

Andries Sternheim

A Dutch Trade Unionist in the Frankfurt School

Summary

This biography concerns Andries Sternheim (1890-1944), a diamond cutter from Amsterdam. After a ten year long career in the international trade union movement Sternheim became a staff member of the Institut für Sozialforschung which was based in Frankfurt. This career was remarkable in itself and especially so regarding Sternheim's view on society. In Sternheim's view the quality of labour plays a crucial role. In contradiction to all pessimistic cultural views prevailing in the thirties, Sternheim developed a vision in which progress is central. His ideas were based on his year long experience in and with the trade union movement. His years of training in the General Dutch Union of Diamond Workers (ANDB) proved in this respect to be essential. In the ANDB he is confronted with a way of thinking and a world of experience which is completely different from that which he was used to at home. His father, Lion Sternheim, who was at first a commission agent and later on a commercial traveller, took to heavy drinking and became bankrupt; his marriage to Sara Keetje Biallosterski broke up and ended in a divorce. This forced the young Andries to go out and get work in the diamond business, just like his mother did. He was trained to become a diamond cutter and after passing the 'test' he joined the ANDB in 1909.

The ANDB was the first trade union in The Netherlands which realized an eight-hour working day and a paid holiday. Sternheim, who wished to leave all the misery at home behind him, searched elevated ideals which he initially tried to find in the conceptions of beauty of the literary movement of the eighteeneighties.

Frank van der Goes, a member of this literary movement and one of the founders of the Dutch Social Democratic Labour Party (SDAP) made him aware of the civilizing influence of the rising labour movement. Sternheim followed some courses given by the Commission for Social Work of the ANDB, studied several languages and in 1910 he obtained a teaching certificate in political economy and statistics. In the same year he joined the SDAP.

In 1913 he became unemployed and one year later he got a temporary appointment as a civil servant of the city council of Amsterdam. His career as a civil servant, which lasted till 1920, coincided with the first term of the aldermanship of the social democrat F.M. Wibaut. Together with his friend, the economist Van Gelderen, and Boekman, the future alderman of Amsterdam, Sternheim belonged to the first generation of social democratic civil servants.

In 1916 Sternheim was elected as a committee member of the famous Division III of the SDAP in Amsterdam. He, among others, was in opposition to the SDAP-leader Pieter Jelles Troelstra. He was especially opposed to the "truce of God", postponing the class struggle in favour of the national unity and the abolition of an international standpoint. He contributed to the oppositional weekly magazine *Het Weekblad* edited by Van der Goes and Wibaut.

In these years Sternheim developed into a socialist intellectual. He published articles about the development of the unemployment-insurance in the Netherlands in the German *Jahrbücher für Nationalökonomie*. Independently of both Hilferding and Lenin he recognized the new power balance which was developing between capital and labour because of the rise of the trade union movement and the interpenetration of society and state. In his article *The Economic Development of Japan* (1917) he applied Kautsky's analysis of German imperialism to Japan which was undergoing a similar process of industrialization stimulated by the authority of the state. In *League of Nations and World Peace* (1919) he gave a critical commentary on the peace treaty of Versailles. He believed that the peace treaty bore the seed of a new world war. Sternheim now felt accepted as a member of the informal intellectual labour community with Boekman, Van Gelderen and De Wolff. This, however, came to an end when Van Gelderen left for the Dutch East Indies, when the publication of *Het Weekblad* was stopped, and when Sternheim was appointed as head of the documentation division of the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU) which was re-established in Amsterdam in 1919.

In this new position Sternheim was even more poignantly confronted with the big issues the international labour movement was concerned with after the First World War. For the first time, the international labour movement was represented in organs like the

ILO and the League of Nations. Would the IFTU be able to play an independent part in international politics? How was this related to the national balancing of power of the trade union movement? In many countries the social democratic party became either the government party or the most important opposition party. In addition to the defence of universal suffrage, the eight-hour working day and social legislation, the labour movement strove to expand political democracy into economic democracy by means of socialization and worker participation. Sternheim was critical of the potential of possible international actions of trade unions. Attempts to form an anti-war committee of international union secretaries of miners, transport workers and metalworkers failed. The representative of the internationalist standpoint, IFTU-secretary Edo Fimmen, lost his position in 1923. Sternheim concluded that the real power was vested in the national trade union federation. The influence on the league of Nations and the ILO proceeds via the influence the federations had on the national governments.

