed. According to Blanc (2025, 20), these obstacles led trade unions to *'do so little to proactively reach out'. and support the countless people who would initiate organising campaigns if given the proper encouragement and tools.* Trade unions find it difficult to make the shift from 'macro/meso' to 'micro' activism and to shift initiative and energy from trade union staff at head offices to the 'front line' (Tamminga, 2020).
2. Embracing local power: *Organising* motivates and mobilises action-oriented, experienced, articulate colleagues to take local collective action. Blanc is pleased to note that younger generations are more willing to do this. One problem is that centralised trade unions mainly see (potential) members as consumers of services and as an extension of their own campaigns ('foot soldiers'), which quickly turns *organising* into *'lifeless formulas' (*Blanc, 2025: 179) in the form of courses and fill-in-the-blank exercises: *'Staff-intensive (hollow) organising can win the battles, but not the wars' (p.62).*
3. Digital capabilities: The roll-out of *organisen* requires effective use of interactive digital tools for opinion forming, mobilisation and knowledge exchange. This constitutes the new gold for embracing and connecting local forces. This also allows us to benefit from the rise of a more radical, more collectively oriented youth. However, working from a position of digital strength is still a step too far for many trade unions. Blanc (2016: 223) sees *"unions reluctant to leverage digital tools*". Communication often focuses on *'posting'* and 'clicktivism' (systematically counting and interpreting 'clicks' and *'likes').*
4. Multi-track inclusive decision-making: *Organising* requires different forms of communication and decision-making, with more say for 'ordinary' members, in all their diversity, and more open political debate. Instead, Blanc (2025: 232) too often sees *'unions hunkered down into their narrow and depoliticised niches*'. Organising gives local groups more room for manoeuvre, initiative and control. Organising makes employees feel heard, motivated, supported and in control, and creates space for local democratic

practices (Williams, 2016). How this fits within the classic association democracy is part of the search between setting goals and frameworks from above and uniting from below.

From this perspective, we now look at the movements from below and above in the Higher Education Action Year 2024-2025.

2024-2025: organising and actions in higher education

Three organisations have played a central role in the grassroots movement, namely WOinActie (nationally and the organisers per institution), the National Student Union (as a federation of local activist student unions) and OrganizetheRUG (OtR) in Groningen (see contribution by Young and Krook in this collection). Since its inception, WOinActie has been part of a protest coalition with trade unions and other organisations. On 2 September 2019, this protest coalition organised an alternative (or 'true') opening of the academic year in Leiden, in protest against the education cuts at the time. That protest led in part to additional investments in higher education, later laid down in the 'Administrative Agreement on Higher Education and Science' (MOCW, 2022). Later 'openings' were the inter-university bicycle tours against temporary contracts (2020), 'the reckoning' in Utrecht (2021) and 'everyone professor in Amsterdam (2023). In 2024, the protest against the Balanced Investment Act (WIB) took centre stage, but this shifted to the cuts announced by the Schoof cabinet from May onwards. In 2024, WOinActie rapidly developed an extensive mobilisation, coordination and action network, which proved capable of quickly organising local actions. For the LSVb, the higher education actions were an excellent opportunity to roll out *organising*, a priority of the new student union board. The result was a mobilisation and action network that reached into the very fabric of the universities. More than WOinActie, the LSVb made use of of organising techniques, particularly by building networks of leaders in faculties. Finally, at the University of Groningen, OtR has managed to build up a strong organising network over a period of ten years, with advanced practices of consultation, decision-making, representation and communication.

On each campus, these movements joined forces with the trade unions to form local coalitions. These local coalitions mobilised staff and students through numerous chat groups (university-wide, departments, activities, discussions, etc.), meetings, campaign materials (posters, flyers, banners), strike preparations and the planning of the strike day (*picketing,* workshops, lectures, stages, marches). Other groups that also contributed to the mobilisation were 0.7 (against temporary part-time teaching jobs), HBOinActie (due to the HBO joining the actions) and the pro-Palestine groups. The reach of these coalitions was quickly broad and intense, with hundreds of active staff and students and an even larger number of followers of the chats and participants in the actions.

What are the *trade* unions doing *to counter this*? Starting with Blanc's first point (*'investing'*) (1), it is on the agenda. The FNV has been using *organising* for years in several sectors to activate members (healthcare, cleaning, postal services, etc.). The AOb has initiated a movement towards 'powerful unification' as part of a movement towards an inclusive, activating professional association by and for members (AOb, 2024). However, these initiatives are still limited, and

have not brought about any significant change. In line with Eshuis' observations, such initiatives seem to remain "isolated pockets in a predominantly traditional, representative and consensual trade union landscape" (2020: 90). The trade unions recognise that it is important to embrace *local organisational power (*2), but this remains a quest. During the year of action, trade union staff, hopping from campus to campus, mainly helped with
promotional material, organising the strike and setting up the demonstrations. It remains difficult to truly respond to the ambitions, initiatives and energy of local groups.
Furthermore, in line with Blanc's observations in the US, little use is made of *digital interaction. (3)*. Communication focuses on sending (newsletters, campaign updates), posting (promotional photos) and physical 'visibility'. The fourth point, giving more voice to local groups outside the traditional association democracy (4), has not yet gained much traction. In the Dutch polder context, the search continues for the best way to organise (Kösters and Eshuis, 2020).

Conclusion

The HO action plan for 2024-2025 took shape and gained strength through grassroots organisation and mobilisation (WOinActie), with various initiatives (LSVb, 0.7) and reinforcements of *organising (*OtR). The trade unions find it difficult to relate to this. Setting up a mobilisation and action plan together went well, but initiating further movement towards *organising* remains a major challenge.
To activists, trade unions mainly come across as distant organisations, working according to their own goals, frameworks and channels. It is difficult for trade union working organisations to connect with very diverse and often spontaneous forms of self-organisation and the virtuous, interactive use of digital resources. For activist employees, trade unions are primarily the logistical and financial force behind the actions, while there is less connection with the association's democracy, goals, working methods and narratives. These separate worlds are good
This can be understood in the context of the history of centralisation, distancing from the workplace, limited digitisation and resource constraints. Nevertheless, now is the time to embrace the strengths and capabilities of the grassroots. The question is how these strengths can be better connected to the formal and practical world of trade unions, and how trade unions can give more voice and weight to the ambitions and organisational capacity of the grassroots.

Arnoud Lagendijk is professor of economic geography at Radboud University and chief executive of the AOb.

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HBOinActie:

The rise of resistance to budget cuts in higher professional education

Annemieke de Jong

Higher professional education in the Netherlands does not have a tradition of activism. However, with the proposed cuts to higher education, there was a need to take action and make their voices heard. HBOinActie was founded in November 2024.

In 2024, many employees at universities of applied sciences in the Netherlands were busy with an education reform: all curricula had to be made more flexible. The Learning Outcomes Act came into force on 1 January 2025, requiring all programmes to offer flexible education based on learning outcomes in order to provide more personalised learning pathways.
Many universities of applied sciences seem to be using this educational reform as an opportunity to implement their own budget cuts. The number of students at universities of applied sciences has been declining for several years, and forecasts indicate a further downward trend. As a result, many university staff members focused primarily on their own institutions rather than on the political situation in The Hague, where substantial budget cuts in higher education had also been announced.

Nevertheless, in November 2024, many higher professional education students were ready to demonstrate in Utrecht against the cuts to higher education. They had often been informed about the cuts and the actions against them through the trade unions of which they were members. The Association of Universities of Applied Sciences also campaigned against the proposed cuts. It focused primarily on the penalty for studying too long: a fine for every student who takes longer than intended to complete their studies.

When the planned demonstration in Utrecht was cancelled, the need to take action did not disappear. At the local level, initiatives were launched to join the actions of WOinActie. To this end, contacts were established between a number of campaigning higher professional education students and
the local branches of WOinActie. At very short notice, in just one evening and morning, staff members, mainly from HAN University of Applied Sciences in Arnhem and Nijmegen, tried to inform as many staff and students as possible about the alternative local actions against the cuts: a *walk-out* followed by speeches in a square at Radboud University. Despite the short preparation time, many staff and students from universities of applied sciences in various parts of the country were involved in these alternative actions.

