# Why we strike

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The Dutch education sector is in turmoil, once again. Four years after the student occupations that began in Amsterdam and swept the whole country, the totality of teachers in the Netherlands is due to strike, for the first time ever, on March 15. This sector-wide strike follows in the wake of a wave of successful teachers' strikes in the United States. The strike will be a loud opening salvo; a powerful broadside will follow if the government doesn't listen.

So what's wrong with Dutch education?
The answer can be found in the policy mix pursued by successive Dutch governments, contriving to simulate an austerity-driven market mechanism in the public sector. Universities and schools are encouraged to compete against each other for students and monies, under emaciated budgets, on the basis of dubious benchmarks and targets. The policy has raised the student/staff ratio in the Netherlands to one among the highest in the OECD—higher than the US, Greece and Italy; the ratio is approaching 20 in the main research universities.

These pathologies are consequences of diminishing funding per student (68% more university students

since 2000, and -25% in government funding per student) creeping micromanagement of teaching and research, and growing authoritarianism from management—all made possible, indeed foisted on university teachers and researchers, by government policy.

We are therefore striking to demand an end to the bossing around of our universities by politicians and bureaucrats. We are striking to demand the cancellation of the latest budget cuts, and the restoration of real funding levels to those of the year 2000. We are not striking to fill our pockets. Rather, we are striking to pay for an increase in staff numbers that will improve the student/staff ratio; to provide better infrastructure for our students; to reduce the workload and frequency of burnouts among our colleagues; to improve our institutional capacities for self-government; and to improve the quality of Dutch education.

We are also striking to protest against the creeping mechanisms of market simulation and commercialization in education. We are striking to contest the incessant drive to turn schools and universities into supermarkets, with an unelected—and unaccountable—board of directors at the top, and a hapless army of consumers at the bottom. We are opposed to the opacity and authoritarianism at the helm of Dutch education, to the hierarchies that the drive to privatization inevitably

creates, and to the recent cuts in the humanities that threaten to destroy institutional structures of research and teaching it took decades to create.

Any benchmarking, targets and managerial indices that impinge on academic development, teacher-student relations, or inter-university relations violate the freedom and independence of educational institutions. This does not mean that teaching and research should not be evaluated. All it means is that, if teaching and research are to be evaluated, then evaluation must be based on their *content* alone, not on spurious market-mimicking metrics. For all its flaws, only the institution of peer-review can evaluate academic work for what it is.

We are therefore striking for *respect*: respect for the necessity of a well-funded educational system; respect for our autonomy as institutions of teaching and learning; respect for education as a precondition for a democratic society. The American teachers' strikes show that we can win.