

# **Unions and their representation of contingent workers: A comparative analysis of Japan, the Netherlands and the UK**

**10th European ILERA Conference**

**20-22 June, Amsterdam**

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## **Abstract**

The rise in alternative employment types has posed a major challenge to trade unions, partly because of a former strategy of exclusion. This challenge is well acknowledged and shared across countries. However, important differences also exist in terms of the timing and extent of this rise, the regulatory context, and unions' legitimising principles and identity. This paper provides a 'contextualised comparison' of the organisation and representation of non-standard workers by mainstream unions in three countries: Japan, the Netherlands, and the UK. It discusses the situation in these countries on the basis of interviews with union representatives in industries with many non-standard workers. The objectives of the paper are threefold. First, it provides an overview of the critical issues in each country, the strategies that unions have developed for the organisation and representation of these workers, and their achievements. Secondly, the developments are linked to the specific labour market context and identity of the unions in each of the countries. Finally, the paper compares the developments in the three countries and draws lessons about the organisation of alternative employment. This enables an informed assessment of the role that unions can play in improving precarious jobs.

*This paper concerns a first draft to analyse findings and should be considered preliminary. It is expected to be published in a revised form and should not be quoted without permission.*

## Introduction

The strong rise in new employment types during recent decades has transformed the labour markets of most developed economies, resulting in 'the prevailing view that the full-time continuous job is being eclipsed by part-time and temporary paid employment and self-employment' (Vosko 2010: 1). These alternatives to the standard employment relationship are numerous and can include further types uniquely developed in specific countries such as *shokutaku* in Japan and *payrolling* in the Netherlands.<sup>1</sup> The rise has raised concerns that increased labour market flexibility has resulted in 'vulnerable' or 'precarious' employment as these jobs are often characterised by low pay, limited sick pay and pension provisions, and limited career opportunities while young and immigrant workers tend to be highly over-represented. For example, in Japan there have been important debates about the 'working poor' (*wakingu puu*) and social inequality (*kakusa shakai*) while union representatives in the Netherlands speak about 'insecure work' (*onzeker werk*) rather than flexible employment. In a particular polemic contribution, Standing (2011: 1) referred to 'the Precariat' as a new and dangerous class in the making of 'millions around the world without an anchor of stability'. This precariat is not solely defined in terms of labour market position but the temporary character of its employment constitutes a core aspect.

These workers are probably most in need of representation by labour unions. However, unions have long neglected these employment types and have achieved little advancement in organising them. Instead they have been identified with the standard employment relationship of full-time and continuous employment and argued to almost exclusively represent standard workers 'with their pensions, paid holidays and enterprise benefits, often subsidised by the state' (Standing 2011: 7). At times, the unions are seen as part of the problem. However, there are indications that at least some unions are trying to organise alternative employment types and unions still may have an important role to play when it comes to improving the conditions of these workers as the success of strategies proposed by authors like Vosko (2010) and Standing (2011) is far from obvious. The challenge that alternative employment types present to unions is shared across countries and there are few unions that managed to organise substantial numbers of precarious workers and to improve their working conditions. However, important differences also exist in terms of the timing and extent of the rise in alternative employment types, the regulatory context, and unions' legitimising principles and identity. This paper aims to study these differences by analysing the organisation and representation of alternative workers by unions in three countries: the Netherlands, the UK, and Japan. These countries show substantial differences in industrial relations and can be characterised as 'coordinated at the national level' (the Netherlands), 'liberal' (UK), and 'coordinated at the enterprise level' (Japan). For example, the Netherlands has achieved important progress in the 'regularisation' of alternative employment, including specific collective labour agreements for agency workers, while Japanese unions still struggle to overcome their established exclusive commitment to standard workers and have only recently begun to organise part-time workers.

The paper draws on interviews with union representatives in these countries. All the unions included are active in the organisation of alternative employment types. In Japan, this concerned interviews in 2007 and 2011 with all three levels of unionism: the national federation Rengo, the industry union UI Zensen, and the enterprise union of a major retailer. The interviews in the Netherlands took place in 2010 and 2012 and involved several representatives of FNV Bondgenoten, CNV Dienstbond and CNV Vakmensen. The interviews in the UK took place in 2012 and involved representatives of UNISON, UNITE, USDAW and the GMB. This paper is a first attempt to compare and contrast the developments in these countries and, also because of the complexities involved, will be exploratory in character. In addition to the chosen countries, several further decisions are crucial to defining the topic of the paper and analysing the findings. First of all, the focus will be on the strategies of mainstream unions within these countries as the dominant representatives of labour. Secondly, the paper requires a definition of alternative employment. In order to allow for the specificities of each country, the paper uses a neutral and inclusive definition by including all employment that does not fall under the standard employment relationship consisting of full-time and continuous employment. It can include temporary, agency, self-employed and part-time workers but the focus will be on those types that are particularly precarious in the country under consideration and have been successfully targeted by unions. Finally, there are issues of terminology. There has been a plethora of concepts to discuss alternative employment types including

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<sup>1</sup> *Shokutaku* refers to senior workers rehired on temporary contracts after mandatory retirement. Under *payrolling* the firm remains responsible for the recruitment, selection and treatment of employees while legal employment and the accompanying administration are handed over to a *payrolling* firm.

'vulnerable', 'precarious', 'contingent' and 'flexible' employment. There is also the question whether we should still speak about 'standard' or 'regular' employment as both terms feel like an anachronism at times. For the time being I have decided to be pragmatic and speak about 'standard' and 'alternative' or 'non-standard' employment.

The objectives of the paper are threefold. First, it provides an overview of the critical issues in each country, the strategies that unions have developed for the organisation and representation of contingent workers, and their achievements. Secondly, the developments are linked to the specific labour market context and identity of the unions in each of the countries. Finally, the paper develops a framework to compare the developments in the three countries and to draw lessons about the organisation and representation of alternative employment. This enables an informed assessment of the role that unions can play in improving precarious jobs. The paper is structured as follows. The next section discusses the rise in alternative employment types together with the lack of an appropriate response by the unions. The subsequent three sections discuss the developments in respectively the Netherlands, the UK and Japan. This then allows for a comparison and analysis of the similarities and differences. The paper ends with a summary and conclusions.