Start and growth of HBOinActie

Inspired by their big brother WOinActie, employees of universities of applied sciences also wanted to unite. Many more employees and students of universities of applied sciences were outraged by the cuts, but knew nothing about the actions being taken to express their dissatisfaction.
The media focused primarily on the consequences of the cuts for education and scientific research at universities. The consequences for higher professional education and the research conducted there were hardly mentioned, if at all. The voice of
The higher professional education sector was barely audible. It was clear that the higher professional education community needed to organise itself in order to make its voice heard and to make it known that higher professional education would also be dismantled.

by the announced cuts. A name was needed to emphasise that colleges and universities stand strong together against this dismantling of higher education, and the name HBOinActie was chosen. To make the voice of higher professional education heard, HBOinActie was included in the national action coalition against the dismantling of higher education.

Building HBOinActie as a community

Now that we had a network and a name, we also needed communication channels to enable us to communicate quickly with each other. Following the example of WOinActie, national and local communities were established, initially mainly via WhatsApp, and later also via Signal. The national channels were used to communicate about the national demonstration on the Malieveld in The Hague, which took place on 25 November 2024. It was a success: of the 25,000 participants in the demonstration, a significant proportion came from universities of applied sciences.

Meanwhile, the budget cuts remained on the table. Various local initiatives were launched, such as singing and recording the protest song *Eppo ciao*! at various universities of applied sciences. In various university cities, contact was established between the local branches of HBOinActie and WOinActie. In cities without a university, connections were sought with the nearest university. Different actions were carried out in each city, with staff and students from universities of applied sciences and research universities making their voices heard against the dismantling of higher education, such as whistle concerts, protest marches and protest bike rides.

During the relay strikes in March and April 2025, activists from colleges and universities marched together in protest and made their voices heard loud and clear. The need to take action against the cuts was now also clearly felt at colleges.

In the spring of 2025, many universities of applied sciences had their own HBOinActie branch. The local branches were connected to each other via a national network. It was possible to quickly communicate. However, a certain degree of action fatigue can be observed: there was little willingness to take action before the cancelled strike of 10 June 2025. The high workload, the fall of the cabinet, the previous actions (and the lack of desired results) were cited as reasons for not going on strike. Communication channels are also being used less intensively than before.

Future of HBOinActie

The cuts have not yet been taken off the table, which means that the need for action remains. HBOinActie will remain in contact with WOinActie and the other campaigning parties in order to coordinate national and local actions. Should any HBO-specific issues arise in the future that require national contact, there is a well-functioning communication structure in place.

Given that there is no tradition of activism at universities of applied sciences, unlike at universities, apart from in very recent history, it remains necessary for the national and local branches of HBOinActie to communicate effectively about upcoming actions. Only a handful of people per branch organise the actions. This poses a risk to the network's survival. Cooperation and coordination with other parties, and WOinActie in particular, therefore remains of great importance.

Annemieke de Jong is a lecturer at Arnhem Nijmegen University of Applied Sciences, a PhD candidate at the University of Amsterdam, and co-initiator of HBOinActie.

OrganizetheRUG:

Back to the basics of trade union work

Eden Young and Laurent Krook

OrganizetheRUG is an initiative by employees of the University of Groningen to organise and democratise our workplace. In this contribution, we look back on the origins and growth of OrganizetheRUG over the years, its guiding principles and our perspective on the movement against austerity policies.

OrganizetheRUG (OtR) originated during the COVID pandemic when a small group of RUG colleagues were surprised by the lack of an active and visible local trade union during the crisis, an irresponsibly high workload and the lack of (co-)determination at the university. The goal was simple: to organise the University of Groningen, get every employee to join a trade union and be ready to strike when the time came. To achieve this, a clear cultural shift had to take place – among both employees and trade union members – whereby employees would have more say in the workplace. But the pandemic had widened the gap between employees, and it was completely unclear who was committed to improving the workplace. The goal then became simply to meet with union members.

OtR tried to connect colleagues by means of a registration form for a weekly newsletter. When the measures allowed it again, we organised accessible meetings followed by drinks, where solidarity was emphasised. We argued that the problems at our work should not be individualised and internalised, but that we should unite to gain more power in the workplace. Over the years, OtR has built itself up around various themes.

Themes in the workplace

A central theme in OtR's activities was its involvement in collective bargaining negotiations in higher education. With the help of CasualAcademy and action group 0.7, CasualGroningen started as a working group of OtR[7]. CasualGroningen initially focused on casualisation and high workloads in higher education — the structural use of temporary contracts for structural work. Based on interviews and an extensive analysis, CasualAcademy wrote the report: *'Casualisation in Dutch academia: Testimonials from the margins' (*Casual Academy, 2022). This report led to a concrete agreement in the collective labour agreement that researchers from the Social Fund for Knowledge Institutions (SoFoKles) would "investigate precariousness within universities" to determine whether and how universities use revolving door constructions and abuse novice lecturers. The details of the report were harrowing and

The employers' organisation UNL did not want to share the full report, which means that only a summary is available (Sofokles, 2023). Nevertheless, this report led directly to victories: a concrete agreement on the percentage of temporary employees and the introduction of a teaching policy at the Faculty of Arts.

7 For more information, see: https://casualacademy.nl/ and https://zeropointseven.nl/

Simultaneously with the struggle for better working conditions, OtR committed itself to a fair, inclusive and democratic university with a focus on addressing and improving social safety. This gained momentum when Dr Susanne Täuber – university council member, advocate for social safety at universities and co-author of the report *Harassment at the University of Groningen (*Young Academy Groningen, 2021) – was threatened with dismissal by the University of Groningen due to 'a disrupted working relationship'. Colleagues who were not yet involved in OtR came together in an OtR meeting and set up a working group.
to campaign against her dismissal. Together with students and local action groups, the AmINext campaign was set up, which used escalating actions to put pressure on the
Executive Board to reinstate Täubers position and at the same time drew attention to social safety. The first goal was not achieved, but the actions did contribute to raising awareness of this issue.

During the Palestine *encampment* in 2023, a large group of staff members became active in a group that supported the protesting students. OtR did not initially play an active role in this, due to tensions within the group surrounding the issue. Over time, more unity emerged. After the *encampment* was dismantled, many lecturers who had been activated by
the Palestine movement to continue organising within OtR.

For the past two years, OtR has been organising a *roadshow*, proactively inviting itself to departments and divisions. The *roadshow* consists of a comprehensive script with guidelines for discussions about the role of employee participation, the role and structure of trade unions, and – above all – *organising principles*. The idea is that faculties organise the meeting themselves and OtR only provides speakers. This allowed the colleagues involved at the faculty to immediately build their own network and put the basic principles into practice. What started as a small group of colleagues at two faculties grew into a visible and recognisable
movement within the University of Groningen, with a lasting influence on the way in which trade union work and solidarity are organised at the university.

OtR and the unions

OrganizetheRUG has continued to grow with the binding principle of building collective worker power through self-organisation. The same principle underpins the power of a trade union. OtR is not a project of the FNV or the AOb, but an employee initiative without a clear trade union signature. Our primary goal is to organise our workplace, for which we use the existing institutions. In this way, we are half inside and half outside the union.
We use union membership as *a tool* to activate people, but it doesn't stop there. The real work lies in building networks between employees that enable collective decision-making and a willingness to take action. The unions form a platform that connects employees from all universities and brings collective power together. We see that major steps are needed in the democratisation of the unions. We, the employees, should have a decision-making role. This will lay the foundation for solidarity instead of individualism.

