

# Tim Edwards and Khadija Hyati

Khadija Hyati is the president and Tim Edwards is the acting vice-president of the Union of Cleaners of the Netherlands Trade Union Confederation (FNV). They were invited to contextualize Matthijs de Bruijne's work with this union.

**Khadija Hyati:** During the very first meeting of our Parliament of Cleaners in 2011, I was elected as its president. The Parliament was brought into being to give cleaners a shared voice; a voice to directly influence the collective bargaining negotiations in the Netherlands. But it, first and foremost, is for coming together and being able to make our own decisions. Obviously, I myself am a cleaner, and as the president I'm the face, the spokesperson of the Union of Cleaners of the Netherlands Trade Union Confederation (FNV). I feel responsible for the cleaners who do not dare let their voices be heard. In addition to the Parliament, we have a twelve-person administration and we also have artists.

**Tim Edwards:** At first, most cleaners weren't aware that the artists were present. Everything was new in 2010, and everyone was mainly concerned with the strike we were organizing. It was very exciting. We learned that we had to shout, we learned how to block people. The longer we were on strike, the more we became aware of all the props that had been created for it: the glove icon, the yellow flags made of cleaning cloths. These symbols helped convey our message immediately. But for most cleaners, a real awareness of that didn't come until 2014 when we started making our own protest signs. It was so colorful, everyone made their own sign and each sign was different.

**KH:** The artists that we work with, Marnix de Klerk and Nina Mathijssen of Detour, and Matthijs de Bruijne, said: write whatever it is you want people to see, even if it's your name. In this way, we as cleaners got a voice. It was good to do this because we were doing something in preparation for the actions, for the strike, and we had our own voice in that. It gives us as the cleaners the sense that we are in control and that it is not the FNV that determines everything.

**TE:** Before that, at union actions and demonstrations all the protest signs were the same, and everything was orange. And if you look at other workers' strikes, you see all these prefabricated, printed flags and signs. That was very clear when we went to that big demonstration in Brussel in 2014. All the other unions looked more or less the same. But we were different. Even though we were a small group, we had our flags, hundreds of different protest signs, and our mascot Blink on a cart. We were so proud. It's the same as when you go to a football match, you have something that shows who you are, something that makes you visible. And if you're on strike for so long, say sixteen weeks, then there are moments when you're not feeling great, that you have doubts. But if we're all together, with our protest signs and the other stuff, then you just go for it.

Now you saw all these different signs, with the yellow flags behind them. People found this much more pleasing, and the newspapers published a lot of photos of us. Like many other cleaners, I made my own signs. One of them said "just Tim." I saw a lot of protest signs that I had made in the newspapers, even though I'm not really that good with these kinds of things and there were some that I would say were much more beautiful.

A few years ago, in a women's magazine, I saw a fashion show with exactly the same type of signs as ours. I don't know if it was a famous designer, I don't know that many. But they were just like ours, the colors, the shapes, everything. Did someone see the pictures of our actions or is it just a coincidence?

**KH:** We definitely made our mark. Even outside of the Netherlands people know how to find us and are talking about us. We shouted “No longer invisible!” at our first strikes. This goal of visibility has been achieved, but we also have to maintain it. If we let it slip away, we notice how rapidly we begin becoming invisible again. People forget very quickly.

That’s why it’s important that the cleaners keep showing their faces, keep doing actions. The artists are a big part of this; they create our face. As a cleaner, I can go out and shout. I might be seen, but I will also be forgotten again. It’s the signs, the films that stick in your head. All those things that were thought up to make us and our strikes more visible, we should keep that going.

**TE:** The artists help make us visible. They tell our story to people in a language they can understand. *Het Afvalmuseum* (The Trash Museum, 2011) is one example. I have to admit I was a little flabbergasted when I heard about the plan. Really, I found it quite funny: art, but made of trash, joined with our stories. I immediately got the idea behind it, but I wondered if it would work. I found a syringe, and told the story of how I accidentally stuck myself with it. I remember the afternoon that the stories were recorded very well. In Utrecht Central Station, where the museum was displayed, people spent a lot of time reading the stories and looking at the objects, some for more than half an hour. I saw that they were interested in our work. The cleaners were astonished; this was our story, presented in a very unusual way. It was both art and politics; but often art is politics, isn’t it?

**KH:** We may be visible now, but we still haven’t accomplished everything, especially when there is a change of contract. Almost always working hours are reduced but the work load stays the same. How can you do that? Always work faster and faster? I wonder how the client company, but also the cleaning company can justify that. That trash can, that window sill, that floor, they’re still the same. And if there is not enough time to clean those during work hours, you shouldn’t try to finish that work. You just have to go home. Of course that’s hard to do. If, in a group of ten, there are two who go home and eight who stay after paid working hours, then those two are in trouble. But if the group takes it up together, they can win.

Sometimes I wonder if the politicians have any notion of what it means to have to clean a toilet in under thirty seconds. I do think that all politicians know that there are a lot of workers living in the Netherlands who do not have papers, but they just don’t want to admit that they know because many of them make use of the services these people provide. These domestic workers are cleaners who have less rights than we do. We know what the film *Work No Pay* (2012) is about, we only need to watch it once to understand the story of these domestic workers. But do the politicians realize what these workers have to go through?

**TE:** I am very happy to have these domestic workers in our union. Even though we cannot do that much for them because they are undocumented, they’re with us, and we can support them. If you’ve joined a union only for your own good, then you’ve joined for the wrong reasons. It’s not just about getting a raise or being better off personally. You do it for your colleagues. I may not be very rich myself, but others are really worse off. It’s for them that I am part of a union. I wish that we could do more, but without a revolution, that just can’t be done.