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Netherlands

Building the movement against neoliberalism

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At the end of November 2007 the Dutch SP will hold its 15th national congress. The congress is of crucial importance to the building of the movement against neo-liberalism in the Netherlands, in which the SP plays a central role.

[<https://association-radar.org/IMG/jpg/spdutchvotes.jpg>]

The Socialist Party is the main anti-neoliberal left force in the Netherlands. The party was built as a socialist alternative to the social-liberal Labour Party. The formerly Maoist SP, which broke with orthodox Maoism in the seventies and has drifted further away from that strain of thought ever since, entered parliament in 1994. The party now has over 50.000 members, half of whom have joined since 2000. The SP has 145 local groups and thousands of active militants. Among them are most members of the Dutch section of the Fourth International, [Socialist Alternative Politics](#). In Rotterdam, Leo de Kleijn of SAP is a member of the city council for the SP.

The 15th congress of the SP takes place in turbulent times. In November of 2006 the party made an enormous electoral breakthrough, gaining almost 17 percent of the votes and going from 9 to 25 seats in the country's lower house (150 seats). The party came second in the country's biggest cities, Rotterdam and Amsterdam, just behind traditional (social-liberal) Labour, scoring almost 20 percent in both cases. In a few cities and towns, like Nijmegen and the industrial city of Heerlen, the SP came in first. In another industrial city, Eindhoven, traditionally in the hands of Labour and Christian Democracy - the SP scored a resounding 23,4 percent of the vote. The vote for the SP was a working class vote. The lower people's income, the higher the chance they voted SP in November last year – which is exactly what we saw when we looked at the composition of the "No" vote against the European constitution in 2005.

The battle for the Left

The breakthrough is of course of crucial importance. One year after the elections the SP finds itself at a crossroads: will the party develop into an active, pluralist party strongly rooted among militant workers and activists and committed to building the opposition to neo-liberalism, or will it turn into a 'normal' social-democratic party? Both developments are possible. A clear and loud choice for option number 1 needs to be made. And that is why the 15th congress is so important.

After the November 2006 elections different authors argued in *Grenzeloos*, the radical and socialist magazine and webzine published by SAP, that 'the battle about socialism in the Netherlands has started'. The breakthrough of the SP marked the beginning of the demolition of the dominant position of Labour on the Dutch Left. For a long time Labour was without any doubt completely hegemonic as the most important expression of leftwing politics. Both the elite and the base of the unions and the most important social movements in the country made up the backbone of supporters of the social-democratic party. Parties, currents and movements that wanted to be an alternative to social-democracy were doomed to play a role on the fringe. They either only bore ineffectual witness to leftist principles; or they hoped to influence Labour by attacking it from the left. The breakthrough of the SP fundamentally changed the relationship between Labour and the movement to the left.

Labour's love for neo-liberalism

The rise of the SP has everything to do with the evolution of Labour from a social-democratic party to a social-neoliberal party. In other words, with the genuflection of Labour before neo-liberal economic policies. As [Naomi Klein](#) describes so well in her new book – *The Shock Doctrine* – neo-liberalism has an extremely violent and anti-democratic history. She argues that it was first established by cruel dictatorships in Latin America in the sixties and seventies, which with the support of Chicago School free-market professor [Milton Friedman](#) and the CIA crushed the Left and the social movements while forcing radical neo-liberal policies down the throats of the people. Klein describes how that history of Chicago School economics became mixed up with torture and shock. Literally, because neo-liberalism could only be enforced through the use of electroshock on the bodies of those who resisted. And symbolically, because Friedman and other neo-liberal theorists knew and propagated that neo-liberalism succeeded best in societies that were in ‘shock’. The shock following a traumatic experience or radical change or war or natural disaster, should in the eyes of neo-liberals be used to force radical reforms down the throats of the workers.