### **The rise in alternative employment and the union response**

The available statistics do not always make it possible to clearly assess the rise in alternative employment types but they nevertheless show a strong rise, particularly in Japan and the Netherlands. In Japan, the share of standard workers declined from 79.1 per cent in 1995 to 65.6 per cent in 2010, an almost 15 per cent decline. Instead, there has been a rise in part-time employment (from 11.8% to 16.6%), *arubaito*<sup>2</sup> (from 5.7% to 6.8%), temporary contracts (from 0.7% in 2000 to 6.8%), and agency workers (from 0.9% in 2002 to 1.9%) (JILPT, 2012). In the Netherlands the rise in part-time employment is most striking. According to Eurostat data, its share has risen from 38 per cent in 1996 to 48.3 per cent in 2009. The rise in other employment types seemed rather modest as the share of flexible employment between 2000 and 2009 remained around 14 per cent according to Statistics Netherlands (CBS). However, in 2010 the UWV<sup>3</sup> presented alternative statistics that estimated the flexible share of all employees for the previous year at 34 per cent by including a wider definition of both 'flexibility' and 'workers' than Statistics Netherlands.<sup>4</sup> Finally, the data on the UK are less striking. The share of temporary workers actually declined from 7.4 to 6.4 per cent between 1995 and 2012. The share of self-employed and part-time workers showed a modest rise in this period, respectively from 13.7 to 14.2 per cent and from 26.2 to 30.8 per cent (Office for National Statistics). However, as argued in the remainder of the paper, these data are likely to underestimate the rise of precariousness because of a strong rise in privatisation and outsourcing, and the implications this holds for working conditions.

The response of unions to this rise has been modest at best. A relatively small but significant literature has developed on the organisation of non-standard workers by unions across Europe and these studies show how unions have traditionally opposed such employment because of the inferior working conditions and the threat to secure jobs (Goslinga and Sverke 2003). Moreover, the prevalence of competing interests and representative conflict has negatively affected the willingness to organise and the dominant union strategy has been exclusion (Delsen 2001, Goslinga and Sverke 2003, Heery 2009). Most European unions now accept part-time employment because of its greater equality with standard employment and the opportunities it offers, especially to female and young workers (Goslinga and Sverke 2003). However, the attitude towards more precarious forms of employment often remains ambiguous (Delsen 2001; McKenzie 2010). Organisation strategies are limited and fragmented, and the majority of unions have failed to organise substantial numbers of these workers in spite of the need to stem the long-term decline in membership (Goslinga and Sverke 2003, Heery 2009, Pernicka 2005). The organisation of

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<sup>2</sup> *Arubaito* are jobs that tend to be taken by people who are still in school or with other reasons to work a relatively small number of hours.

<sup>3</sup> Uitvoeringsinstituut Werknemers Verzekeringen: the organisation commissioned by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment to administer the various employee insurances.

<sup>4</sup> Several factors explained this higher share of flexible employment. It includes the of different databases, the inclusion of a wider range of flexible jobs (i.e. jobs up to 12 hours per week, temporary contracts over 1 year, temporary workers who expect to become permanent), and the inclusion of self-employed workers ('Zelfstandigen Zonder Personeel', ZZP-ers). These differences suggest that the UWV data can be argued to overestimate flexible employment to some extent but they nevertheless seem a better assessment of the risen flexibility in the Dutch labour market (see Hilbers et al. 2011 for a further explanation for the differences in data).

non-standard workers has therefore been recognised as one of the main current challenges (Malo 2006) and certain authors present a clearly negative assessment of the contributions by labour unions. For example, Standing (2011), in a generalisation that seems to ignore important differences between countries, considers unions as solely representing core employees and argues that they are highly unlikely to speak for the precariat.

In order to analyse the organisation of contingent workers by UK unions, Heery (2009) developed a framework that distinguishes four approaches: exclusion, subordination, inclusion, and engagement. This concerns both the rules for membership and participation (the internal strategies of representation) and the attempts to regulate the employment relationship (the external strategies of representation). In the case of 'exclusion' unions oppose contingent employment and refuse to organise these workers in an attempt to protect workers from insecure employment and existing members from increased labour market competition. Under 'subordination' unions accept contingent workers, both as members of the labour market and as potential members, but 'on a secondary basis' (Ibid: 431). Heery explains how these workers may be considered an employment buffer that helps to protect the employment of core members. The attitude of unions changes rather fundamentally under the other two strategies. In the case of 'inclusion' unions accept contingent workers as equal members to workers on standard contracts, with the same membership status and rights of participation. Finally, 'engagement' also fully accepts contingent workers as union members but stresses the need for 'tailored systems of representation' that acknowledge the different interests of these workers (Ibid.). This last strategy also differs from 'inclusion' in its acceptance of the legitimacy of contingent work. Although the four approaches are conceptually distinct, reality is likely to be more diffuse as illustrated by Heery's reference to 'a mix of measures that promote both "inclusion" and "engagement"' among unions that organise these workers (Ibid: 432).

This framework can inform a first attempt to classify the response to the rise in alternative employment types by the unions in the Netherlands, the UK and Japan. This aims to show how the organisation of these employment types is not only shaped by the specific national contexts but also by the specific character of the unions as illustrated by Locke and Thelen's (1995) discussion of 'contextualized comparisons'. They stress how common challenges impact unions in different countries in different ways because of 'issues of identity and the political valence that different issues possess in the different national settings' (Ibid: 338). In other words, the response by unions is not just determined by the existing national practices but also by their own legitimizing principles and identity. Unions have specific 'sticking points' because 'the most intense conflicts are those which are so bound up with the traditional union identities that their renegotiation in fact sets in motion a much deeper and fundamental reevaluation of labor's "project" within a given institutional and political setting (Ibid: 342). This importance of union identity also informs Hyman's analysis of European trade unionism; in particular how these identities both enable and restrain union strategies. It explains why 'developments which constitute major challenges for unions in some countries occasion little disquiet in others' (Hyman 2001: 162).