Organising for Power

A large part of OtR has taken Jane McAlevey's *Organising for* Power course. This has provided us with many practical and theoretical tools to organise our colleagues . The power of employees lies in their numbers. That is why our goal is to organise the entire University of Groningen. The course teaches us that the participation rate in collective action requires a large majority *(supermajority)*. In practice, this is still far from being the case, but it is the goal. Large-scale collective action is only possible when employees organise other employees: this means engaging in conversation with colleagues who do not (yet) agree with us, who are not union members, or who do not know that a union exists. These discussions should preferably take place in person. That is why it is important that The organisation starts in the workplace itself. These discussions are always accompanied by a specific request (the *ask*) to involve people in the OtR organisational structure. Examples include signing a petition, talking to colleagues, or – in the case of the recent strike – putting up a poster on the office door and organising a strike meeting in their own department.

Structure of OtR

OtR's structure makes it easy for everyone to get involved. Every week, OtR has an *organising* meeting where we chat about current topics, share experiences, and plan our organising. For colleagues who regularly attend these meetings, there's a Signal group for quick chats and a Loomio forum for asynchronous discussions and decisions that need to be voted on. We also send out a newsletter almost every week to keep colleagues informed of (local) political developments and opportunities to get involved. The regular tasks – chairing, taking minutes, writing the newsletter, and auditing the online forums – are rotated each week. This way, a large number of people share responsibilities and experience does not remain concentrated in a small core group. This structure is laid down in our collective *organising* agreement.

OtR therefore also acts as a platform for launching new campaigns. Working groups are used to set up action groups based on available expertise (and time!). To achieve this, OtR itself must also function democratically. OtR explicitly does not operate as a chat group in which a few active members make *top-down* decisions for a group of passive followers. The weekly meeting attracts a broad group of university staff and can now be seen as the place *where organisers* meet. This collaborative and structured approach to organising is the starting point for OtR and makes OtR a sustainable initiative and prevents organisational memory loss.

First strike in higher education on 18 March 2025

These organisational structures enabled us to achieve a great deal in a relatively short period of time in terms of organising the Groningen strike. Few of our colleagues had ever been on strike before, and yet six faculties organised their own morning programme to encourage colleagues to be involved in the action. This was coordinated centrally in OtR meetings, where a core group was formed for communication with the coalition partners (FNV, AOb, WOinActie, Groninger Studentenbond, Hanze University of Applied Sciences, OtR) and for the organisation of the collective part

of the afternoon programme. The faculty committees arose organically after the *assembly* where the strike date was chosen. Our existing WhatsApp community (450 members) formed an organic and useful channel for continuing that communication.

In preparation for the strike, we went door-to-door with specific questions, such as 'What do you think of the cuts?' and 'What do you think of the plan to strike?'. We chose faculties where OtR still has little reach. There, we first established targeted contacts in
approached their own networks and then, in pairs (with more experienced *organisers*), began talking to and mobilising colleagues. The advantage was that a 'familiar face' was involved and could immediately identify which people were willing to take action and which were more difficult to convince. Moreover, *face-to-face* conversations form the basis of trade union work: building relationships between colleagues.

Broadening the struggle

OtR has made attempts to broaden the strike action. The core group included an employee of Hanze University of Applied Sciences, as well as members of the student union. We also contacted local pharmacists to ask if they would be willing to talk about their struggles during the action.
Unfortunately, this was not possible because they had to work and did not feel sufficiently informed about the strike process to talk about it. After a march and speeches, the core group organised a market where political parties, Palestine activists, trade unions and a left-wing bookshop had stands, alongside a *teach-in* programme.
The idea behind this was that the central part of the action should also be supported by as many organising staff as possible. This was reasonably successful, although many people left after the speeches, probably to go to work after all.

Looking back, we see the action as a successful structural test, in which we were able to quickly and effectively mobilise colleagues in at least six faculties. It also became clear that there is still a long way to go in terms of raising awareness about what striking entails and broadening the scope of the action.

Outlook and strategic pillars

One of OtR's goals remains to promote strike readiness among the workforce.
But to get there, clear strategic points must be set on the horizon.
Due to years of individualisation in the workplace and the absurdly low level of unionisation
(five per cent of employees were union members before 2020), there was a lot of catching up to do. This is particularly evident in the lack of a shared vocabulary when it comes to trade unions and organising. That is why one of OtR's pillars is to democratise trade unions from the bottom up and make them more visible, with the mantra 'the union is us'.

In addition, one of OtR's strategic pillars is to gain participation in the University of Groningen's representative structure through faculty, service and university council elections.
OtR is now well represented in the various representative bodies (F-Council, U-Council, Local Consultation). However, creating a culture of solidarity requires patience, time and a clear vision. After all, there is a culture of conflict avoidance, colleagues are loyal to their institute, do not feel safe enough to become active or are sceptical about the effectiveness of organised action. Building bridges between activism and broader participation is therefore part of a broader perspective to break these patterns.

Thirdly, a bottleneck for OtR is that we are currently still seen as academics for academics, with little regard for colleagues in other roles. Although this is a perception – there is a significant group within OtR that does not have an academic position – it is important to take this sentiment seriously. The language used in communication, the use of jargon and the sometimes theoretical perspectives can have an alienating effect. Building a sustainable movement requires constant presence and critical reflection on one's own actions. One of the most important lessons of recent years is that organising is a process, not a project.

For OtR, the fight against budget cuts cannot be separated from the fight for the democratisation of universities. The financial devastation that has been carried out for years under the guise of efficiency has not only led to work pressure, exhaustion and uncertainty, but also to a *top-down* management culture in which employees have little say and to the repression of protest and activism against the genocide of the Palestinians. By demanding structural participation, transparency in decision-making and protection of labour rights, we are linking the economic struggle with the democratic one. The university is not a business, but a public institution and should be managed as such. The struggle at the University of Groningen is part of a larger whole. *Austerity policies* are not only felt in the education, but across the entire public sector. Support staff, students, cleaners, postmen, care workers, pharmacy assistants, municipal employees and teachers in primary and secondary education: all feel the consequences of decades of neoliberal policy. That is why a final pillar for OtR is to seek a more explicit connection with broader social movements, trade unions and action groups. Not to merge into an amorphous mass, but to build an alternative vision in mutual solidarity.

Eden Young is a PhD candidate in Philosophy and American Studies at the University of Groningen and a member of the FNV trade union. Laurent Krook is a lecturer in psychology and educational developer, chair of the Faculty Council of the Faculty of Behavioural and Social Sciences at the University of Groningen and a member of the AOb trade union.

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0.7:
Democratise the university!

Tim de Winkel and Lotje Siffels

On the eve of disastrous cuts to our universities by a radical right-wing government, the Executive Boards (CvBs) are collaborating in their own demise. 0.7 argues that this is a logical consequence of the current structure of Dutch academia. An academy that refuses to offer its lecturers sustainable working conditions
and would rather see victims of (sexual) harassment leave quietly, will also send police dogs after its own students when they protest against genocide. And it would rather sacrifice entire programmes than truly oppose the extreme right. If we want to save Dutch universities, they will have to change. Moreover, only a radically democratised Dutch academy is worth saving.

Like many other academic action groups, we emerged in 2020. The combination of temporary contracts for lecturers, sky-high workloads and social insecurity made working in academia a drain on your financial and social resources. Such job insecurity meant that we could not have homes, children or partners outside academia, nor could we pursue promising career paths within it. Moreover, precariousness was an ugly filter for who could stay and who could leave through the back door – always through the back door. Anyone who could not draw indefinitely on their own resources was deemed incompetent in the meritocracy of
the university.

Who left? Parents – or rather, those without partners who bore the brunt of the burden, disproportionately women – people without money, neuro or physically atypical people, non-white and non-Dutch scientists, or people who simply did not feel like putting up with all this: critical people, in other words. Above all, it was our friends and colleagues, our *peers,* who became burned out, intimidated, discriminated against, assaulted, or simply treated so outrageously that they left. That was the situation, and it still is.

