



The Netherlands: Woonbond Report

October 2013

De Nederlandse Woonbond represents over 1,5 million renting households. It has a degree of organisation of over 51,5% of renting households, which has risen from 35% in 2001. The Woonbond organizes tenants mainly through its 548 member organisations and the residents' committees associated by them. Apart from them, there are over 6.000 individual members.

Since 2010 The Netherlands have had a right wing government under liberal prime minister Rutte. This has come with a serious attack on tenants, tenants' rights and the structure of the Dutch social housing system. The attacks have increased since the last elections of 2012, even though the social democrats have joined the liberals in government. Liberal minister Blok has an agenda of radical decreasing the number of houses owned by social housing associations and an increase of rent unseen in the last fifteen years.

The government in 2011 announced a plan to cut the budget of housing allowance, a plan to raise the maximum rent of every rental house with € 123 monthly and an agreement with the EU which forbade housing associations to rent affordable houses to households with an income exceeding the modal income (€ 34.000 a year).

In 2012 government announced a law to introduce the *right to buy* for 75% of the social housing sector, a law to introduce an income-related rent rise and a huge landlord tax, based on the value of the homes owned by landlords in the social sector.

This means the political work of the Woonbond from 2011 to 2013 has consisted mainly of defending tenants' rights, availability and affordability of social housing. This was done with a twofold strategy, which consisted of campaigning and presenting alternatives. The Woonbond organized a campaign against all of the plans and laws mentioned above, but was unable to stop most of them. There was some success: The *right to buy* was cancelled, the rise of maximum rents was confined to ten regions with high pressure on the housing market and the income-related rent rise was postponed for one year and adjusted. The rest of the measures was introduced, which made affordability a quickly increasing problem.



The most important activities of the Woonbond during 2011-2013 have been mass campaigns against these measures. With the campaign 'Ik wil ook wonen' (I want housing too) we have been collecting the stories of people who could not rent a house because of the EU-agreement mentioned before. Over 4.000 alarming stories were presented to the minister of housing, who promised to discuss the agreement in Brussels.

In 2012 the Woonbond launched a campaign called against the 'gluurverhoging', which is a pun that contracts the words for *rent rise* and *peeping*. It was a media campaign against the income-related rent rise, which allowed landlords to peep into the tenants' tax information. The word 'gluurverhoging' became widely known and was even used in parliament. It was nominated for the 'word of the year 2012'-competition. The Woonbond succeeded in blocking the income-related rent rise in 2012 by legal action. In 2013, the law was introduced after all, but the Woonbond managed to introduce several adjustments, such as a decrease of the rent rise percentage and an exception in case of a declining income.

In 2013 the Woonbond launched the campaign 'Huuralarm' (rent alarm) against the combination of attacks on tenants planned in the new governments' coalition agreement. A national petition collected 60.000 autographs. They were presented to the senate by tenants from all over the country.



In spite of the political climate, there have been some positive experiences. The main results the Woonbond achieved in the last two years are 'Wonen 4.0' and the covenant 'Energy saving rental sector'. 'Wonen 4.0' is a historical agreement between four housing market parties: the home owners, the housing agents, the housing associations and the Woonbond. These four parties agreed on a radical reform of the housing system, as opposed to government policies. It featured equal treatment of home owners and tenants, a reform of tax benefits for home owners and a revision of the legislation on maximum rents and rent rise. The members of the Woonbond approved on the agreement with a 85% majority. Unfortunately, the governing parties chose to ignore this broadly based agreement when writing their coalition agreement. The covenant energy saving rental sector is an agreement reached by the Woonbond, the housing associations, the commercial landlords and the government. The goal is to reduce energy consumption in rental houses by 33%.

The main challenge that lies ahead of Dutch tenants and the Woonbond is to find a way to prevent the demolition of the housing system. The alliance we had forged with the organisation of social landlords has ended, due to an unexpected move by the landlords. They made a deal with the minister to accept a landlord tax. In exchange for their support, the landlords have been enabled to pass the tax to the tenants. For the years to come, we will continue our resistance against this law. Affordability and availability of social housing will continue to be our key priorities.

Our members, the local tenants organisations, will have a great challenge to claim their position in negotiating local housing planning with the landlords. The Woonbond has been developing a training program to support its members in this cause.

The role of rental housing in the future is hard to foretell, since there are two contradicting tendencies at the moment. On the one hand, the popularity of house owning has decreased for the first time in over thirty years. House value has fallen gigantically. The average price has decreased 21% from € 240.000 in 2008 to € 206.000 in the summer of 2013. This development could lead to an increased popularity of renting.

On the other hand, there is the all-out attack of the governing liberal party on social housing and affordable rents. This could minimize the broadly based rental sector as we know it into a mere welfare facility.