The next three sections discuss the developments in respectively the Netherlands, the UK and Japan. Each section will provide some necessary background through a short description of the rise of the dominant alternative employment types and the position of these workers. The subsequent focus is on the changes in organising, here simply defined as the inclusion as union members, and representation, and the challenges to balance the interests of existing and new members. Specific examples of organising and representing will be included. Each section ends with a discussion of the achievements and remaining challenges. As the focus of the paper is comparative, the three cases will not be discussed in detail.

### **Organising and representing alternative employment in the Netherlands**

The Dutch labour market knows a very high percentage of part-time employment, in particular among female workers. Moreover, a process of 'regularisation' has resulted in an important equality with full-time employment in terms of wages, employment stability, social security, etc. (see e.g. Portegijs et al. 2008). Visser (2002: 33) concludes that '[p]art-time jobs are neither atypical nor flexible' and Plantenga (2002: 59) states how '[p]art-time jobs are no longer similar to marginal jobs, concentrated in the lower segment of the labour market'. Problems remain (e.g. part-time employment remains more prevalent at lower functions and continues to hinder career development) but its 'regular' character justifies the focus on more precarious employment types in this paper. As mentioned in the previous section, the UWV estimated the share of flexible employment at 34 per cent in 2009. This includes self-employed workers as

many are quasi-independent because they work for just one or two principals, often their previous employer. The data, included in Table 1, also show a strong rise, at least until the economic decline since the fourth quarter of 2008.

	1996	2006	2007	2008	2009	Growth 07-08	Growth 08-09
<b>Flexible employees (1)</b>	862	1,688	1,794	2,021	1,999	12.7%	-1.1%
• <b>Agency</b>	247	368	377	389	323	3.2%	-17.0%
• <b>Other</b>	615	1320	1417	1632	1676	15.2%	2.7%
<b>Permanent employees (2)</b>	4,108	5,065	5,080	5,134	5,108	1.1%	-0.5%
<b>Self-employed (ZZP-ers) (3)</b>	397	584	611	652	629	6.7%	-3.5%
<b>Flexible employment (1 + 3)</b>	1,258	2,272	2,405	2,673	2,628	6.7%	-3.5%
<b>Share flexible employment</b>	23%	31.0%	32.1%	34.2%	34.0%		

**Table 1 Persons with an open-ended contract and in the flexible layer**

Source: UWV (2010: 32)

A milestone in the development of flexible employment in the Netherlands is the 1999 Flexibility and Security Act ('Wet Flexibiliteit en Zekerheid' or 'Flexwet'). Its content stretches much further but of particular importance are two provisions concerning fixed-term contracts and temporary work agencies. First, the number and duration of fixed-term contracts have been regulated by the so-called 'chain' provision, also known as the 3x3x3 rule. It states that after 3 years or 3 consecutive contracts an open-ended contract exists unless there has been an interruption of 3 months or more. Secondly, a worker's contract with a temporary work agency (TWA) constitutes a regular employment contract but not during the first 26 weeks when the so-called 'agency clause' applies and the end of the agency placement constitutes the end of the relation with the agency. However, the act also provides substantial leeway for social partners to agree alternative arrangements in collective labour agreements. Of particular importance are the agreements reached within the TWA industry, in particular those between the unions and the ABU, the dominant organisation of employers. These agreements introduced a so-called 'phase system' that affects the application of the law's provisions on, for example, dismissal, social security, pensions and training. After the first phase (A), which runs for 78 weeks (rather than the 26 weeks stated in the Act), the agency workers qualifies for a fixed-term contract in phase B. After a maximum of 2 years, the worker qualifies for an open-ended contract with the agency in phase C. However, there are few guarantees that the worker will progress to the latter phases as illustrated by the fact that 93 per cent of all agency workers in 2008 were in phase A (ABU 2009).

There are plenty of indications that many flexible workers are in a precarious position and prefer 'standard' employment. A substantial share accepts flexible employment because they have not found permanent employment. This held for 28.2 per cent TWA workers and 32.9 per cent of temporary workers in 2007. Data from 2002 found that 61.9 per cent of all flexible workers preferred an open-ended contract (OSA/CPB 2004: 90). Among agency workers, the shares of both older workers and breadwinners have increased; the latter to over 40 percent in 2008. There has also been a growing share of vulnerable groups (i.e. people over 45 years, ethnic minorities, the long-term unemployed and those partially disabled to work) among agency workers (ABU 2009). Progress to 'better' forms of employment is limited as illustrated by UWV data from 2010 on the employment status of agency staff after three years: 46 per cent had temporary work, 7 per cent was unemployed and only 19 per cent had an open-ended contract (UWV 2010).

Dutch union representatives confirmed the continued rise in alternative employment types besides agency, temporary and on-call employment (see 'other' in Table 1). New types include *payrolling* and the acceptance of work ('aannemen van werk') by an organisation that subsequently performs the work on the premises of the client. The rise in self-employment (ZZP-ers) also fits this development. Often the legal position of these workers is far from clear and one of the representatives spoke about 'product development on the labour market'. The interviewees also confirmed the inferior working conditions of many flexible workers. This holds in particular for agency workers in certain industries and this section therefore focuses on the union strategies towards agency workers. Many collective agreements require equal working conditions between standard and agency workers but the latter tend to be in 'starter' positions with limited pay. In addition, a substantial share of agency workers, especially but in no way limited to immigrants, do not receive the pay and benefits they are entitled. For example, a study in 2011 by the Inspectorate of Working Conditions ('Arbeidsinspectie') found that 25 per cent of

the certified TWAs structurally paid less than the minimum wage. Moreover, the work pressures for agency workers can be so high that it is unlikely that many can perform this work for more than a number of years. Fears for losing their job stops many agency workers from complaining.

*That is because we have a system where agency workers can never complain because if they do so, they are without work the next day. If they complain about working conditions, about low wages, or about working hours, they are fired tomorrow.<sup>5</sup>*

These circumstances illustrate both the need and possibility for unions to organise these workers. However, it is safe to say that Dutch unions have had limited success in organising agency workers, at least until recently. They were originally organised within the TWA industry but union membership has been almost non-existent at less than one per cent. Several factors have contributed to these extremely low levels of membership including a limited awareness of the excesses by those unions responsible for agency workers and the likelihood that these workers are less likely to be a long-term union member.

