

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article7844>



Netherlands

The Netherlands: new socialist organization forms

- IV Online magazine - 2022 - IV573 - October 2022 -

Publication date: Monday 10 October 2022

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

Over 120 socialists closed their meeting in Utrecht, the Netherlands, on 25 September by singing three verses of *The International*. “A lot more than the social-democrats sing”, one participant remarked. Not only in singing does the meeting of a new organization, simply called De Socialisten, hope to go beyond social-democracy.

Sunday’s meeting followed a process of discussion, drafting a statement of political principles and deliberating on the building of a new organization. The aim is to lay the foundation for a party that fights for “socialization of the economy” through a process of radical transformation; “social revolution.

Need for an alternative

Many of the participants in the meeting were former members of the Dutch Socialist Party (SP), the main left-wing party in the country; they were either expelled or left the party in disappointment. Starting out as a Maoist sect in the seventies, the SP evolved into a left social-democratic mass party during the nineties and early two-thousands. The SP attracted some international attention when in 2006 it briefly seemed poised to become one of the major parties of the country. But since this peak the party stagnated and then declined. In the national elections of 2021, it won less than ten per cent of the vote and lost five of its 14 seats. Membership figures have dropped from a peak of 50.000 around 2008 to 32.000 today. Particularly worrying for a left-wing party is that polls indicate the SP’s voting base is now among the oldest in the country.

The malaise led to some friction in the notoriously top-down party. Some party-leaders attempt to balance a willingness to enter into governing coalitions with right-wing parties (as the SP previously did on a regional and municipal level) with a more activist profile. Others, including party-leader Lilian Marijnissen, aim for a more respectable, moderate image of the party. Real political differences are small, with proposals for example remaining within the limits set by EU standards on ‘free and fair competition’ and budgets.

In recent years, the SP is caught in a rightward drift that can be explained in part by its electoralist orientation. Faced with declining electoral support, the SP struggles to combine its image as a party of protest with gestures to the right to prove its “realistic” and “serious” nature. Themes that the leadership thinks would be controversial among potential voters are ignored. A certain workerism, partly inherited from its Maoist past and now strengthened by polls that purportedly show the potential of a “socially conservative but economically progressive” approach, mean that climate justice, anti-racism and feminism are not taken up. Typical was a declaration early this year by SP-parliamentarians that on issues such as climate and immigration they are “more conservative than left-wing”. The party’s electoralist focus is also affecting the SP’s central focus on bread-and-butter issues, such as in its positions on raising the minimum-wage. And especially declarations of the party-leadership that the SP did not exclude entering into future coalitions with the right-wing VVD of prime-minister Mark Rutte raised the hackles of more left-wing members.

Among SP-members, dissatisfaction increased. Unsurprisingly, especially in the party’s youth wing, ROOD (RED) more radical sentiments were strong. ROOD-members as well as other radicals in the party wanted to see more emphasis on activism, more daring proposals, more engagement in movements such as those around climate justice and anti-racism. And certainly no alliances with the traditional party of the class enemy: the VVD. In late 2020, the leadership of ROOD made a declaration that it opposed forming coalitions with the VVD. In response, the SP-leadership “discovered” that several leading ROOD-activists were supporters of Communist Platform, a group that is politically close to the publishers of the Weekly Worker in Britain. The party-leadership then proceeded to label

the Platform a “party” - meaning members could be expelled since the SP has a ban on dual memberships. Thus began a process of escalating expulsions. Sometimes entire branches were expelled, as was the entire youth-organization when ROOD-members refused to withdraw support from expelled activists. Others left in disgust at the bureaucratic maneuvers of a SP-leadership that refused any compromise. Some hundreds of members, many quite active, found themselves outside the party.

The fissures in the SP sometimes resembled a generational conflict. For many radicalizing young people anti-racism as well as feminism and trans rights are central, but the SP has little to say on such issues. For a generation that will need to live in a world dramatically affected by climate change, ecology is not a secondary issue that can be postponed. In addition to generation, geography played a role. Especially SP-members in the larger cities are confronted with the reality of a changing working class, and the need to oppose racism, exactly in order to be able to unify a diverse class. More generally, sharpening social contradictions such as a great housing shortage and precarious working conditions have brought a renewed recognition of the importance of class, and of class contradictions that can not be fought out through in elections only. People are looking for radical solutions, but in the political terrain they find few who support those.

