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Netherlands

# Break with the logic of austerity

- IV Online magazine - 2010 - IV422 - March 2010 -

Publication date: Monday 29 March 2010

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**In a debate I took part in during the city council election campaign [for the municipal elections on 3 March], the moderator posed the following question to the eight people at the head of the different party lists: ‘We all know that â¬300 million will have to be cut from the Rotterdam budget. I would like to hear now from each of the parties what it is going to cut.’**

This moderator's lead-in shows how effective [Christian Democratic Prime Minister Jan Peter] Balkenende and [former Labour Party leader Wouter] Bos have been this past year in making everyone resigned to their classic response to a recession: there's a crisis, everyone has to sacrifice, so local government has to sacrifice too. But in fact that's not at all a logical response.

I was in fact the only one of the eight to protest at the question. I said, ‘The government has fallen. Nothing's been decided yet about the â¬35 billion in cuts. The national elections on 9 June are about who's going to pay for this crisis caused by the bankers and swindlers. Why should we in Rotterdam resign ourselves already to â¬300 million in cuts? If the parties here say that we can cut â¬300 million without pain and suffering for the people of Rotterdam, they're messing with people's minds. As it is we don't have enough money to make the city better and more social and fix up the neighbourhoods that are in bad shape. We can say goodbye to the wonderful neighbourhoods we promised in the last elections if now, less than three years later, we're forced to cut the budget by almost 10 per cent. Rotterdam has to defend its people. We have to say loud and clear that whatever government we get has to look elsewhere for its â¬300 million. If necessary we should call out the people of Rotterdam to go to the Malieveld [traditional site of national demonstrations in the Hague] for a massive protest against this attempt to make our city pay for the crisis.’

Long before the elections, the Rotterdam SP took a stand against the plan for cutbacks in the Municipal Fund and the municipality's other sources of revenue. At first we got support from local Labour Party leader Dominic Schreijer. In response to my proposal to go to bat against the Hague, he said that the Labour Party should bring down the coalition government if it persisted with sharp cuts at the expense of Rotterdam's neighbourhoods. Later he backed down – but the government fell anyway [over Afghanistan].

Local government in the Netherlands is responsible for vital public services: street and park maintenance and cleaning, affordable housing, welfare facilities, support for schools, public safety, anti-poverty measures, provision of welfare benefits, nursing care, youth services and much more. In the debate on the 2010 municipal budget, the Rotterdam SP introduced an alternative budget with â¬150 million in savings to improve all these services and distribute the tax burden more fairly. We proposed cuts in bureaucracy, in ‘red carpets and trinkets’ for big companies, in expensive outside consultants, in prestige projects, and in municipal funding for real estate developers putting up more office towers and luxury housing. That â¬150 million in fat that we wanted to carve off the bones of local government is badly needed to fight poverty in this city, help people with heavy debts, and invest in quality, affordable housing for the people of Rotterdam. Why should we give up all those millions to the Hague without a fight?

The SP is headed into the national parliamentary election campaign with the message that the rich, the swindlers, the bankers and the mansion owners have to pay for the crisis. They're the ones who caused it. Our battle over state pensions [against raising the retirement age from 65 to 67] didn't really get off the ground, because the [social democratic-led trade union federation] FNV had accepted in advance the logic of [Christian Democratic Minister of Social Affairs Piet Hein] Donner: ‘We have a problem paying for the pensions.’ We mustn't walk into that same trap with this â¬35 million in cuts. For local government this means challenging the logic for ‘more money this

## Break with the logic of austerity

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year, less money next year'. Cutbacks of â–300 million mean a poorer, less social, less safe Rotterdam – even if we implement austerity in the most social possible way. The SP will not shrink from the task of dividing the cuts as fairly as possible if there's really no other way. But first it's time to fight.

*This article was originally published in Dutch in the March 2010 issue of Spanning, the SP's magazine for active members.*