*Look, we have always had problems and this is likely to continue, that it is difficult to organise agency workers. Agency workers are, you do see at times that they are employed for a long time in certain firms, but they are also likely to move to other jobs. And we always had the dilemma, let's say we had two members among 20 agency workers, should I spend time on them?*

It is also important to point out that the strong institutionalisation of unions at the national level and the likelihood that the government will declare agreements generally binding make that Dutch unions are less concerned about union density than many of their counterparts in other countries. As pointed out by Ebbinghaus and Visser (1999: 145), 'by enhancing the institutional security of unions and their leaders, and by establishing a quasi-monopoly of union representation, corporatism intentionally diminishes the need for unions to prove their strength through mobilization and lowers the political and organizational incentives for union recruitment'.

However, the attitude of several unions seems to have changed and there are several successful organising attempts. The justification for the change in policy is twofold. First, there are the arguments of solidarity, the conviction that all workers deserve a fair wage, especially when agency and standard workers perform similar jobs next to each other. Several interviewees also referred to the importance of intergenerational solidarity as many union members have come to realise that their children struggle to find standard employment. This is complemented by more instrumental arguments that the alternative employment types negatively affect the working conditions of standard workers and thus union members and has negative implications for pension funds. These considerations have raised awareness of the need to organise agency workers and several interviewees referred to the earlier debates within the unions on childcare as it also required some time before they achieved a change in attitude among union members. At the same time, the organising attempts remain linked to specific issues and the initiative of specific union officials, although others are likely to follow in case of success. Some initiatives include the following.

***The organisation of immigrant workers by CNV Vakmensen.*** This union, active in several so-called heavy professions ('zware beroepen'), has started to organise immigrant, predominantly Polish, agency workers as a large share does not receive the appropriate pay. When they contact the union, it will perform a quick check on their contract and wage slip; the first tends to be okay but not the latter. It will then ask the workers to get several colleagues together for a visit from the union. Subsequently there tend to be two options:

1. To continue working until the end of phase A (78 weeks) when the worker is unlikely to be offered any further employment. The union can make a wage claim up to five years after the contract and this strategy means that any complaint does not terminate employment early.
2. If the group of workers is substantial, the union can approach the employer as a larger group cannot be replaced easily. In this case, the union offers to keep the case out of the publicity but demands the appropriate wage and at least a one-year phase B contract after the end of phase A

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<sup>5</sup> All quotations of Dutch union representatives were translated by the author.

for the workers it concerns. In return, it may not demand the full compensation of missed payments; also because such a claim may cause the bankruptcy of smaller agencies.

***The organisation of agency workers in the Metal industry by FNV Bondgenoten.*** Representatives for workers in the Metal industry at FNV Bondgenoten developed an Excel spreadsheet that enables a quick comparison between the wages and other benefits of agency and standard workers. This is particularly relevant because the collective agreement states that the difference between the total working conditions of agency and standard workers cannot be more than ten per cent. When they expect this to be relevant, the union asks their members to organise a meeting where they ask both standard and flexible workers for their (anonymised) wage slips. In the first firms that the union visited, the agency workers received 25 to 35 per cent less than standard workers because of issues like missing shift and overtime additions. The union then approaches the employer. The subsequent process can easily take several months but the union has been very successful in raising the working conditions of agency workers. As stated by the interviewee:

*I have never had such easy negotiations. And at times we were slightly wrong but then I said: 'okay, but you still have 28 per cent to go, that's nice progress'.*

The improvements to working conditions have included a thirteenth month, holiday pay over the shift pay, reduced hours for 13 days per year, yearly increments, and extra holidays. Together they have been worth up to 25 percent in accordance with the requirement of a maximum ten percent different.

There have been other, by now rather well-known, examples including the organising among cleaners and within Albert Heijn distribution by FNV Bondgenoten. All these attempts require from the agency workers that they become members to the union as a prerequisite for taking action. This held in particular for the actions among the cleaners in accordance with the strong organising model that informed these actions. Across all these examples, the unions were able to balance or even align the interests of standard and agency workers. It appears that the numbers give agency workers the visibility to convince the standard members that action is required. At the same time, there are obvious limits to this support and unions need to balance the interests between standard and alternative members. Moreover, there are still many places where unions are not actively organising agency workers (e.g. foreign agency workers in distribution centres).

### **Organising and representing alternative employment in the UK**

The rise in alternative employment types in the UK has been more modest as illustrated by Table 2. There has been a long-standing in part-time employment and one in four employees now works part-time. Many of these jobs are precarious as they offer poor pay, are low-skilled and unstable, and often with limited working hours (Slater 2011). On the other hand, there has been no clear rise in temporary and self-employment although the latter is prevalent in certain industries including construction and occupations including taxi and delivery drivers. Slater (Ibid: 43) ascribes this limited rise of alternative employment types to the lightly regulated labour market, which reduces the demand for alternative employment as 'there is often little to gain by employers since standard employment faces relatively low costs compared to most other industrialised economies'. However, part-time employment is relatively high and the prevalence of privatisation in the public sector and outsourcing suggests a rise in more precarious employment. The latter developments concern a significant group of workers as illustrated by UNISON's estimate that about 25 per cent of all 'public service' workers in the areas they represent work for contracted firms. It does not necessarily result in alternative employment but the subcontractor relationship can be argued to create a degree of atypicality or vulnerability. Not all these alternative employment jobs are precarious but protection remains uneven and complicated, also because of the distinction between employees and workers. Workers are usually not entitled to, amongst others, minimum notice periods, protection against unfair dismissal, and statutory redundancy pay. Standard workers tend to be employees but many others only have worker status (Slater 2011). In accordance, alternative employment types are more likely to be characterised by low pay and the absence of sick and pension provisions and opportunities for career progression (McGovern et al. 2004). Temporary and agency positions are also more likely to be part-time and young and non-white workers tend to be over-represented.