0.7 started as a group of PhDs and temporary lecturers who wanted to know what would happen to their appointments if the pandemic continued. Sure, we are now investing overtime to convert education to online, but what do we get in return? Just like now,
On the eve of the destruction of the HO&O, the crisis was both the straw that broke the camel's back and a 'thing with feathers'. Now, then! Now what? Business as usual was difficult to imagine from a two-by-three-metre room, with reports from Bergamo on your screen.

Predictably enough, the language of healthcare and bureaucracy narrowed our reasonable request down to an individual problem. 'How can we help you?' was the answer. Business as usual, then. So we organised ourselves into a national network with a clear message: permanent contracts for structural work, no more unpaid overtime and an end to misconduct and intimidation. We took action, wrote articles, sat at all the
, shamed the universities for their malpractice, and stood by people.

if they were exploited or intimidated. In addition, we approached all trade unions, all councils, all networks and initiatives that had the potential to do good. Our name, 0.7, is a reference to the habit of university HR departments to award 70 per cent contracts to those silly lecturers because they were always overworked on a full-time basis. It is one of many examples of how abuses in academia are formalised rather than addressed. The fact that every academic immediately understood what the name referred to tells the sad story of how the current hierarchies make us all complicit in the exploitation of our colleagues. The managers outsource the teaching that we cannot or do not want to do to temporary lecturers, in exchange for our silence.

As soon as we started speaking from a representative role, the tone of the managers hardened. We quickly learned what the coffee invitations, the invitations to the office,
and chance encounters at the printer meant. 'We can't help you this way; you're jeopardising your career.' A threat, and not an empty one. After we sought out the media to argue for better labour rights, we faced intense intimidation from several prominent professors in leadership positions at various universities. They are still there and have since been involved in a few more scandals.

Shortly afterwards, there was a very serious and now infamous social safety case –
That is a euphemism for (often sexual) violence – which was rapidly swept under the carpet. When we, as 0.7, tried to stand up for the victims, we saw exactly the same reflex. First, the representative work was personalised, then there was bureaucratic resistance, followed by intimidation. The realisation was this: the structures within the university are there for the institution and its stars, not for us, not for the students, not for academic principles. Thus, the neoliberal university. It was disheartening and frightening enough to make us want to quit. However, we decided to grit our teeth and seek confrontation.
'If the whole academy is a farce,' we thought, 'then we don't have to work there, and we don't have to be afraid of anything.' 'After all, managers and professors are not particularly impressive people. They are vain, touchy and weak. They only have power within the specific structures of their friends and cronies.'

In all honesty, it was pure anger. You owe our presence to professors who complained online about victims of sexual violence because they were ruining the anniversary celebrations. It was enough for us to embrace the role of the unreasonable, rude, unacademic (what a compliment!), unconstructive, uncollegial and radical. After all,
We helped lecturers who were crying on the phone, we addressed department heads in meetings where colleagues dared only to look at their shoes, we tried to provide care
to students who were being (sexually) harassed – or worse – by their supervisors. What did we care about their opinion? Every insult from a prominent academic was a badge of honour. Every instance of harassment was a sign that they, of all people, were becoming afraid.

An analysis of vulnerability

And yet. And yet, for over a year now, we have been contributing to the resistance against the cuts. To this end, we have temporarily suspended our anger towards managers and administrators. A joint struggle had to be waged against the cuts.
The threat is too great and the goal too important to jeopardise the coalition.

After all, our anger has always been a declaration of love for everything that academia can be. We want to help protect, cultivate and build it. The history, the books, the old and new buildings, and all the amazing PhDs you meet at conferences are worth it. Today's neoliberal institutions only reward individual career opportunities, but the university as we propose it is a community of scientists and educators who collectively contribute to knowledge. The people who occupy university buildings to stop climate change and genocide show us all that such a university is possible. They believe in a democratic university and a university that can democratise. During the teach-outs and outdoor lectures at the demonstrations and *encampments*, lecturers and students experience what it is like to learn and teach without bureaucratic burdens. We love all of that. And all of that is at stake.

The cuts to higher education and research proposed by Wilders 1 are part of the well-known fascist playbook. Financially undermining free science brings the institution under control, thereby limiting criticism. Moreover, there is great symbolic value in so ostentatiously punishing a critical pillar of our open society. Sidelining
parliament, the attacks on journalists and the judiciary, the criminalisation of activists, the dehumanisation of people fleeing war and conflict, and thus also
The decimation of knowledge institutions is all part of an extreme right-wing attack on our democracy and institutions. Dutch universities have no choice but to resist this attack. It is our duty to recognise fascism, to raise the issue and to combat it.
combat it. But precisely now that everything is at stake, we notice how far the neoliberal university has already prepared us for surrender, for collaboration.

> *"Precariousness leads to a lack of courage, competition to a lack of solidarity, toxic hierarchy to a lack of agency, and paralysed participation to*
> *a lack of participation, and management will stand firm in its commitment to preserving the organisation – which is not the same as standing firm in its commitment to the academic community of values – even if this means abandoning every ideological principle in order to survive." (De Winkel, 2025).*

Such a university is defenceless against fascist policies. A university that is itself undemocratic will collaborate. And so the executive boards sent police dogs after their own students, who were demonstrating against genocide. The resistance – the coalition against the cuts
- was supported sparingly and often with obvious reluctance by the Executive Boards, and ultimately betrayed by both the institutes and the employers. Entire programmes were haggled over without consultation, departments were abolished, and professionals were dismissed. We have learned the hard lesson that the Executive Boards and umbrella organisations have actually refused to work together from the outset. Now it is time for the universities and trade unions to realise this too, and to move towards
to act. Business as usual means that they are betraying us.

The balaclava above the tie

For half a decade, 0.7 has represented the part of the academic chain that is always forgotten to exist. Our demands were simple: permanent contracts
for structural work, no more unpaid overtime, and better social security. This proved to be

impossible within the current structures, so we have adjusted our demands in order to tackle the underlying problem: we demand the radical democratisation of Dutch academia.

We continue to call for opposition to these cuts and this government, but let it be clear that our participation is conditional! We do not want to return to how things were;
we want to move forward to what a university can and should be. We believe that a democratic and democratising Dutch academy can be achieved by:

1. Strengthening the employment position of workers, and specifically those who work in are in a precarious situation. Permanent contracts for permanent work! No unlawful part-time work! No unpaid overtime! Better working conditions, legal protection and social security for international colleagues, colleagues who have care responsibilities for themselves or others, for those who are in a dependent position, and anyone who is otherwise vulnerable to hatred, exclusion and exploitation.
2. Radically democratising our universities. From now on, rectors must be elected. Strengthen employee participation, trade unions, workers' and students' councils. Give more say to students and university staff. And less power to unelected boards, works councils, umbrella organisations and science funders such as the UNL and NWO. Furthermore, we believe that academic publishers such as Elsevier should be dismantled.
3. COPS OFF CAMPUS! No police deployment against students and lecturers, ever! No security guards in front of the library, no cameras, no ID checks, no police dogs, no riot police, get rid of your guidelines for protests. Give us back our caretakers, canteens,
and offices back. Give us a say, guidance, and facilities. That will provide enough social control and community that we no longer need the visits, caracals, and security. The squares are there for *encampments*. The buildings belong to us and not to a board of directors.
4. Accountability over management. Diversity and inclusion over window dressing and university branding. Rights over *lip service*. Less PR, less HR, less management.
Functioning structures of social safety.
5. An independent but serving academy. A focus on serving society is at odds with any form of conflict of interest, as we have already defined our interests in our academic values. Conflicts of interest with
politics, conflicts of interest with the business community, lucrative side jobs, high executive salaries, are a violation of academic standards. The same applies to institutional ties with evil companies and genocidal regimes.
6. Solidarity. Replace the idea of the top sports scientist with a lived solidarity and collectivity. Less hierarchy. Everyone a professor, or rather, no one a professor. No more feigned meritocracy on a nepotistic ladder.
7. Anti-fascism. If democracy is something you have to defend every day, then fascism is something you have to fight every day.

