



February Strike 1941 - Worker Resistance During the War

On February 25, 1941, three hundred thousand workers in Amsterdam and other cities went on strike against the German occupiers. Increasingly severe repression, including the growing persecution of Dutch Jews, was met with great resistance among the population. Fascist terror led to the situation where the CPN (Communist Party of the Netherlands) in Amsterdam decided to call for a general strike. The February Strike has gone down in history as a courageous act by tens of thousands of workers who stopped working and stood up for their persecuted Jewish fellow citizens. After Amsterdam, the strike quickly spread to the Zaan region, IJmuiden, Kennemerland, Utrecht, Hilversum, Weesp, and other cities.

Actions Against Deterioration

After the German invasion in May 1940, the Dutch economy deteriorated. Dutch food disappeared to Germany, and prices skyrocketed. But the support, the welfare benefits for the unemployed, remained the same. Due to shortages, distribution via ration cards was introduced. In Amsterdam, the number of unemployed rose from 40,000 at the end of August 1939 to over 60,000 in July 1940. Because their families were severely affected by the high prices, they staged fierce protests. The mayor of Amsterdam ordered them to go to work in Germany – those who refused received no support. By the end of July 1940, 2,100 unemployed workers had refused. The workers had nothing to expect from the unions that had been harmonized. It was the illegal CPN that campaigned for a solidarity fund for those who refused.

The CPN had divisions in the metal industry, in the government, and for office workers. The first two had already led a nearly illegal existence before the war. In the government, the so-called "*civil servant ban*" was in effect: as a civil servant, you were not allowed to be a member of the CPN, under penalty of dismissal. CPN members did so with complete conviction, prepared to accept all consequences. There was no 'ban on civil servants' in the metal industry. But unemployment, fear of dismissal, and the bosses' blacklist had roughly the same effect.

Civil servants and metalworkers therefore had some training in illegal work and in organizing actions in collaboration with others. This organizational strength and experience were decisive in the February Strike. The February Strike became the beginning of a nationwide, all-

encompassing resistance against the German occupiers, the persecution of Jews, and the German annexation plans.

Victory in the Forced Employment Scheme

At the end of October, the workday for the 11,000 Amsterdam workers in forced employment camps was extended by half an hour, but the workers rejected this and began openly fighting the German occupiers. The occupiers could rely on collaborationist senior municipal officials, who suspended 2,000 workers from work and benefits. But the struggle spread. Women joined the demonstrations, and money for the suspended workers was collected from workers of other companies. With such unity and fighting spirit, they won. The authorities withdrew the extension of workhours and continued the pay for the days on strike. A movement arose among the population, and more resistance began to develop.

Meanwhile, major Dutch entrepreneurs tried to secure their position by founding the political movement 'De Unie' (The Union), which called for open collaboration with the fascist occupiers. The exiled government in London also urged non-resistance.

Increasing persecution of Jews

Shortly after the start of the occupation, Dutch Jews faced compulsory registration and dismissals. Assault squads of the Dutch fascist party, the NSB (National Socialist Movement), attacked shops, cafés, and the Jewish neighborhood. The people there resisted, aided by non-Jews and workers from other neighborhoods. The occupiers began expropriating Jewish businesses. Civil servants were required to declare whether they had Jewish parents; if so, dismissal followed. On November 22, it was announced that Jewish professors were being dismissed, prompting 3,000 students at Delft University of Applied Sciences to organize a strike. After a similar action in Leiden, the fascists closed the university permanently. Signs reading: "*Forbidden for Jews*" appeared in cafés. Compulsory registration of Jewish people followed on January 10.

The German occupiers wanted to tighten their grip on the population and ordered the WA — NSB's assault squads in black uniforms — to hold intimidating marches through Amsterdam. They primarily raided Jewish cafés and smashed everything to pieces. But workers and Jewish youth formed their own groups to beat back the Blackshirts. German soldiers often had to come to the aid of their Black-uniformed friends.

Employment in Germany

On February 5, 1941, the Nazi occupiers pressured shipyard management to send skilled workers to Germany — initially, 150 on a "*voluntary basis*". Of the 10,000 shipbuilding workers, eight volunteered. On February 17,

the German managers of the Dutch Shipbuilding Company (NSM) in Amsterdam designated a large number of workers for employment in Germany. When two buses arrived at the NSM on Monday morning, February 17, to pick up the selected workers, a strike began. NSM workers went in groups to other shipyards, and by noon, almost all shipbuilding had ground to a halt. That same evening, the national leadership of the CPN convened a meeting. It was proposed that the striking NSM workers would shut down as many metalworking companies in the North of Amsterdam as possible on February 18, and that on the 19th, they would achieve the most widespread strike possible throughout the city. The surprised Nazis were at a loss to deal with the growing unrest and decided to cancel the compulsory sending of shipyard workers to Germany. The next morning, the occupiers gave in completely. The forced deportation was off, and there would be no punitive measures. This victory demonstrated the power the workers possess—even against a fascist oppressive apparatus.

Ghetto and Raids

The German fascists had transformed the 'Jewish Quarter' in Amsterdam into a ghetto—with barbed wire and raised bridges, even though 40 percent of the residents were non-Jewish.