Year	Total employment (x 1,000)	As a percentage of total employment			
		Employees	Self-employment	Part-time employment (incl. self-employed)	Temporary employment
1995	25,818	84.7	13.7	26.21	7.4
1996	26,060	85.2	13.5	26.95	7.4
1997	26,526	85.7	13.0	27.32	7.9
1998	26,795	86.5	12.5	27.38	7.4
1999	27,168	86.9	12.2	27.21	7.1
2000	27,484	87.2	11.8	27.39	7.1
2001	27,710	87.3	11.9	27.21	7.1
2002	27,920	87.3	11.9	27.83	6.5
2003	28,182	86.7	12.6	28.33	6.1
2004	28,480	86.5	12.7	28.33	6.2
2005	28,770	86.6	12.6	27.84	5.8
2006	29,025	86.5	12.9	27.87	5.8
2007	29,228	86.3	13.0	27.88	6.0
2008	29,440	86.3	13.0	28.05	5.5
2009	28,960	86.1	13.3	29.02	5.8
2010	29,019	85.6	13.6	29.92	6.3
2011	29,166	85.5	13.8	30.31	6.3
2012	29,519	84.9	14.2	30.77	6.4

**Table 2 UK employment by category, 1995-2012**

Source: Office for National Statistics

Like their Dutch counterparts, many UK unions recognise these workers as most in need of a union but also acknowledged their weakness in organising agency workers in particular. The UNISON representative listed a multiplicity of problems why they struggled to reach these workers including a lack of experience ('simply not used to') and resources. Moreover, there also was, and continues to be, the perception that agency workers constitute a buffer and this informed concerns whether the union had anything to offer them. However, there has been a change in strategy amongst some unions and union representatives. The interviewees acknowledged that the organisation of agency workers is 'really, really difficult' but also stated that it can be done and there were several examples of organising success. Some initiatives include the following.

***The organisation of agency workers in Salford Council by UNITE.*** Among the refuse collectors in Salford Council, the share of agency workers had risen over the years to around 40 per cent. It created a certain resentment among standard workers because agency workers were taking jobs and hired in situations that were handled previously through overtime. It also resulted in a two-tier workforce with the agencies insisting that the workers are self-employed. It meant that the agency workers were responsible for their own protective equipment. In the end, this proved an issue to unite the standard and agency workers.

*The common ground was to say to them directly, listen, these workers are in full-time jobs. If they don't get full-time jobs, your jobs are being casualised more and more ... when is it going to be that you're not getting protective equipment, when is that going to happen? When you don't get protective equipment... your terms and conditions get eroded. So you've got to fight with them out there.*

The union representatives thus were able to convince members that the use of agency work was undermining their terms and conditions. The concerns resulted in a two-day strike. Press coverage created some further momentum. Other important factors for success included the issue being a winnable one and an important solidarity between the different groups of workers; also because they all lived in the Salford area and there was generational solidarity with fathers being 'standard' and sons being 'agency'. There union also lobbied to the town hall and the council (Labour) and there was a strong organisation on the ground, good planning, and local support. As a result, all of the agency workers it concerned were given fulltime contracts. There was also an agreement reached that agency workers would receive a full-time temporary contract that offered equality of pay with standard workers after a qualifying period.



***The organisation of self-employed workers by GMB.*** The GMB has made important progress in organising self-employed workers. Many construction workers, mini cab drivers, and delivery drivers have been told by employment agencies that they have to declare themselves self-employed to get any work. Those workers are not necessarily inclined to fight this requirement because they profit from the lower percentage of taxes for self-employed workers (18 rather than 25 per cent). They may not have any sick pay, any paid holidays or any further rights but that may not be the most important issue to young workers in particular. However, it is bogus self-employment. And because of this, there is actually a collective identity among these workers that makes it possible to organise. An example concerns mini cab drivers. When the union is able to organise a substantial group of these workers, they can organise a 'strike' if the workers do not pay the fees to the firm that organises them (the fee for the use of the radios). In this case, it is a rents strike rather than a strike for higher wages. Another example would be the organisation of DHL drivers where the bargaining concerns the price per package rather than wages. This has been very successful, but in particular because it concerns bogus self-employment. In a number of places, the union managed to secure recognition for self-employed workers. However, the case of self-employed workers presents a specific challenge that the unions come across in organising certain alternative employment types. The GMB's long-term ambition is to prevent bogus self-employment because they consider this type of employment against the long-term interests of the workers it concerns. However, this will not be possible in the short run and they need to acknowledge that this policy may not be supported by the self-employed workers who can take advantage of their lower taxes. It contributes to a two-prong strategy:

*We're attacking it politically nationally, we're tackling it with HM Revenue and Customs, but we're not making it a demand on behalf of individual groups of members, because they wouldn't support it frankly, they just wouldn't support it.*

In spite of these successes, there are still many situations where unions struggle to organise. This holds, for example, for the organisation of agency and temporary workers in many situations. Most unions see a change in the attitude towards these workers as shop stewards and officials realise that they may be around for many years. However, progress in organising has often been limited. For example, the USDAW representatives estimated that they had organised less than a thousand agency workers in total. They also acknowledged that it would be *foolish to assume that all of our reps have always been in the right place on this, particularly with the agency workers issue or any of the other equality issues. They're not, I think, and we don't pretend that they are.* However, the union tried to stress that 'unity is strength' and that it is in all workers' interests to recruit agency workers and to ensure that they are treated equally because that is what is undermining terms and conditions. USDAW was able to achieve several improvements in terms of better pay and conditions. Sometimes new jobs have been created which are slightly less well paid than other jobs because the roles the agency was covering were less skilled, more basic roles. But in other situations, this was not accepted because it would create a two-tier workforce.

This relates to the challenge to balance the interests of workers. This even extends between different groups of standard workers after privatisation and outsourcing. In the case of the former, there is the importance of TUPE, the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations, which protects employees' terms and conditions when a business is transferred from one owner to another. Employees of the previous owner automatically become employees of the new employer on the same terms and conditions. This is of crucial importance for the workers it concerns but also holds the danger of a stratified labour force with subsequent negative implications for the union. Once an original employee has gone, the contract might be taken by somebody on inferior working conditions. This negatively impacts the position of the union as *the new workers come in on lower terms and conditions, they don't see the union doing anything for them, but see the union looking after the people who'd been transferred.* This presents a huge challenge to any union that is trying to make itself relevant to the new workers: *What you end up with is a scenario where we are less effective where there's a transfer because these transfers become like a barrier to recruiting new people.*

### **Organising and representing alternative employment in Japan**

Japan has also seen a strong rise in alternative employment types. It concerns a long-term trend that has been particularly strong since the 1990s and among female and young workers (JILPT 2012, Rebick 2005). Its share has increased to almost 35 percent in 2010, after a rise of almost 15 percentage points in 15 years.

