

Podcast “Amsterdamse Handelsgeest” (Amsterdam’s Trading Culture) – From the Golden Age to Now

➤ Episode 5: From the Jordan riot to modern labour law

In this episode of *Amsterdam Trading Culture: From the Golden Age to Now*, **Hidde Bruinsma**, lawyer and legal podcast maker, discusses with **Lex Heerma van Voss**, fellow of the International Institute for Social History, and **Esther van der Meulen**, law partner at Lexence and expert on labour law, how the social security and labour law system has evolved since the Jordaan riots.

Hidde Bruinsma: It is 5 July 1934. A state of war prevails in the Jordaan. The Dutch government had cut support payments for the unemployed by 10 per cent. This led to riots, six dead and more than 100 injured. Nevertheless, the measure remained in place. Finally, the unemployment crisis reached its lowest point in 1936 with 60,000 unemployed in Amsterdam. Today, we live in a different Netherlands, with a robust social safety net and a legal right to strike. But why do workers still continue to take to the streets for fair working conditions? Lex Heerma, can you tell us more about this?

Lex Heerma van Voss: Indeed, the immediate cause of the Jordan riot was the cut in support payments. People were already living in abject poverty and this additional cut was the straw. Moreover, Amsterdam had always had a riotous tradition. In the Jordaan, the situation broke completely out of control. Streets were broken up, barricades erected and the police cracked down. The army even had to step in. All this led to six deaths and more than 100 injured.

Hidde Bruinsma: Esther, how is the protection of the unemployed and workers today different from that time?

Esther van der Meulen: Today, we have a robust social safety net. For example, workers are entitled to unemployment, for a maximum of two years, and then possibly welfare. In addition, they have the legal right to strike, which did not exist back then. The government also intervenes more quickly now with schemes like the NOW scheme during the corona crisis. We saw how important such protection is to ensure livelihood security.

Hidde Bruinsma: You mention strikes. Are strikes still a powerful tool today?

Esther van der Meulen: Absolutely. For instance, we see recent nationwide strikes in the metal and engineering sector. Workers are willing to take to the streets when it comes to fair working conditions and livelihood security. The right to strike is an important tool still used today.

Hidde Bruinsma: Lex Heerma, how did the Jordan riot ultimately contribute to our current social security system?

Lex Heerma van Voss: Although the insurgency itself had no direct consequences, the persistent unemployment and poverty prompted the government to think again. After World War II, the welfare state was quickly built up. People never wanted to go back to the situation of the 1930s. That realisation laid the foundation for social security as we know it today.

Hidde Bruinsma: Esther, how do you see the future of the social security system?

Esther van der Meulen: There are challenges, especially around disability and the position of self-employed workers. A simpler and more accessible system, possibly with a basic income, could solve many problems. The complexity of systems like the WIA also calls for simplification, so that everyone knows where they stand.

Hidde Bruinsma: Thank you, Lex Heerma van Voss and Esther van der Meulen, for this fascinating conversation. Want to know more about how courts worked in Old Amsterdam or the role of notaries in the Golden Age? Then press the follow button to never miss an episode.