On February 22nd and 23rd, the Nazis launched brutal raids. The German occupiers carried out a medieval pogrom, also intended to crush the growing resistance of the Dutch population. Young Jewish men were dragged off the streets, doors kicked in, and women and children abused. People could not believe that this was possible in Amsterdam. Something had to be done, but most political parties remained silent, including the social democratic SDAP. The churches also remained silent.

The CPN called for resistance against the persecution of Jews, against deployment to Germany, and against the establishment of a so-called 'national' government led by NSB leader Mussert. The Amsterdam CPN leadership issued directives to everyone involved in the underground organization. The mimeograph machines churned out thousands of leaflets bearing the famous call "*STRIKE! STRIKE! STRIKE!*" On Monday evening, February 24, 400 communist leaders briefly met at the Noordermarkt to receive final instructions on what the various groups of workers were to do the following morning: organize a general strike—starting with public transport.

Strike Became Popular Action

At four o'clock in the morning, strike notices were distributed and discussed at the streetcar shunting yard in the eastern part of Amsterdam. Drivers halted their trams. By 4:30, the strike was declared a

reality, and it was decided to send a delegation to Central Railway Station. There, supervisors were able to insist that there would be no strike, but when the workers of the forced employment schemes arrived on the platforms, the discussion continued: "*It's against the terrible Jewish pogroms. Should we allow this to happen?*" But others considered the risks: being fired again and sitting at home without a job. The discussions escalated. Eventually, the train departed, but at Muiderpoort station, most of the workers were convinced and joined the strike.

Simultaneously, the manifesto was distributed to workers at companies in Amsterdam and several other cities. Inside the companies, the discussion was often heated as well. Dismissal and imprisonment were real risks, so a lot of persuasion and perseverance were required. This also applied to the municipal companies, public works, and city sanitation. The communists gave speeches and refused to yield to bosses or directors – the strike snowballed. Groups of workers toured companies where work was being done. Shops began closing. Thousands of office workers and schoolchildren also participated. The strike became a popular action. Around noon on the 25th, a general strike against the fascist German occupiers was declared in Amsterdam. Despite bans, demonstrations and several mass meetings were held.

Pamphlets called for a large demonstration from the Jordaan district. This was widely supported by local residents. Social Democratic, Communist, Christian, and Catholic workers marched shoulder to shoulder. "*The International will rule the earth*", they chanted.

IJmuiden, Velsen, and the Zaan region

Within hours, the strike spread to other municipalities outside Amsterdam. In Haarlem, employees of Conrad and Stork Hijssch stopped working that same afternoon, followed the next day by the 380 workers of the Figuee machine factory, the staff of the Haarlem Shipbuilding Company, the Haarlem Shirt Industry Kerko (170 girls), and the 620 workers of the Beijnes. The next morning, the thousand workers of the United Paper Mills Van Gelder in Velsen went on strike. The strike spread to companies in the region.

At Hoogovens ('blast furnaces'), the willingness to take action was evident among the more than two thousand workers. On the afternoon of the 25th, the order was given: no dressing up and calling on everyone to strike. After discussion, Hoogovens also decided to do so. Jan van Aalst, a 19-year-old from Beverwijk who worked in the electrical department at the time, decided not to go to work on the second day of the strike: "*It was simply a matter of solidarity.*" (Haarlems Dagblad, February 25, 2003)

CPN member and resistance fighter Jan Brassler later recalled the days following the strike: *"After that, the mood at Hoogovens was quite different. One strike, and people had become much more militant. They wanted to read, De Waarheid (The Truth), pamphlets, and so on. They were in great demand. So, a better mood, less fear."* (From: 'Witte Ko', by Jan Brassler and Otto Kraan, 1982).

So, large-scale strikes also took place in the Zaan region in response to the raids. Ultimately, around 15,000 people in the Zaan region walked out on the 25th and 26th.

'Uninterrupted Resistance'

German police raid vans arrived. They began firing live ammunition, forcing people to flee into doorways and side streets – from where they could later regroup. The German Nazi leaders ordered hundreds of SS men, Grüne Polizei, and military police into Amsterdam. After 7:00 PM, a curfew was in effect. German soldiers marched through working-class neighborhoods, shooting at every light that emerged.

On February 25th, the ANP (General Dutch Press Agency) sent the following message to all newspapers: *"Nothing may be published about strikes in Amsterdam or the general situation in this city."* That evening, the CPN distributed mass appeals to strike on the 26th as well. The Nazis used sound trucks and radio stations to threaten anyone who would strike with severe penalties. It became a test of strength. Due to the threats, some trams were in operation, but in the vast majority of companies, the strike continued unabated on the 26th. The Nazis responded with brutal violence. Four communists were shot dead on the spot by the occupiers, and hundreds were arrested. Numerous people were forced into hiding. The German military leadership threatened prison and the death penalty. After two days, the strike largely ended. But the workers and employees had demonstrated their courage and strength.

In the words of Gerard Maas, who writes in his book 'Chronicle of the February Strike 1941': *"The leadership of the illegal CPN knew what it had to do. The time had come for general popular resistance, for the great act of resistance that would rouse the entire country and lead it to an uninterrupted struggle against German tyranny, for a free and independent Netherlands."*