Important types include part-time and *arubaito*, accounting for about 17 and seven per cent of total employment (JILPT 2011: 12). The rise has been particularly prevalent in certain industries such as retail and hospitality (Kōsei rōdōshō 2008: 82-3). For example, over three-quarters of employees at the larger supermarkets were part-time or *arubaito* as early as 2002 (JILPT 2005a: 19). The quantitative importance has qualitative implications. Many part-timers work long hours, sometimes more than 35 hours a week, and are considered part of the core workforce, albeit as ‘permanent employees with inferior occupational status (and pay)’ (Gadrey et al. 2001: 175). It has inspired qualifications such as ‘quasi part-timers’ (Passet 2003), ‘core part-time workers’ and ‘fulltime part-time workers’ (Tsuchida 2004). The rise can be ascribed to a dualism in the Japanese labour market because access to the internal labour markets for standard employment tends to be limited to recent graduates or certain employees during the early years of their career (Keizer 2008, 2010). Others, including those with domestic responsibilities, have often have little choice but to opt for alternative employment types. Without the career progression and rising wages of standard jobs, these alternative employment types offer important cost advantages to firms and this has become an important consideration in the context of slow economic growth and the rise of service industries. The negative implications for workers are obvious.

Even more than in the other countries, Japanese unions are considered partly responsible to this outcome because of the importance of enterprise unionism. The enterprise unions are complemented by industrial and national federations but the latter mostly perform a coordinating role as the enterprise unions keep the major share of union dues, provide the majority of officials in industry and national federations, and hold the main decision making powers (Jeong and Aguilera, 2008; Whittaker, 1998). This dominance of enterprise unions has strongly shaped the identity of Japanese unionism. The relationship between unions and management has been highly cooperative under the mutual understanding that they ‘are in the same boat’ and that ‘survival or prosperity is the ultimate goal’ (Suzuki, 2004: 15). In accordance, membership has been limited to the standard workforce while other workers were considered outsiders to the ‘enterprise community’ (Jeong and Aguilera 2008, Urano and Stewart 2007, Weathers 2010, Whittaker 1998) and an employment buffer that supports survival during difficult times (Chalmers 1990). The inclusion of non-standard employees within the union would therefore conflict with the security of existing members (Honda 2007, Tachibanaki and Noda 2000). The unionisation rate is indicative. As late as 1999 only 2.5 per cent of ‘short-term workers’ were union member and these workers made up a mere 2.1 per cent of total union membership (JILPT 2005: 21).

This illustrates how Japanese unions have long complemented and confirmed the dualism in the labour market and have been considered part of the problem rather than a possible solution to the disadvantaged position of alternative workers (Yamashita, 2005). Urano and Stewart (2009: 28, 35-6) see Rengo and its affiliates as ‘unlikely vehicles for alternative strategies’ because of their ‘exclusionary ideology bound by the perpetuation of the cultural milieu of the secure work force’. The organisation of non-standard workers has been the prerogative of alternative unions like women-only and, in particular, regional or community unions (Broadbent 2008, Stewart 2006, Suzuki 2008, Urano and Stewart 2007, 2009, Weathers 2010). The rise in alternative employment provides these unions with a large pool of potential members. However, they face important challenges including small membership, a weak financial base, and a shortage of professional staff (Suzuki 2008, Weathers 2010). The prevalence of union shop agreements also limits their ability to organise employees in unionised workplaces. As a consequence, they account for less than one per cent of total union membership and their direct involvement in the core of industrial relations remains limited. It confirms the possible importance of the decision of mainstream unions to organise non-standard workers. These initiatives tend to be limited to part-time workers because of their increased responsibilities and relative employment stability. The unionisation rate for part-timers remains low but has changed from 2.7 per cent in 2001 till 5.6 per cent in 2010. Moreover, these percentages tend to be much higher in industries with a high share of part-time employment. This shows in the following two examples. They show an important overlap as an illustration of the complementarities that exist between industry and enterprise unions.

***The organisation of part-timers by UI Zensen.*** UI Zensen, the Japanese Federation of Textile, Chemical, Food, Commercial, Service and General Workers’ Unions, has been highly successful in organising part-time workers and this has contributed to almost 1.1 million members in 2010. Table 3 shows the rise in part-time membership to over 500,000 members and over 45 per cent of all its members in 2010, making UI Zensen responsible for over two thirds of all part-time union members in Japan.

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
<b>All members (1)</b>	826	862	948	1002	1036	1071	1093
– Male	444	447	456	479	490	495	495
– Female (2)	382	415	491	529	547	576	598
<b>Part-time members (3)</b>	244	290	386	413	460	490	507
– Male	25	33	51	56	77	81	79
– Female	219	257	335	357	384	409	429
<b>Share part-time members (3/1)</b>	29.5%	33.7%	40.7%	41.2%	44.5%	45.8%	46.4%

**Table 3 Membership UI Zensen (x 1,000)**

Source: data provided by UI Zensen

The growth in membership has come from both establishing new unions and recruiting new members to existing unions. However, success in setting up new unions does not come easily. For every firm where the union is successful, there are several firms where it does not succeed. This explains why the second strategy, the recruitment of part-time members to existing enterprise unions, has been dominant. The decision which part-timers qualify for membership rests with the enterprise unions but they tend to follow similar criteria. Most organise part-timers that either work more than 30 hours per week (the minimum number that requires contributions to pension and health insurance) or more than 20 hours per week (the minimum number that requires contributions to unemployment insurance). Enterprise unions try to convince potential members to join by offering a communication channel with the firm and stating the ambition to improve employment protection, working conditions, and other aspects like pensions and medical or life insurance. Moreover, union shop agreements play a similar role as for standard workers and contribute to the success of ‘organisation’ once part-time employees qualify for membership. The next example discusses these issues in greater detail by focusing on the unionisation of part-time employees by the enterprise union of a major retail company.