If we recognise our duty, we can resist. If we transform universities into a democratic collective, we can protect democracy. Democratic internally, democratising externally. That starts first and foremost with resistance. If we continue to give in to demands to be 'reasonable', 'mild' or 'tactical', we weaken ourselves. If we abandon our own community, we will be played off against each other. Even if we manage to postpone the cuts in the short term, it will only be a matter of time before Brown 2 comes along.

The university as it currently exists will lose everything in the long term. There is nothing reasonable or tactical about this. Open and determined resistance is sincere, just and unifying. We must not remain silent while academic freedom dies a quiet death.

Tim de Winkel, visible member of the academic action group 0.7, PostDoc media and democracy, trade unionist. Lotje Siffels, visible member of 0.7, executive member of AOb, VSmP member, PostDoc AI ethics.

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8 0.7 is a radical action group with executive members, visible members, and a broader network with a predominantly decentralised structure. Many of our members choose to remain anonymous, often because they are on temporary contracts and risk not having their contracts renewed or being intimidated by managers if they speak out publicly. They contribute to the action group but remain 'invisible'.

UvA Staff Walk Out Over Genocide in Palestine

Lamia Tawam and David Hollanders

In December 2024, 300 academic staff of the University of Amsterdam went on a four-day strike to demand that the university board respect international law by cutting ties with institutions that serve Israel's Gaza genocide; and respect the right to demonstrate at the university. Staff followed students, who had been protesting for over a year. The strike was the country's first in support of Palestine and can serve as a pilot for future solidarity strikes.

Students at the University of Amsterdam wasted no time demanding an academic boycott after the onset of Israel's assault in 2023, recognising that the violent resistance of 7 October was produced by over a century of extermination, expulsion and ghettoisation by Israel, which experts already decades ago deemed an 'incremental genocide' (Pappe, 2006). Demands for an academic boycott on campus are also at least a decade old, and have been silenced or ignored by the University for as long. In 2022, the UvA failed to comply with a Freedom of Information request seeking clarity on the extent of its collaborations with Israeli institutions and lobby groups, and it continues to suppress the information despite losing a lawsuit on the matter (Dutch scholars and students for Palestine, 2023). Such antagonism for the basics of democracy at the university was made stark after 7 October 2023.

Since 7 October, students and staff have protested constantly, held teach-ins, sent The Board received public letters (signed by thousands), issued formal advice via the co-determination (*medezeggenschap*) process, and invited the Board to public debates and recorded discussions. Staff and students lobbied the Board through all existing democratic structures: the unions and their local federation (the UCLO), the student union, the federation of student unions, and the works council. The UvA's only material response to these efforts was to scale up security, set police on students, ban political speech on Palestine, and on one occasion shut down educational buildings just to prevent a small sit-in (George, 2024). Out of options, students escalated by blockading university buildings. Then, on 6 May 2024, staff and students started an encampment and the next day occupied a UvA building, taking part in a global student movement. These escalations were always coupled with exit ramps for the UvA, but to avoid addressing demands, the Board deployed police to brutalise students.

May 2024: A balancing act collapses

Until 6 May, the UvA had successfully sustained a balancing act: ostensibly committed to human rights while indirectly but concretely contributing to a genocide. Activists tried to make this duplicity obvious in order to threaten the Board's legitimacy, the only leverage left available to staff and students. But the 'liberal repertoire' of petitions and communication via the works council does not draw sufficient public attention and is thus never acknowledged by the Board, unlike disruption. The UvA, a state institution, followed the state in supporting a NATO ally.

This meant that the Board could not publicly acknowledge the genocide—anyway, that would oblige them to cut ties as in the case of Russia—nor could they publicly deny it—that would delegitimise them. So they resorted to ignoring or repressing students, which worked as long as suppression remained local and relatively limited. But the encampment and subsequent

occupations drew many spectators. The authorities' violent response in the week of 6 May upset many UvA employees, some of whom were beaten themselves. The day after the initial police confrontation, staff walked out of the workplace to join students, filling the streets from Amsterdam-Oost to the city centre.

June–December 2024: Justice delayed

The UvA sought to recoup its liberal prestige by establishing an advisory commission in June 2024. However, disruptions were still common on campus, because staff and students knew that the initiative was not meant to address demands in good faith (Stäger and Leone, 2024). Besides having no democratic mandate, the commission moves at a snail's pace and reaches unsatisfactory conclusions in a completely opaque manner. Perhaps most disappointing is that its decisions are non-binding. After the University received the commission's advice to cut ties with the Hebrew
University, the Board immediately broke its promise and stated its intent to establish fresh ties with Hebrew University, signalling its reluctance to respect an instrument of its own making (Wolthekker, 2025). By contrast, it took the UvA about a week to publicly and unreservedly cut ties with all Russian and Belarusian universities in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

December 2024: Staff go on strike

One motivation for the strike was the observation that the commission was not established to address grievances, but to bury them. The goal was to make this apparent and break the silence on Gaza, as the encampment had done (Pellikaan, 2025). In November, around 85 per cent of UvA-FNV members voted to stage a four-day strike from 9 to 12 December.

Solidarity strikes face a unique set of issues. Getting the strike off the ground was itself a challenge due to the prohibition on political strikes. The FNV was hesitant to put the strike to a vote because of the possibility of having to cover the UvA's lost revenue if the strike were to be ruled illegal. Organisers therefore included a demand to respect the right to demonstrate at the university, to ensure that the strike was undeniably related to employment conditions and would thus be legally justified.

Although small (only 900 of 6,000 UvA employees are FNV members, and only 300 participated), the strike gained the attention of the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions and the Health Services Union, who together sent strikers an encouraging letter (Manifest, 2024). The strike also had historical significance. Sympathy strikes are far less common than strikes over wages, and when they do occur, they are usually much smaller than UvA's Palestine strike.
Nonetheless, the strike failed to secure demands, and employees involved did not manage to subsequently increase the pressure.

Organisers are now planning a longer, more disruptive strike. So it is important to assess what worked and did not work. Distilling lessons from the December strike may also help workers elsewhere take up the mantle.

Mobilising for a solidarity strike

Mobilising a strike proved more difficult than expected at the university, where employees are divided from one another by a hierarchy of distinct titles. Research and lecturing are essentially solitary work, and universities are non-solidary institutions in which employees compete for grants. Unions have exacerbated this problem in the last decades by not seriously organising against temporary contracts.

For a solidarity strike, mobilisation is doubly challenging. The University's institutional ties with Israeli institutions do not directly harm workers, many do not see the connection between the genocide and the university, or believe they cannot help. Consistent and deliberate political education efforts are crucial to activate people towards social causes; by making them realise their influence over the workplace, how structures here exacerbate the genocide, and the depth of the suffering in Gaza. Others may already be sympathetic, but need to be shown that there are *many* others like them. Bravery is contagious, and to spread it, the pro-Palestine movement must be visible. Reaching national news helps, but for that a clear media strategy is needed in advance of the call to strike. Strikers contacted local Amsterdam (AT5, Parool) and university media outlets (Folia), but neglected national media. That was a missed opportunity, as the strike should have been addressed as much to the broader public as to the academic community.

Mobilising should be strategic; focusing not just on numbers, but also on employees whose refusal to work disrupts the organisation itself. Striking secretaries, librarians, doormen and ICT personnel could have shut down the university. For the next strike, organisers are looking to expand participation of subcontracted staff by offering legal protection and support funds for precarious strikers (those on visas, for example).