In *Socialism in its Latest Varieties* (1922) Sternheim argued that in one country after another socialism was coming to its 'constructive' phase. He based himself on the system of British guild socialism and on Austro-Marxists like Hilferding and Otto Bauer. It is in this book that he introduces the term 'cultural socialism', but he did not separate this from the struggle of the trade union movement like Vorrink was to do later. Sternheim had an inspiring effect on young social democrats like B.W. Schaper en M. van der Goes van Naters.

Constructive socialism and cultural socialism led to the idea of worker participation. Sternheim contributed to the activities of a SDAP committee concerned the political system of social democracy under the chairmanship of Troelstra and in 1925 he, together with I. Monas, set up *Medezeggenschap* (Participation) which was meant to be a monthly paper for local trade union officials. He also managed to attract staff members who did not belong to the circle of social democrats. However, this expansion did not prove to be sufficient and, after a year, there was not enough interest to go on with the paper. The attention was shifted to issues concerning rationalisation and unemployment.

Between 1924 and 1926 Sternheim was intensely involved in the activities of the joint committee of SDAP and NVV (Dutch Union of Trade Unions) which dealt with 'The Military Issue' in which a strong plea for disarmament was heard in accordance with the

propositions of the League of Nations. As far as Sternheim was concerned this plea did not exclude the possibility of a defensive war.

The rise of the communist movement affected the international trade union movement because of the tension between the Red Trade Union International inspired by Moscow and the IFTU based in Amsterdam. IFTU secretary Edo Fimmen developed into a pronounced supporter of cooperation with the Russians; IFTU secretary Jan Oudegeest was a strong opponent. Even though Fimmen resigned in 1923, the relationship with the Russian trade union movement occupied many minds in the IFTU. The central issue was whether or not the IFTU was prepared to sit down at the table and start talking with the Russian trade union movement about the admission of the latter to the IFTU. Sternheim reproached the board with being unduly fearful and believed that, analogous to the meeting of the political Internationals, a meeting would clarify their mutual standpoints. Sternheim became chairman of the oppositional Socialists Club in Amsterdam and initially managed to inspire Stenhuis and Smit, both international trade union secretaries to a conditional 'yes' concerning the negotiations with the Russians.

Sternheim's attitude as regards cooperation with the Russians was connected with his opinion on the Russian revolution. In the wake of Kautsky his judgement had been negative at first. Under the influence of the NEP he adjusted his opinion because he saw opportunities for the democratization of Russian society and for an independent role of the Russian trade union movement in a liberalizing economy. Contacts with the Russian trade union movement were not only necessary with a view to taking care of labourers' interest but could also contribute to strengthening the independence of the Russian trade union movement, he believed. With his Five-Year Plan Stalin put the developments of the Russian trade union movement towards independence to an end.

In the period between the IFTU congress in Paris (1927) and the move of the IFTU to Berlin (1931) Sternheim was actively concerned with the formulation of an economic programme. The central issue was the problem of the rationalisation of the capitalistic production process which was dominated by cartels resulting in an expanding productive capacity, a stagnation of sales, an intensifi-

cation of labour and a decrease in employment. These developments were accompanied by economic nationalism and protectionism, increasingly felt after the crash of 1929.

Sternheim was one of the five economic experts who were commissioned by the IFTU to write an international economic programme for the trade union movement. By so doing he could refer to comparative research of the IFTU as to working hours and holiday regulations and the influence which the trade union exercised on national governments as far as the labour legislation was concerned. In addition to that, he coordinated the actions of the representatives of the international trade union movement in the ILO from the IFTU. The economic programme was finished in 1929 and was approved of that the IFTU congress in Stockholm (1930).

