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Netherlands

Left must help rebuild the unions

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Through the autumn Holland has been swept by a wave of industrial action in response to planned government welfare reforms. The mass struggle against social cuts has already deeply influenced the debate on the left. Many activists thought of the trade unions as archaic, non-representative, corporatist organizations, with no will and capability to fight back against the neo-liberal reform of the Dutch welfare state. The massive response of government employees, transport and industrial workers and others to the unions' call for action took the union leaders themselves by surprise. But maybe more so the Dutch left.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/36214-2.jpg>]

300,000 march

In the past fifteen years two main political forces emerged to the left of the social democracy. In 1989 the Dutch Communist Party (CPN), the Pacifist Socialist Party (PSP) and the PPR (left wing Christians) formed Groen Links, the Dutch Greens.

The ex-Maoist Socialistische Partij (SP) first entered parliament with two MPs in 1994. Before 1994 the SP had some strongholds in a number of regions, but never managed a breakthrough on the national political level. Basically the SP, as an outspoken socialist and anti-capitalist party, filled in the gap the disappearance of the CPN and the PSP had left behind.

From 1994 to 2002 the Netherlands was governed by so called "purple" coalitions (social-democrats, liberals and conservative liberals). The "purple" governments headed by prime minister Wim Kok, managed - with the help of a period of economic expansion in the 1990s - to strengthen corporatist social relations with the trade unions, keep wages relatively low and "reform" social security gradually on a neoliberal basis. Bill Clinton and Tony Blair hailed Wim Kok and his politics as a perfect example of the so-called Third Way. But the downside of the "success" was further impoverishment of the unemployed and urban poor, and a growing underfunding of public services.

Fortuyn

The SP (and to a lesser extent GroenLinks) were the only political opposition from the left and gained support in that period, both in membership and in electoral results. But they failed to organize substantial social struggle against the politics of "purple".

In the year before the general elections of 2002 the "purple" coalition collapsed. But it was not the left that took the initiative. In less than half a year the right wing populist Pim Fortuyn shook Dutch politics dramatically, with a combination of a popular critique of the deplorable state of public services, health care and education on the one hand, and on the other a xenophobic call for blaming the victims, above all migrants from Turkey and Morocco.

Fortuyn was shot dead just before election day, his party gained nearly 20 percent of the vote and entered a right wing government coalition headed by the Christian Democrat Balkenende. This coalition formulated a sharp right wing turn on social-economic, migration and cultural issues, but exploded in less than a year due to the instability of Fortuyn's party, left without a leader.

The following elections of 2003 brought a comeback of the social democratic PvdA (from 15.1% to 27.2%), while

GroenLinks got 5.1% and the SP 6.3% of the vote. Despite the growth of the PvdA, the Christian Democrats chose a right wing coalition, this time without Fortuyn's party, which dropped to 5.7%.

300,000 march

Facing economic depression, the second government headed by Balkenende succeeded in binding the trade unions in the autumn of 2003 to a new social contract. In exchange for some minor concessions on social security issues, the unions agreed on moderating wage demands to zero percent. This "cheap and easy deal" convinced the right wing parties that further steps to meet the Lisbon agenda were possible. In the spring of 2004 the union leaders were provoked with a new package to cut pensions and social benefits. It gave the unions no other choice then to mobilize their members, despite their lack of confidence that they were really able to do so successfully. The response of the rank and file surprised the right, the union leaders and the left. 300,000 people took to the streets of Amsterdam on October 2, and a series of successful strikes followed.

The now proven ability to fight back has a direct impact on the relationship of forces, both on the social and political level. For sure, the union leaders will return back to their corporatist practices in the coming months or sooner. But they can only do so after substantial - in the eyes of the union membership - gains will have been made or if the struggle wavers and the unions are defeated.

The left and the unions

Recent electoral polls show a majority for the left (PvdA, SP and GroenLinks), which is unprecedented in Dutch politics. The SP would get some 10% of the vote according to these polls.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/36215.jpg>]

Solidarity

But the perspective of the majority of trade union activists, some of them organizing strikes for the first time in their lives, remains exclusively syndicalist, despite the fact that the struggle has a political character (against the government's policies).