[<https://association-radar.org/IMG/jpg/spincamp4-2.jpg>]

This neo-liberalism, which in Latin America tried to destroy the backbone of the people, took root in Western Europe after [Margaret Thatcher](#) took office in Britain and [Ronald Reagan](#) in the US. The Dutch Thatcher was [Ruud Lubbers](#), a Christian Democrat who initiated radical neo-liberal reforms in the early eighties as an answer to the economic crisis which in the mid-seventies marked the end of a long wave of economic boom. The neo-liberal answer to falling profit rates was: lower wages; fundamental cuts in social security; privatizations and a larger role for ‘the market’ in public services. The power of the unions needed to be broken. Big waves of privatization and the demolition of the welfare state were the result. The rights of workers were under pressure.

The neoliberal agenda has dominated politics and economy ever since. The commercialization of public health care and the attacks on redundancy legislation stem from that agenda. The neo-liberal agenda has from the very beginning been accepted by Labour. Unlike some European social-democratic parties, the [Dutch Labour Party](#) has always been quite enthusiastic about neo-liberal reform. This culminated during the period when Labour leader [Wim Kok](#) – a former union boss who became a leading social-neoliberal politician – was Minister of Finance (between 1989 and 1994) and Prime Minister of the so-called Purple government (between 1994 and 2002), containing two (neo)liberal parties and Kok’s own Labour Party. Kok and his party were among the architects of the radical neo-liberal reform of Dutch society and the economy. And this enthusiasm for neo-liberalism was not limited to the Netherlands. As Minister of Finance, Kok met [Nelson Mandela](#) just after his release, and made it abundantly clear that no other development for South Africa than neo-liberal development was imaginable. In *The Shock Doctrine* Naomi Klein describes how Mandela pointed out that he wanted nothing more radical than a kind of Marshall Plan for his country. Kok in response stated that ‘no economy can develop separately now’. Mandela should, in other words, not imagine that he had the right to independently choose an economic policy for his country.

The rise of the SP

The neo-liberal conversion of the Labour Party – an enormous betrayal of the base of the party – created the space for the Socialist Party to grow in. The SP arose as the voice of the opposition to neo-liberalism. After years of patient work in towns and cities where neither Labour nor the Communist Party of the Netherlands (CPN, which later merged with other parties into the [GreenLeft](#)) had strongholds, the SP finally broke through with two MPs in 1994. That happened after Labour had got rid of what Kok called its ‘ideological baggage’ and after the Communist Party had lost its influence among the most radical elements of the workers’ movement. The SP quickly became the face of anti-neoliberalism. More than the GreenLeft – which has flirted with liberalism lately, has an elitist and middle-class-profile and is a ‘politicians’ party’ – the extremely popular and charismatic SP leader [Jan Marijnissen](#) and his party managed to cross the bridge between the will to change the world and the daily needs of people.

The crossing of this bridge is extremely important. Because it is ‘normal people’ who are the victims of neo-liberal

politics. The women who work in health care and their clients, for instance, are the ones who receive the blows of neo-liberal reforms and have to live with the consequences. It is the workers in the factories who may lose protection against redundancy. It is the people in the poorer neighbourhoods of cities like Rotterdam who become the victim of the mass demolition of cheap social housing, which in effect means they have to make space for the rich. It is the Socialist Party that supports the struggles of these people, supports them and gives them a voice and helps build resistance to the indecent, uncivilized and inhuman politics of neo-liberalism. During the campaign leading up to the referendum against the EU constitution, the SP was the only left party which campaigned for the NO. Contrary to parties like the GreenLeft and Labour and to most of Dutch civil society, the SP understood the growing dissatisfaction with neo-liberalism among 'normal people'. A dissatisfaction that was expressed by the mass character of the NO against the European constitution, but also by the mass turnout at the demonstration in Amsterdam against pension reforms. The 400.000 people who were in the streets of the capital in 2004 were part one of the biggest demonstrations in the history of this country.