Nevertheless Sternheim was not satisfied. Under the influence of protectionism which was also emerging in working-class circles, he realized that a return to economic free trade was impossible for the time being. Impressed by the election result in Germany in September 1930, which was highly successful for the National Socialists, the revision of the international programme, strongly advised by Sternheim, was rapidly taken care of by IFTU and the Socialist and Labour International. In this revised programme we can also find initiatives to control national crises, which was later elaborated in the crisis plan of the German trade union movement, the WTB Plan. Sternheim believed that it was possible to overcome the crisis by a further reform of capitalism by means of state interference, influenced by the trade union movement. In the Netherlands Sternheim opposed Tinbergen who wished to deal with the economic crisis by means of wage cuts.

The Institut für Sozialforschung, in which Sternheim got involved in 1931, gave him the opportunity to develop his ideas about the connection between labour and leisure. In 1935 *Autorität und Familie* was published, being the first result of the 'interdisciplinary materialism' of the institute. In articles published in *Mensch en Maatschapij*, *De Toorts* and the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* Sternheim emphasized the democratization of family relationships. The family had developed from a production unit to a consumption unit, whereas parental authority was increasingly limited by the growing amount of leisure time. His ideas were diametrically opposite to Fromm's initial views which held that the economic

crisis of the thirties would mean a crisis of patriarchal authority and clear the way for matriarchal social relationships. Sternheim argued that the authority of the father does not suddenly disappear when he becomes unemployed. Horkheimer demonstrated his pleasure at Sternheim's argument and used it to reverse Fromm's hypothesis. In *Autorität und Familie* Horkheimer argued that it is exactly because of their subordinate position that the lowest classes have developed a sadomasochistic attitude towards authority. According to Sternheim psychoanalysis was erroneously made absolute. He pointed out issues which were missing in the analysis of class relationships in Germany during the rise of National Socialism, the extraordinary high unemployment rate, the disastrous political discord within the German labour movement and the German state tradition.

As leisure time specialist of the institute Sternheim published the article *Zum Problem der Freizeitgestaltung* in 1932, an article that had become a standard text on the issue of leisure time and has been reprinted many times. Influenced by the successful results of the labour movement in the fields of politics and economics, leisure time developed into another field of interest, one in which workers follow their own needs. In their perception of the world the importance of the party and of the trade union movement decreased. At the same time Sternheim emphasized the connection between the quality of labour having decreased and influence of rationalization and the filling-in of spare time.

Sternheim was commissioned by the institute to write a handbook on leisure time. In the meantime he published the article *Leisure in the Totalitarian State* in *The Sociological Review* after it had been refused by the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*. This article was an elaboration of his former observations on the German state tradition. In his handbook Sternheim makes a principal distinction between democratic and totalitarian nations. In the latter the state forces people to subordinate their leisure time to the bigger whole. He rejected Pollock's view that National Socialism is the right political form of the highly developed monopoly capitalism. His views on the independent role of politics and the importance of liberal rights caused him to come into conflict with the views of Horkheimer and Marcuse expressed in critical theory.

In 1938 Sternheim was forced to move to Amsterdam. His salary was gradually reduced. He had to look around for an additional

income. He did, however, comment on Horkheimer's project on anti-semitism. In 1939 he became head of a distribution office in Amsterdam but was fired by the occupying force at the end of 1940. He led a team of Jewish ex-distribution officers and taught at a Jewish training college for social work. In May 1943 he went into hiding, but in January 1944 he and his wife were arrested by the Germans. He was transported to Auschwitz via the concentration camp Westerbork and there he was executed.

In his work Andries Sternheim described the modernization and democratization of Western society, in which the necessary reform of the economy, the actions of the labour movement and the development of family life are connected with each other. The realization of political democracy and social legislation, the development of leisure time and the democratization of family relations all affect perceptions of the quality of labour and thus contribute to the emancipation of the labourer. Sternheim concentrated on the central role of the quality of labour and that is what distinguishes him from the ethical socialism of Vorrink and Banning and the views of Hendrik de Man.