***The organisation and representation of part-timers by RetailCo enterprise union.*** This example refers to the strategies by the enterprise union of a major retail firm, here referred to as RetailCo. The firm operates a variety of formats but the case refers to its superstores, large supermarkets that also sell apparel and household goods. Its enterprise union, a member of UI Zensen, has organised so-called ‘long-hour part-timers’, employees who work more than 30 hours a week, since 2006. They number about 37.5 per cent of all non-standard employees and their recruitment has been very successful with 98 per cent joining the union. It has resulted in about 55 per cent of all employees being union member. The RetailCo union representatives ascribed this success to several factors including extensive promotion activities at every shop, the support by standard employees, and the company permission for the union's promotional activities during working hours. The union subsequently participated in the development of a new personnel system with added career tracks for non-standard employees. Union representatives at both the enterprise and industry level were particularly concerned about those part-timers that are breadwinner and can use the new personnel systems to earn essential extra income. Part-time and *arubaito* employees used to be treated as a single group but three different courses are now distinguished: an ‘expert’ course, a ‘partner’ course, and a ‘helper’ course. The latter, specific for *arubaito* employees, is not specified further but the first two courses include various job grades. The courses and job grades offer new career opportunities and young and skilful part-timers in particular were said to appreciate these changes. At the same time, the changes have not fundamentally affected the wage gap between standard and other employees, especially as the large majority of part-timers continued to be in this lowest grade. The salary differences between subsequent job grades in the ‘partner’ course were limited to about 50 yen per hour, albeit that these differences tend to increase as pay rises with time and the tenure-wage curve of the higher grades is steeper. In addition, the employees in the ‘partner’ and ‘expert’ course receive an annual bonus equivalent to respectively one month and two months of salary. Overall, it was estimated that their annual pay would be 25 to 30 per cent higher than that of part-timers in the ‘starters’ position.

These examples show how mainstream Japanese unions have engaged with the organisation and representation of part-time workers. As in the other countries, there has been the challenge to balance the interests of the various groups of workers. This is particularly difficult in Japan given the entrenched dualism in the labour market. All interviewees pointed out the fundamental opposition between the interests of standard and other employees as, for example, better pay for part-time workers could be

perceived as going against the interests of standard employees. The representative of UI Zensen described this conflict, and the challenges involved, as follows.

*Wages are different, bonuses are different, retirement pay is different. Almost all labour conditions are different. But the union tries for improvement for both groups. But it is not equal. We try to make equal but we also think that we need some difference between non-standard and standard workers because they do not do the same job.*

This illustrates the difficult position of the unions but also explains the strong and wide support for the new personnel systems that include part-time employees. They can offer a means to achieve 'equality' or at least 'balance' and provide a framework to integrate part-time workers in the unions without alienating existing members. Finally, there have also been other developments in the organisation of agency workers. For example, UI Zensen was successful in convincing Komizon, a nursing care company in the Goodway Group, one of the biggest dispatching agencies. It was then able to set up enterprise unions at all related companies and subsidiaries within this group. In addition to establishing new enterprise unions, UI Zensen has also set up an occupation-based trade union for care workers and a union for agency workers. However, these initiatives have proven much more challenging given the established character of Japanese unionism.

### Analysis and comparison

The previous sections discussed how mainstream unions in all three countries have achieved progress in organising and representing alternative employment types. However, it is also clear that the specific strategies and outcomes have been shaped by the specific labour market situation and the character of unionism in each country. As a first step towards comparing the position of unions we can draw on Heery's distinction between strategies of exclusion, subordination, inclusion and engagement. Table 4 provides the outcome of such an exercise although it is important to acknowledge that it faces various challenges. For example, many unions will simply not consider (most) self-employed workers, even when it concerns bogus self-employment, as potential members and it can be debated whether this qualifies as an explicit strategy of exclusion. Moreover, the comparative focus of this paper means that not all union strategies concerning all employment types have been discussed in detail. This holds in particular for temporary employment and for this reason it is not included in the table. Finally, it is not always possible to clearly qualify union strategies within this framework, also because of differences between unions in a single country. The table therefore does not pretend to be representative of all unions in each country but is based on 'positive' examples.

Country	Employment types		
	Part-time employment	Agency employment	Self-employment
Netherlands	Engagement / inclusion	Engagement / subordination	Exclusion
UK	Engagement / inclusion	Subordination	Subordination
Japan	Engagement / subordination	Subordination	Exclusion

**Table 4 Mainstream union strategies to alternative employment types**

This exercise makes several aspects clear. First of all, actual union strategies often do not fit easily within the four types. At the basis of this ambiguity appear two strategic questions. First, whether to accept alternative workers as equal members ('inclusion') or to acknowledge their different position and interests? In the latter case, there is often a difficult balance to be struck between fully presenting those interests ('engagement') and the continued focus on the interests of standard members ('subordination'). This is illustrated by the positions of agency workers in the Netherlands and the UK and part-time workers in Japan. The examples included in this paper illustrate that several unions, and more in particular union representatives, have engaged in the organisation and representation of alternative employment types. At the same time, their precarious position in the labour market also informs the union strategies and we need to make a distinction between the internal and external strategies of representation. These workers, when they qualify, are usually entitled full membership and participation but the engagement often accepts their subordinate position in the labour market. In the case of Japan, this means that unions 'accept' the disadvantaged position of part-time workers in terms of remuneration and career opportunities. New personnel systems like the one at RetailCo offer better opportunities but also confirm the realities of the labour market. Something similar holds for the representation of agency workers in the

Netherlands and the UK. They are accepted as 'equal' members but often remain an employment buffer to protect 'standard' employment. The representative of GMB expressed this as follows when describing their attempts to organise agency workers at a Pizza producer.