Including other unions would have increased turnout. But where the FNV ultimately understood the UvA's collaborations as an issue of workplace democracy, the AOb undermined the strike by refusing to put it to a vote, or to acknowledge Palestine publicly at all. At FNV, strikers did not wait for union leadership, and instead altered the union's positions from below. Trade union members Solidair met Palestina, agroup of workers organising for Palestine across unions, which "sees itself as a vanguard: agroup that dares to go first, but who always has the intention to take others with them," has changed what was politically possible for the FNV by defining a left faction in the union (VSmP, 2023). This is a known strategy: "you don't have to organise everything and everyone. You just have to move the landscape enough to show cracks in labour's unanimity.
Once there is room for dialogue about 'what labour's position should be'—as opposed to 'labour's position is X'—we found that what is right usually prevailed," says Brooke Anderson on organising against climate change, another solidarity issue (Anderson, 2024: 180).

Keeping issues connected

The government's largest party has touted cuts to higher education as punishment for pro-Palestine protests on university campuses (HOP, 2024). In November, the mayor of Utrecht cancelled a national mass protest against the cuts, citing expected violence from pro-Palestine groups but admitting to unions and organisers behind closed doors that she had no evidence for the claim. On campus, this narrative caused backlash against anti-genocide voices.

The UvA Board and others mistakenly assumed that betraying pro-Palestine segments of their campus would reverse the budget cuts. In reality, it was a numbers game: The government wanted to cut taxes while increasing military spending by 41 percent, and targeted public services in order to do so. The minister of education even admitted that increased defence spending was the cause of cuts to higher education (HOP, 2024). Rather than recognise this and unify with others threatened by cuts to social funding, the Board took notes from the PVV government and sold out genocide victims and their defenders. The lesson is that defunding is not forestalled by cooperation; under aright-wing government, it is simply inevitable. But the Board could have gone down fighting. The

The strike should have emphasised this message, since there is an obvious and exploitable link between the Palestine strike and the budget cuts strike: a quarter of cuts to higher education were used to purchase weapons from Israeli arms manufacturer Rafael (Ruitenberg, 2024).

Both budget cuts and universities' complicity in genocide can be traced to a lack of democracy at the university. The past two years have made clear that the codetermination scheme is undemocratic, and that the university's status as a state institution renders it less democratic.
Struggles on the points of democratisation and internationalism can work in building the union, and should be discussed seriously within the union as part of a strategy for mobilisation. Students at the University of Amsterdam have already connected issues of decarbonisation, democratisation, and decolonisation in 2022 (Pergher and Pereira, 2023). The Palestine strike could be a step towards the resurgence of a union-led vision for democratisation at the university. The FNV's willingness to stage the Palestine strike has already doubled membership at the UvA, and every employee can be made sympathetic to the issue of democratisation.

Parting thoughts

The UvA Board recently halted new collaborations with Israeli Horizon Europe partners, in lock-step with the government's push to reassess EU trade with Israel. But students and staff won policy changes outside of the government line when their disruptions placed scrutiny on the Board. Power concedes nothing without force, even in a microcosm, even over astonishingly small demands. The movement continues to insist on a total boycott, and will use the Board's concession to its advantage.

Academia can significantly contribute to societal pressure, but is no substitute. In combination with shifting public discourse, such pressure can push a movement forward without being immediately successful. Universities do not see their cash flows threatened by strikes (though strikes can deter external funding), but strikes do bring the urgency of the genocide to our communities, with the hope of motivating change, or inspiring others to make similar demands. Judged in this way, the strike at the UvA has contributed to a slow but undeniable shift towards ending complicity in genocide. On the effort to win white workers to black liberation in the United States, activist Noel Ignatiev recalled that "the appeal fell on deaf ears until… [the union] was present as a real force, until the momentum built up, until people began to feel that there was another way" (Ignatiev, 1972; 109).

In sharing these lessons, we appeal to the reader to help build momentum in their own workplace by striking in solidarity with Palestinians and other victims of Israel's impunity. While Israel bombs Gaza, the West Bank, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Iran, and even humanitarian flotillas carrying aid; starving civilians in Gaza are lured to their death by food, systematically executed at point-blank range. Israel is now depopulating Gaza and setting in motion US-UK plans to steal the land (Foley and Pickard, 2025). These horrors are legitimised and even financed by our employers, our pension funds, our public institutions (Albanese, 2025). We cannot allow employers who contribute to incommunicably dire conditions in Gaza to enjoy the same impunity that our governments have given Israel.

Lamia Tawam works at the Institute for Logic, Language and Computation, University of Amsterdam. David Hollanders is a lecturer in economics at the University of Amsterdam

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Higher education and the student perspective:
towards more action than reaction

Jens Bosman

The National Student Union (LSVb) was the only student organisation that was part of the national coalition against the cuts. The LSVb consists of student unions in various cities and also has a lot of contact with other student organisations.

Dutch students have had to endure blow after blow in recent years. Harsh austerity measures, initiated by the introduction of the student loan system and continued through a series of broken promises, have caused student confidence in the government to plummet. The situation has worsened with each successive government. The lack of decent compensation for the student loan system, interest on student debt, constant increases in tuition fees, the lack of affordable student housing, the plan for a 'long-term study penalty' and the dramatic cuts to higher education in the past year: it all fits into a trend of a government that does not see students as the future of this country, but as cash cows.

The harsh conclusion from this history is that students have no say in their own future. As a student movement, we have only reacted in recent years. Time and again, disastrous government policy forced us to take to the streets, to resist and to try to get measures off the table. Time and again, students had to be mobilised, often for a one-off protest. It took the form of *Groundhog Day:* 'here we are again' became a common greeting on the Malieveld.
and the Koekamp. A growing awareness within the student movement bubbled to the surface that this was not a sustainable way of campaigning. Logically, the movement became exhausted and demotivated. If we want to achieve real, structural change and a liveable student life in the long term, we will have to be able to set the political agenda ourselves – not react, but set the agenda. But how?

Students in the education movement

The fight against cuts to higher education over the past year has taught us a lot about our position as students within the education movement. As was evident in the earlier #NietMijnSchuld campaign, in which we actively collaborated with the trade union movement in the fight against the student loan system, we as students are much stronger when we are part
of a broader movement for higher education. In our view, the high level of student activism also contributed to the attention given to the fight against education cuts. Students throughout the Netherlands showed solidarity with dismissed teachers and staff. This sent a strong signal.

Fundamental to the willingness of students to take action is the activism against
the penalty for studying too long at the beginning of the 2024-2025 academic year. Because we were successful in this, the willingness of students to take action continued. This led to a high degree of solidarity with dismissed employees, which was also motivated by concerns about their own

education, resulting in the disappearance of courses in several student cities. Another clear factor in this willingness to take action was the hostile climate of protest at the university: in several cities, students faced severe police violence, surveillance, persecution and reprisals from the university. This repression – often carried out by *trigger-happy* university boards themselves – made students more aware of their vulnerable position and led to greater frustration about the current state of affairs in higher education.

The complexity of the position of students within the education movement, including over the past year, lies in our increasingly fragmented and decentralised nature. As LSVb, we consist of a federation of local student unions, which campaign in their own student cities.
advise and provide services. Together, they determine our policy and direction, and we represent their local issues in our national lobbying efforts. However, with a centrally led protest movement taking place on a national scale, such as the actions against education cuts, it became difficult to involve all local student unions in determining strategy and methods of action – sometimes leading to considerable internal frustration. Our decentralised nature normally offers a wealth of opportunities: we are able to work together effectively to coordinate action throughout the Netherlands, as has happened on some occasions. On the other hand, national mobilisation moments, such as a protest on the Malieveld, are extremely burdensome and energy-consuming for local unions, which have to put their local activism aside in order to mobilise their network in The Hague.

Due to this focus on national policy – not only in the past year, but also before that – the student movement has not had the time and energy to really build a sustainable student movement. In recent years, the 'cooperation' between the LSVb and its local unions has consisted too much of mobilising students for national protests, without paying enough attention to the opportunities these protests offered to students.
become active in local trade unions. As a result, several large-scale protests have had little or no impact on building a sustainable movement, and many local trade unions are struggling with a shortage of active members. This makes it very difficult to find new leadership every year, which jeopardises the continuity of the movement. In addition, the constant wave of reactive protests is causing a form of *activism fatigue:* repeatedly demonstrating in response to poor policy is extremely demotivating and leads to a feeling of futility.

