Stepping up to strike: A union mobilisation case study of Polish temporary agency workers in the Netherlands

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Abstract

This article examines a successful union mobilisation of Polish temporary agency workers in the Netherlands. The case provides insights into the nature of the mobilisation triggers for workers that are generally reluctant to complain, let alone organise collectively. While the initiative to mobilise originated from the workers themselves, their collective interests were strategically developed into further action by Polish leadership from below and effective organisation by the union. As forms of precarious employment are spreading, trade unions face the challenge to protect and represent workers that due to their employment position tend to fall outside established representation structures. This article shows that unions when faced with such conditions of weakness need to seek, build-up and foster bargaining leverage in flexible and strategic ways.

keywords: migrant organising, migrant workers, mobilisation, agency work, Dutch industrial relations

Introduction

As a result of European integration, persistent wage differences within the EU and the increase in flexible and precarious forms of employment, a considerable share of the workforce in many Western European countries consists of temporary migrant workers. Many of these workers are in low-paid, insecure jobs in sectors with weak or non-existent union presence (Wills et al., 2010; Milkman, 2006; Alberti et al., 2013). Working segregated from native workers, they are often subject to less favourable employment