*We still attempt to organise on the basis of saying to them, come into the union, and as and when the permanent jobs come up we will put your name forward. But as and when redundancies happen, we will put the agency names forward first. So we're very straightforward about it.*

This reflects the realities of the labour market but also the need to balance the interests of standard and alternative employment. For obvious reasons, this has been a returning topic in all interviews across the three countries. One of the representatives of FNV Bondgenoten expressed the dilemma as follows when discussing a possible attempt to agree a maximum percentage for agency work.

*If the success of the negotiations boils down to the demand for a maximum percentage of agency workers, let's say 10 percent, if that is the only remaining issue, then it will be a difficult discussion among standard union members... It may change but not now...*

The danger thus remains that the interests of non-standard workers may be sacrificed during collective bargaining and a strategy of 'engagement' could fall back towards 'subordination'. Interestingly enough, the conflict of interests showed strongly among 'standard' workers in the case of privatisation and outsourcing in the UK where the TUPE regulations contribute to a stratified labour force. However, in the cases described in this paper unions were often successful in achieving a balance of interests, for example by uniting the different types of workers among the refuse collectors in Salford Council by UNITE on the issue of protective equipment. Often the interests of the different groups are similar because they all feel threatened in their working conditions. This not only held for the actions by UNITE but also for both Dutch cases. At the same time, the balancing of interests requires continuous attention. This was well expressed by a representative of FNV Bondgenoten involved in the organisation of agency workers in cleaning.

*Yes, we managed to unite standard and agency workers, we succeeded among the cleaners of trains, but it requires a conscious effort; in your attitude, in your presentation, and in the training of your own people: make sure that the agency workers become a member, make sure that they participate, and give them real support if they are in trouble. These are no simple things. You have to be focused in your thinking. And you cannot allow that someone drives them apart. You also cannot allow that they drive each other away. So you have to say to the standard employee: don't do that! Because they are your colleagues. And we are all members of the same union, we all want the same. They have less than you and you have to make sure that they get the same.*

It is important to point out the challenge that this poses to the unions. It is not merely the willingness to represent other than standard members' interests that is at stake. There is always the danger that new precarious positions undermine existing jobs and unions are therefore not merely defending the vested interests of their members but protecting the condition of current and future workers. This is often not acknowledged by those who argue that unions merely speak for a privileged group (e.g. Standing 2011).

The exercise to use Heery's classification also shows that it can only provide a first step towards analysing the progress in organising alternative employment types. It is clear that all unions discussed in this paper achieved a change in attitude towards one or more alternative employment types. In this sense the findings definitely suggest inclusion and engagement. However, a change in attitude alone is unlikely to result in major organising success. All successful attempts towards organisation in this paper follow on the ability of unions to make a difference to the working conditions of the employment it concerns. The one exception may be the Japanese case where the union shop agreement almost guarantees high membership once a union starts to organise part-time workers. But in all the other examples membership follows onto specific and successful initiatives to improve working conditions. The cases also suggest several factors that contribute to success although they will depend on the regulatory context, the union, and the specific type of employment. However, achievable goals, specific strategies, the possibility to organise at the workplace, and the ability to achieve the support from standard union members by defining a shared interest all appear essential for success.

A final finding concerns the rise in alternative employment types as much as their organisation and representation by unions. The comparison clearly illustrates how regulation not only constrains employment types but also informs the rise and development of alternative types. As mentioned by one of the Dutch interviewees, there are strong indications of 'product development' in the labour market. When certain types become regulated, others seem to be developed to take their place. This is probably best illustrated by the comparison of the Netherlands and the UK. In the UK, the rise in alternative employment types appears to have been limited because of the light regulation in the entire labour market. In the Netherlands, on the other hand, the tighter regulation of, for example, agency workers seems to have contributed to the development of further alternatives. Moreover, these alternatives do not so much bring greater flexibility or productivity but are the outcome of 'regulatory arbitration' whereby firms take advantage of the differences across employment types and the segmentation in the labour market that allows them to fill low-paid and low quality jobs with disadvantaged groups. In the UK a similar process has even taken place by shifting jobs from the relatively generous conditions in the public sector to the much less regulated private sector. It illustrates the 'disembedding' forces of market capitalism and the need for stronger and more coherent regulation. As illustrated by the examples in this paper, unions can still play an important role in supporting and upholding that regulation.

### **Summary and conclusions**

Previous criticism against the unwillingness or inability of mainstream unions to organise and represent alternative employment types have often been well justified. There are clear differences between the three countries but all unions tended to have a rather exclusive focus on 'standard' employees. However, they have developed several successful initiatives to represent non-standard workers in recent years. On the back of specific initiatives to improve the working conditions of these workers, they have also achieved some success in organising although there is always a tendency that some of these workers subsequently progress to 'standard' employment relations and thus no longer contribute to the organisation of alternative employment types. In this process, unions have had to balance the interests of different groups and although that remains a challenge, in some situations more than in others, they have been successful at times as illustrated by the examples in this paper.

The extent and the impact of these developments are hard to assess as progress remains shaped by the circumstances on the labour market and the union identity in each country. For example, enterprise unionism remains dominant in Japan and in this sense the unions have not altered their main principles. Any progress in the representation of other employment types than part-timers remains unlikely. Dutch unions continue to struggle to increase their membership, both among 'standard' and alternative employment types. UK unions continue to face a very harsh environment. A future version of this paper should discuss the role of union structure and culture in the different countries in much greater detail to assess whether they are truly able to change their attitude towards alternative employment types or whether they accept their subordinate position within the labour market and thus (?) the union. We also need to acknowledge that the improvements in working conditions remain rather modest in most situations. There are the major successes like those achieved by FNV Bondgenoten for agency workers in the metal industry but even here there remains a discrepancy of ten percent in total working conditions. The alternative employment types thus remain inferior in terms of working conditions and there are no indications that the rise will not continue. It is also not clear to what extent the initiatives discussed here will inform a wider and lasting move to organise and represent these workers and whether the current structure of unions allows them to represent workers that are only loosely tied to specific places of work. However, maybe boot is highest when need is highest. The strong rise in flexible employment, either at the national level as in the Netherlands and Japan or more limited to specific industries as in the UK, also offers important opportunities. The share of certain alternative employment types, together with the prevalence of inferior working conditions, creates a visibility and urgency that has contributed to the success of organising initiatives.

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