For about a year and a half to two years, there has been a shift in the way the LSVb and the federation of local trade unions think about movement building. The realisation that a much stronger local foundation throughout the Netherlands is crucial for a successful student movement has now become deeply ingrained in the federation's thinking and actions. In a gradual process, the focus has shifted from national politics and immediate policy change – although this is still part of the LSVb's lobbying work – to strengthening local unions through unity as a federation.
to shine, to bring local unions to the fore, and to set up action teams within local unions in which students can become actively involved.

Theoretically, this recalibration is characterised by the well-known model of *organising* in movement building, as formulated and popularised by thinkers such as Jane McAlevey and Marshall Ganz. (McAlevey 2016; Ganz 2024) Their thinking forms the basis for our strategy for the coming period – but not without complex issues.

The need for organising

More and more organisations and social movements in the Netherlands have focused on campaigning and movement building through the organising method. Thanks in part to organisations such as Stroomversnellers and the Lowlander Project, which were the first in the Netherlands to offer training and education in organising, a movement has been set in motion that has ultimately spread to large social organisations such as Amnesty International and the FNV trade union.

In recent years, the student movement has been characterised primarily by *mobilisation*. Jane McAlavey calls this strategy *eventism* – single-issue campaigns, such as a protest against interest rates on student loans, in which you call on people who already agree with you to
show up. Mobilising means believing in a *numbers game* – the more people who show up, the better. That's not entirely wrong: various large-scale protests have led to change and action in recent years, including in education. The HO!
The protest on Malieveld sent a powerful message and contributed to the urgency against the planned cuts.

However, there are two major problems with mobilisation as the main means of building a movement. First, there is no reason to assume that mobilisation will lead to structural change. Ultimately, as a student movement and as an education movement, we want to be able to pursue a certain vision and put it on the agenda. With mobilisation alone, however, we are extremely dependent on momentum: people show up to protest for
a topical issue, such as a bad policy measure. Perhaps a large protest will enable us to change public opinion on that issue, prevent a measure
prevent a measure or change a piece of policy. However, we are never able to *force* change – in fact, there is a good chance that we will all be back again in the foreseeable future for another piece of policy.

Secondly, mobilisation does not ensure the growth of our movement. The people who turn up at protests are very rarely people who are not themselves actively involved in the issue they are demonstrating for or against. There will always be people and groups who join out of solidarity or because of their political convictions, but the danger
is that we are constantly mobilising our supporters without focusing on structural and sustainable growth. Ultimately, mobilisation even has a counterproductive effect: if concrete change and a degree of growth fail to materialise, people cannot be expected to turn up again next time.

That is why it is so important to be aware of the organising model.
There is a fundamental difference between mobilisation and organising, and that difference simply has to do with *growth*. If we want to be able to bring about change ourselves, we will have to grow our movement, bit by bit, and learn *how to win*. And that starts locally. In the organising model, sustainable movement building takes place not by focusing on our own supporters, but by focusing on new groups and people we want to organise. That means having extensive conversations, in which you try to activate people and convince them of the need to take action.

And that, in turn, means that we have to fundamentally reorganise our work as a trade union. Last year, several dozen people from the student movement, including board members of local trade unions and committed activists,

and employees of the LSVb, participated in a training programme organised by *Organising4Power*, based on the principles of Jane McAlevey. The aim of this programme was to train activists to become organisers, who learn to conduct conversations and establish structures within the frameworks in which we want to recruit. By training these people, allowing them to recruit new students, and letting them take independent action for their own local interests, we hope to set off a snowball effect – an ever-growing union. This is a long-term project – much needed for a movement that has been on life support in recent years.

Students within the education movement

In addition to the positive effects of an organising structure for the growth of our movement, there is another important motivation for making this transition. Recently,

Certainly when it comes to education cuts, it has become clear that we cannot and should not focus solely on the national government. Many of the decisions we ultimately protest against are made at a decentralised level: by university and college boards. Ultimately, it is the executive boards that decide who is dismissed, which courses are scrapped and which programmes, grants or subsidies are discontinued. And if one thing has become clear over the past year, it is that various executive boards do not always lose sleep over cutting back on their own education programmes.

At present, there is no democratic power structure in place to effectively control and steer these self-destructive institutional boards.

In fact, student representation is virtually a *sitting duck* everywhere – it hardly has the resources to really monitor and enforce, and often does not even have the information to do so. If we, as a student movement, succeed in transitioning to a structure in which we are able to take effective decentralised action, with organised groups of students in all student cities, this could be extremely useful and valuable for the entire education movement, because it will become easier to hold education boards accountable for their actions and confront them with real resistance. In this way, we also improve the democratic content of education and give students and teachers back their say.

We challenge the rest of the education movement to follow this shift towards organising. Only in this way can we, together with students, teachers and staff, grow our movement and, in the long term, make it much more difficult for others to walk all over us.

It is inevitable that we will occasionally have to mobilise. Bad cabinets come and go, and with them terrible, destructive policies. We will always be prepared to stand our ground at Malieveld or elsewhere and make our voices heard. But when we do so, it must be within a strategic perspective that allows our movement to grow and learn, rather than structurally exhausting ourselves.

Jens Bosman is a Movement Development Officer at the LSVb.

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Hope for higher education

Gaard Kets

As a lecturer in Political Theory at Radboud University in Nijmegen, a member of the FNV trade union and of WOinActie, I was involved in the local organisation of actions against cuts in higher education in 2024 and 2025. In this contribution, I reflect on those experiences. How did we deal with different perspectives on tactics and strategy? And how can the building of coalitions at local and national level help to take our struggle (now and in the future)? I start with an analysis of a number of national events and then look back at our local coalition building.

Due to dirty tricks by the Utrecht 'triangle' and poor decisions by the trade unions, our national demonstration against education cuts on 14 November 2024 could not take place in the form we had envisaged. In my opinion, that day was a turning point in the precarious national coalition, because two issues became unavoidable: the question of what the relationship is and should be between WOinActie and the unions; and the question of what place the Palestine movement has within this coalition.

Although it is still unclear what exactly happened in the run-up to 14 November, it is certain that the trade unions ultimately felt compelled to call off the planned demonstration in Utrecht. The unions made this decision without consulting their main coalition partners, such as WOinActie and 0.7. Naturally, this led to a great deal of frustration among these groups and their supporters. As a result, we made clearer agreements in Nijmegen about the role of the unions, which for us were primarily (excellent) facilitators and organisers of the coalition, but not the leading force. The substantive organisation was the responsibility of the coalition, in which WOinActie took a leading role.

The second – and most important – issue that was explicitly raised on 14 November was the place of the Palestine movement within the education protests. At that point, students and staff had already been campaigning for more than a year against the genocide and human rights violations committed by Israel in Gaza and the rest of Palestine. Until 14 November, the unions, and to a lesser extent WOinActie, were reluctant to give the groups that wanted to link the shrinking education budget to the growing defence budget a visible place and role within the movement against the cuts. When, for example, the group Trade Union Members in Solidarity with Palestine (VSmP) requested that someone speak on their behalf on 14 November, this was rejected by the unions and WOinActie.

The unjustified cancellation of the large demonstration on 14 November changed this in two ways. Firstly, because we realised that as a coalition we are vulnerable to being divided and losing our right to demonstrate.
Secondly, because the groups (led by our courageous students) who – in defiance of the police, politicians and many others – went to Utrecht to demonstrate anyway, showed that the message of the Palestine movement and that of the movement against austerity measures is indeed

could be a solid part of a well-organised demonstration. In doing so, students set a good example: they showed substantive solidarity and effectively reclaimed the right to demonstrate that the unions had so easily given away.

Strategic coalition building

The preparations for our national demonstration on 25 November were not without tension, but thanks in part to the tireless lobbying efforts of the VSmP, the Palestine movement was now seen as an important part of the coalition. There are a number of good reasons to cherish this coalition: substantively, strategically and pragmatically.