The direct role of the left in the mobilizations is limited. GroenLinks and especially the SP participate actively in "Keer Het Tij", a coalition of social movements and the left that supports the trade union struggle and initiated the organization of the first Dutch Social Forum on November 26, 27 and 28. Apart from that, a coalition has been built of the major trade union federations, PvdA, SP and GroenLinks to prepare a referendum initiative if parliament agrees to the government's proposals.

But neither in GroenLinks nor in the SP is there a tradition of organized political work inside the unions. In the 1970s and 1980s the SP organized its own radical "union", Arbeidersmacht ("Workers Power"). Leaving Maoism behind in the 1990s, the feeling of a large number of party activists remains that the mass unions are social democratic institutions, not really worth their while. The SP was successfully built as a party mobilizing locally door to door, not in the workplace. The mass union struggle has helped to change this feeling. Some of the 43,000 SP members are drawn actively into this fight as rank and file union members. Attempts are being made to organize union activists inside the party and to build a network of left wing trade unionists.

Optimism

The mass mobilizations, the polls, the comeback of the left after the dark period of the Fortuyn revolt, leads to a considerable dose of over-optimism on the left. Certainly, the dynamic of the mobilizations in the last few months shows that it really is possible to resist the neoliberal agenda. Steps forward in building a left, anti-capitalist alternative can be made, and we have to make full use of the opportunities to do so.

But it is important to see that this struggle remains defensive, that it is primarily organized by relatively small and older layers of union activists who are for this moment fully supported by their union leaders, that the real dynamic of the struggle is based on a very basic rejection of the sharpest edges of government policies by the majority of the population, not on enthusiasm for the alternatives put forward by the left.

This over-optimism leads on the one hand to illusions that a left wing government of PvdA, SP and GroenLinks, that would solve the problems, is possible in the short term.

The leadership of the SP, for the first time in the history of the party, puts forward this perspective. But the PvdA remains so closely tied up with the basis of the neoliberal agenda, that it will, if it can, make a deal with the Christian Democrats after the next elections, whenever these may be. And in any case, if a left majority emerges and if the social democrats will step into a coalition with the left, it would degrade GroenLinks and/or the SP to playing the role the German Greens are playing at this very moment.

On the other hand, radical groups and organizations, and some SP activists, are putting forward a maximalist approach. Bringing down the government should be the perspective, everything else will be proof of "betrayal" by the union leadership. The problem is that they overestimate the possibility of winning the long and enduring fight that would be needed. For a battle like that a strong and rooted organization of the unions in the workplaces is needed. The current movement can help the workers to start and rebuild the unions as organizations that can fight for their rights. But for that to happen we need a victory on substantial issues in the current struggle, even if it is partial.

Of course, the worst case would happen if the trade union leaders were able make an agreement with the government on similar terms to those of autumn 2003. This would frustrate the activists that took the lead in the struggle. We have to look very critically at the negotiations between the unions, the government and the employers that are now taking place. The outcome of these negotiations must be discussed democratically in the unions. The left should put forward the view that a deal only on pensions is not enough. The government will have to bend also on the issue of unemployment benefits and insurance for the disabled.

Rebuilding the unions

Instead of just putting forward semi-radical slogans, the key role for the left at this moment is to help building and broadening the movement, organize solidarity campaigns with the strikes and above all take an active part in rebuilding the unions. Stronger and active union organization in the workplaces can help, in the coming years, to build up an opposition against the corporatist politics of the union leadership.

The battle now being fought should and will be just a starting point. Whether we will be facing a right wing government or a coalition which includes the PvdA, we will be confronted with new cuts and attacks on working conditions in the coming years.

Left must help rebuild the unions

A substantial victory in the current struggle will help to rebuild both the unions and - in the longer run - build an anti neoliberal, anti-capitalist alternative from the left.