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http://www.taalsector.be/core/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2716%3Aanederlandse-gerechtestolken-vertalers-bundelen-krachten-in-registergroep&catid=75%3Atolken&Itemid=92

Dutch legal interpreters and translators join forces in Registergroep

In the Netherlands an important group of legal interpreters and translators have united to form a new pressure group: the 'Registergroep'. This group wants to defend the specific interests of legal interpreters and translators who are registered with the Netherlands Register of sworn interpreters and translators, the Rbtv. According to Registergroep, the economic position of legal interpreters/translators has severely worsened in recent years. This is mainly a consequence of the Government's outsourcing policy and the heavy pressure that commercial intermediaries Concorde and TVcN are bringing to bear on the fragmented market, says Registergroep.

Unlike the system in Belgium, all sworn legal interpreters and translators in the Netherlands are registered in a central register called the 'Register beëdigde tolken en vertalers' (Rbtv), the Register of Sworn Interpreters and Translators. Moreover, unlike the system in Belgium, as of two years ago legal interpreters and translators in the Netherlands no longer work directly for public service clients, but through a commercial intermediary.

Two years ago, following a public procurement tender, the provision of translation and interpreting services through an intermediary was contracted to two companies: the Amsterdam-based translation and interpreting agency Concorde Group (for translation assignments and some interpreting services) and Tolk- en Vertaalcentrum Nederland (TVcN, part of Manpower Business Solutions, which provides the remainder of interpreting services).

In real terms this means that a lawyer working in immigration law who requires an interpreter for a particular language doesn't contact an interpreter directly, but contacts Concorde to make a booking for an interpreter. The interpreting assignment is subsequently advertised online by Concorde to the pool of interpreters and is allocated (usually to the first interpreter to respond).

At the Registergroep's recent inaugural conference in Utrecht, the willingness of the 200 participants to take direct action and even to go on strike was strong. The conference discussed, among other topics, the resistance to the perceived divide-and-conquer tactics of the commercial intermediaries, the collective striving for decent rates ("which is not the same as price fixing"), the outsourcing problem, reduction in rates and marginalisation of the profession and how it was thought this could be changed, what political channels can do for the registered interpreters/translators, and the register being held by the professional organisation instead ("where it belongs").

Registered interpreters and translators feel as though they no longer have any influence on the developments affecting the profession. In the Registergroep's view, the outsourcing contracts have resulted in the self-employed independent registered freelancer becoming "a wage slave who has to dance to the commercial intermediary's tune. The latter applies a divide-and-conquer strategy to bring rates down severely, and the effects are being felt outside the public sector as well. The commercial world is a hitchhiker benefiting from the government's 'success' in controlling its expenditure on interpreting and translation services.'

The consequences of the policy to outsource to commercial intermediaries appear to extend beyond the market segment of registered interpreters and translators and are now affecting the economic situation of other interpreters and translators too. This view was shared at the conference by Tineke Daniëls, chairman of the Nederlands Genootschap van Tolken en Vertalers (NGTV), the Netherlands Association of Interpreters and Translators. She pledged support for every initiative that can improve the position of translators and interpreters.

In fact, the Registergroep does not dispute that there exists a role for the commercial intermediary to perform. "But the share of the government budget for interpreting and translation services that is currently allocated to the intermediary and the marked influence the intermediary is exercising through its booking policy are not, in our view, proportionate to the modest function an intermediary should fulfil."

For many conference participants the presentation by Marijke Roelofsen (KTV - Kennisnet voor Taal en Vakopleidingen, an education institute for sworn translators and interpreters in the Netherlands) was a real eye-opener. She demonstrated through step-by-step calculations that for a registered interpreter/translator working as a self-employed freelancer to earn the same as a salaried translator whose annual gross salary is 51.000 Euros and who is building up pension and insurance contributions, requires an hourly rate of 66 Euros.

The power of the new professional organisation may perhaps lie in its limitations: membership is limited to those interpreters and translators registered with the Rbtv. In other words, the organisation needs to represent only registered interpreters and translators; it speaks only on behalf of the professional linguists on whom the judiciary (and in the second instance, the commercial intermediary) is dependant, as determined in Dutch law.

In Belgium the police, judiciary, immigration department and other government agencies have not yet struck on the idea of bundling all interpreting and translation services in a single procurement contract and awarding the contract to the cheapest bidder.

In Flanders and Brussels there is already some form of intermediary intervention in the market, mainly in the public care services sector. There, community and care services interpreting and translation work is delivered by nine different intermediary agencies for community interpreting and translation services

In the United Kingdom, too, there is a great deal of commotion at present due to the

privatisation and outsourcing of court interpreting services since 30 January 2012 to language services provider Applied Language Solutions (ALS). Six organisations that jointly represent 2350 registered interpreters have joined forces in a protest campaign. They want the Justice system to go back to engaging registered interpreters directly and not through an intermediary. They are also campaigning for protection of the title of legal interpreter and for the statute of interpreter to be properly regulated. Established interpreters accuse ALS of using incompetent and cheap interpreters whom they 'pick up off the street'. Indeed, during the first phase, ALS appears to be having great difficulties in providing the required language services.

The organisations opposing the contract are, among others, the Institute of Translation and Interpreting (ITI), the Association of Police and Court Interpreters (APCI), the National Union of Professional Interpreters and Translators (NUPIT) and the Professional Interpreters' Alliance (PIA). The new pressure group is called Professional Interpreters for Justice / Interpreters4Justice.

Viewed over the long term there seems to be a developing trend of wholesale government outsourcing of the coordination, administration and booking of language services to a single supplier, rather than having to contract with hundreds or even thousands of individual suppliers.

Another obvious advantage for the government is that it no longer has to pay any attention to the self-employed freelancer moaning about being poorly paid. Anyone who wants a pay rise will have to fight it out with the intermediary.

What effects the market forces - which is how privatisation, outsourcing and commercial intermediaries are being sold - will exert on the quality of interpreting and translation services to the justice system and the police, is another question. As to whether more market forces will contribute to a better safeguarding of the rights of non-vernacular speakers in the justice system, is another question again.

Some people are of the opinion that the self-employed freelance status of translators and interpreters now no longer bears any resemblance to a 'liberal profession'. Others are asking themselves why any interpreters and translators at all would want to be on the Register.