In terms of content, it is evident that the exponential increase in defence spending (including problematic arms deals and cooperation with Israel) is partly to blame for the cuts in higher education. This connection was confirmed by Minister Bruins of OCW: "We [...] are investing extra in defence. That means that cuts have to be made, and part of those cuts will be in education and research". Government and defence circles also called for the impact of the cuts on higher through more intensive cooperation between universities and the defence industry. In terms of content, there is therefore much to be said for linking the struggle against the Israeli genocide of the Palestinians to the struggle against cuts in education.

Strategically, the Palestine movement is also of great importance to our struggle. Dutch higher education has little experience with activism and strikes. Over the past twenty months, the Palestine movement has gained a great deal of experience with all kinds of activism, mobilisation and organisation. Although this has demanded a great deal from those involved, the movement has also been extremely successful: despite the repressive and stubborn attitude of our administrators, who in June 2024 still jointly stated that they "see no reason to reconsider or sever those ties" (Trouw, 7 July 2024), many universities have nevertheless severed or suspended ties with Israeli institutions. Many of these decisions do not go far enough, are far too late, and are more symbolic than material. But the fact that the administrators are against their
The fact that they were forced to take these decisions is a major success for the ongoing and creative activism of the Palestine movement on our campuses. In doing so, this movement also provided an impetus that is of great strategic importance to the unions: the normalisation of political activism on campus. The Palestine movement paved the way for broad mobilisation in the academic community by showing that the place where we work and study is also
a place where political struggle takes place.

The strategic importance is linked to the pragmatic advantages of cooperation between the Palestine movement and the resistance to austerity measures. Partly due to all the experiences of recent months, the activists had good networks within the universities. Because the Palestine movement played an important role within the coalition, existing networks of academic activists around, for example, Scientist Rebellion were also able to join.
In Nijmegen, this contributed to the emergence of a strong and diverse core that was able to mobilise and organise through various networks and channels.

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The experience in Nijmegen

Part of that core were WOinActie, the unions (including the student union AKKU), HBOinActie and 0.7. WOinActie was small in Nijmegen, but thanks to a number of tireless members, it proved to be a better mobiliser than the unions. The level of unionisation in Nijmegen is not particularly high, and employees appeared to experience a barrier to attending union meetings.
When WOinActie organised meetings (together with the unions), these attracted many more people. Through these action meetings, WOinActie was both an effective action collective and a *gateway* for people to join a union. The number of union members in Nijmegen has increased enormously over the past year. Later, the unions proved invaluable in
scaling up the mobilisation and in the practical organisation of the large demonstrations and the strike relay. The professionalism of the unions impressed many employees; WOinActie and other local groups had never been so successful in this regard.

Equally crucial was the student union AKKU, which brought the energy and experience of its involvement in the *encampment* to our organisation. Not only were they always
They were the first to offer practical help, and they also helped to improve the organisation of the local strike by setting up a committee structure.

Forging and maintaining such a coalition did not always go smoothly. That is not a problem. As Rebecca Solnit writes in *Hope in the Dark* (2016), coalitions of social movements actually benefit from different views and ideological positions: *"coalitions can be based on what wildly different groups have in common and differences can be set aside;*
a coalition requires difference as a cult does not" (2016, 88). There were (and still are) many differences of opinion: endless, heated discussions took place in the WhatsApp groups about the substantive relationship between Palestine, militarisation and cuts to higher education. There was also strategic disagreement about, for example, the extent to which we wanted to cooperate with our administrators, who acted repressively against Palestinian demonstrators but did support the demonstrations against the cuts. In Nijmegen, in the run-up to
On 14 (and ultimately 25) November, an FAQ was drawn up by employees with very different perspectives on this movement. The basis for this FAQ was a rule that Arnoud Lagendijk, member of the AOb and professor at Radboud University Nijmegen (see also in this collection), had previously proposed: the central message that everyone conveys is 'Stop the cuts'. As a movement, we do not determine the perspective from which that message is framed. In concrete terms, this meant that there was room for groups that opposed the cuts because of their impact on the economy or the position of Dutch universities in the rankings, but also for those who saw them as part of an extreme right-wing attack on democracy or as a consequence of militarisation. Although this did not put an end to the (online) discussions, it did become a valuable starting point to which we could refer.
and which enabled us to keep many different groups on board.

Strengthening and deepening coalitions

Now it is important to deepen, broaden and re-evaluate our coalitions. Our actions so far have been successful. We got tens of thousands of academics to go on strike and forced the reversal of significant austerity measures. Of course, that is not enough: the cuts that are still on the table are disastrous and there are already new ones on the horizon.

announced. We will therefore have to continue our struggle. The upcoming elections offer an excellent opportunity to increase pressure on politicians. To do so, we first need to further strengthen our current coalition. The way we are organised in Nijmegen has characteristics of what Eric Blanc calls *worker-to-worker organising* in his book *We Are the Union (*2025). In this form of democratic organisation, the initiative (and power) lies primarily with the workers themselves, rather than with the large unions. Groups of workers organise themselves into committees, which in turn mobilise and organise other colleagues. On the initiative of our students, we are now trying (with varying degrees of success so far) to organise at faculty level, with colleagues taking responsibility for part of the organisation themselves, in order to reach out to untouched networks of colleagues in an accessible way.

Broadening the coalition is also necessary. A good example was the large demonstration against the far-right cabinet on 24 May in Amsterdam, in which WOinActie was also visibly present. Now that the cabinet has fallen, we must at least join forces with other groups with the message: never again the PVV in government, never again the disastrous dismantling of
higher education. At the same time, we must force the other coalition partners (especially the VVD) to take responsibility for their destructive policies and the damage they have caused (not only in higher education, but also in NGOs and aid organisations, healthcare, the cultural sector, etc.), especially during the election campaign. Only a broad coalition can exert pressure to
in higher education.

But we must also re-evaluate our coalition. How long do we want to stand side by side with our administrators? Although they often supported ‘the actions’, they have also already started implementing the cuts. The first courses and departments have already been shut down by our own universities, and colleagues have already been dismissed. Moreover, many Executive Boards are increasingly repressing protesting students and staff members.

Do we want to join forces with administrators who simultaneously have us arrested, beaten and maimed by the police? In light of the developments on our campuses in recent months, I have serious doubts about this. Incidentally, I found the response of WOinActie and the unions to this increasing repression somewhat lacking. As I argued above,
our students and colleagues who demonstrate against the genocide in Palestine are of particular importance within our movement against austerity measures. When this group is bugged, spied on and mistreated, when their right to demonstrate is restricted, and when excessive police violence is used against them, it affects us all.
At times like these, it would be appropriate for our movement to take a stand and oppose our executive boards. During the evaluation meeting in De Burcht on 25 March 2025 in Amsterdam, where we discussed the strike actions of the past months, we took a photo with the participants (see introduction to this collection) in which we held up signs with the text 'an injury'.
to one is an injury to all’. This adage from the Wobblies was intended as encouragement for our comrades in the United States who are fighting against their own extreme right-wing oligarchs. But this core principle of solidarity also applies to our own coalition. If we want to build our coalition in a sustainable way, it can only be based on more than a shared interest. It must also be based on solidarity. An injury (by dog or club) to
one of us is an injury to all of us.

Due to the fall of the cabinet and the upcoming period of political uncertainty, it is unclear how our movement stands, but for a coalition movement such as this, that uncertainty is actually an asset. Rebecca Solnit, quoted earlier, writes that hope lies precisely in embracing uncertainty (2016, xii). Whereas an optimist is certain that everything will turn out fine (and therefore does not act), and a pessimist is certain that nothing will come of it (and therefore does not act), the activist understands that what we do matters – even if it is not yet clear how and when.

Gaard Kets is a university lecturer in political theory at Radboud University Nijmegen, a member of the FNV trade union and of WOinActie Nijmegen.

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DE BURCHT

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