Political steps forward

Politically homeless, the expelled socialists formed new networks and groups. In three cities, Utrecht, Rotterdam and Amsterdam, former SP-members organized themselves into new local parties to participate in the municipal elections of March 2022. ROOD reorganized itself as an independent socialist youth organization, adopting a new, radical program. The new text describes ROOD’s desire to link “the struggle of the workers movement with the fight for socialism”; “

We must gather the support of a majority of the population to overthrow the capitalist state and found a democratic republic under leadership of the working class. This transfer of power, in which the working class seizes, dismantles and replaces the institutions of the current system, is the revolution for which we fight.

Together with some regional networks and a number of other socialists, including Dutch supporters of the Fourth International, these groups decided on Sunday to start laying the ground for a future new socialist party, with ROOD as a closely allied youth movement.

What will be the basis of the new organization? In De Socialisten, many consider themselves to be Marxists, even communists and revolutionaries. When former SP euro-parliamentarian Erik Meijer, also expelled and now a central figure in De Socialisten, declared himself to be a “leftwing social-democrat”, a slight sigh of surprise went through the room. The desire for radicalism is strong, but “socialism” has come to signify a great many different things.

A positive development is that the discussions and documents adopted on Sunday show there is considerable agreement around shared radical principles. Socialism is described as a political project for the transformation of society, and the goal of a struggle resulting from contradictory class interests. This is quite different from the vague ethical ideal that the SP calls “socialism”. The principles adopted are quite advanced in other aspects as well. There is a recognition of the need to articulate different social struggles, such as anti-racism and feminism, refusal to support “class collaborationist” alliances and a rejection of building front-organisations instead of participating in existing social movements. The strong insistence on the need for internal democracy and open debate are also very positive.

Tasks ahead

Future discussions must clarify positions on issues such as the attitude of the future party to the institutions of the state as well as the trade-union bureaucracy, issues of strategy and the role of different forms of self-emancipation in the struggle. In the coming period, De Socialisten need to maneuver between the Scylla of going too slow, leading to disappointment and activists giving up on the project, and the Charybdis of rushing ahead, of attempting to compensate for organizational weakness through individual effort of committed activists.

The need for a radical socialist movement is clear in the face of the rapidly rising cost of living and the growth of far-right forces. The evolution of the SP means that there is political space opening up on the far-left. But this is a potential, not a given. Local groups of De Socialisten for example did not win seats in the municipal elections earlier this year. Many activists had already expected this result of an election in which barely formed groups competed with established parties, and considered the campaign as only a first step in making the new project visible.

De Socialisten is also not the only new force on the left-wing of Dutch politics. Since the general elections of 2021, the young party BIJ1 (In Dutch pronunciation “together”) is represented by a seat in parliament as well as locally in a handful of larger cities. For BIJ1, which managed to win additional seats in a few of the larger cities, the March elections were a success. On the national level, BIJ1 is clearly on the radical left, although its ideology is quite heterogeneous. Describing its politics as those of 'radical equality', the party combines notions borrowed from intersectional feminism and anti-racism in a orientation that is anti-capitalist without being explicitly socialist. The party has built itself largely on issues ignored by the SP and a number of its activists have roots in the socialist left. In larger cities it had success in finding support among groups that were previously not reached by the far-left, especially among Black people and people of color. But the party is going through difficult struggles between a radical left-wing and supporters of more liberal interpretations of anti-racism. A motion adopted on Sunday urged the exploration of possible future cooperation between BIJ1 and De Socialisten.

Sunday's meeting showed the real potential for a new socialist organization on a radical basis. A clear task for the new organization is now to build an organization of activists rooted in social struggles. Among the mostly young attendees, there was a strong feeling of enthusiasm. From its initial base in Utrecht, Amsterdam, Rotterdam and elsewhere, a new movement can be build that will bring socialist ideas into social struggles and mobilizations.

Sunday was a step forward on a long road. As comrades sang in the Dutch version of *The International*, “desire has moved us” – a desire for radical change and for an organization that helps bring it about.

30 septembre 2022

PS:

If you like this article or have found it useful, please consider donating towards the work of *International Viewpoint*. Simply follow this link: [Donate](#) then enter an amount of your choice. One-off donations are very welcome. But regular donations by standing order are also vital to our continuing functioning. See the last paragraph of [this article](#) for our bank account details and take out a standing order. Thanks.