The key to understanding the SP's breakthrough is understanding the role of the SP in giving voice to anti-neoliberal sentiment. The party has become the most crucial political representation of dissatisfaction with neoliberalism. The Labour Party is of course frightened to death that the SP is winning this struggle for the Left in the Netherlands. Because that struggle is about so much more than seats in parliament – it is about the meaning of socialism. It is about the opposition between the social-neoliberalism of Labour and socialism as a political and economic alternative, as represented by the SP.

Crossroads

Hence, the SP arose because of its consistent opposition to neo-liberalism. The enormous problem the SP and the whole of the militant Left face is that the amount of electoral support for the party stands in no proportion to the power of the social movements and the political activity of the people. It is true that the times of total passivity are over. That is illustrated, for instance, by the struggle of people in many cities and large towns against the neo-liberal attacks on social housing. It is also illustrated by those who resist the commercialization of health policies now meet resistance, even in the Netherlands. But that resistance is weak. This is a crucial challenge for the SP.

The SP sees itself confronted with an impressive task: building a left alternative in the Netherlands, a counter-power to neoliberalism. Which is something else than building the SP only. The party should be conscious of the fact that it will not be able to make it by itself. Both a one-sided emphasis on building the party – 'if the SP is doing well, the social movements are doing well' - and parliamentarianism are very real and important dangers.

The SP needs to strengthen the foundations of the party – the position and role of the thousands of militants. From all corners of the party militants have proposed building working groups and commissions in which SP members can organize on the basis of their activity or political priorities. Union militants; activists who work in international solidarity; environmental activists; [LGBT](#) activists; feminists – they should be able to organize themselves in commissions or working groups inside the SP, so as to build the visibility of the party on these issues and to work on educating militants.

'Working groups' and commissions like these can function as alternatives to the practice in the party that most of the development of ideas and views happens in and around the parliamentary group. As member of the Rotterdam city council for the SP Leo de Kleijn recently argued: 'The problem is that in the SP the weight of the parliamentary group and the groups in city councils have become much greater in comparison with the weight of militants outside of such institutions.' That one of the most important arguments against the proposed commissions is that the parliamentary group already has a lot of knowledge, underscores the relevance of what De Kleijn says. This development needs to be countered. SP members should be able to organize themselves on the basis of specific

knowledge or activities. The themes that need to be developed are many: globalization and international solidarity; a different Europe; radical democracy; economic alternatives; emancipation and liberation; the struggle of immigrants. The SP should develop from a defensive party – which concentrates on protecting society from neoliberal attacks – into an offensive party which develops alternatives to capitalism, and discusses and proposes them.

A pluralist party

The SP should and must choose to become a party of active militants, as diverse as they come. Society changes all the time – changes we need to see within the SP. Diversity is one of the core elements of modern society. Among other things, that means the SP should develop a clearer anti-racist profile. The SP should be in the forefront of the struggle against the xenophobic and islamophobic right. What is needed is a consequent political line which makes clear that the SP is on the side of immigrants. That is why the proposals for building a working group of immigrants in the party which develops socialist and anti-racist positions on emancipation and integration of immigrants, is very important.

Diversity also means: more space for women and lesbians and gays in the party; more of a profile on feminist and LGBT themes. And the party also needs to work on its internationalist profile – the SP is not afraid of globalization, but is struggling for *another* globalization, socially and ecologically responsible.

The utopian vocation

The consequences of the neoliberal attacks are enormous. The American Marxist [Fredric Jameson](#) has talked about the withering of the utopian vocation. In her newest book Naomi Klein makes a similar argument: the rise of neo-liberalism has gone hand in hand with the demise of the belief that another world is possible. Not only did revolution disappear from the minds of workers, the very idea of a more just society went into crisis. There was talk about the end of history. The belief in an alternative to capitalism and imperialism needed to be rebuilt from the ground up. And this is happening now, for instance in the global justice movement.

In the Netherlands, the SP has a crucial role to play in rebuilding hope. The party should take up this role extremely seriously. In this light, there is a great deal of reason for doubt about the realo-politics that has dominated the latest election campaigns. A more moderate view on the monarchy, on NATO and on socio-economic questions was supposed to create an image of a ‘reasonable party’. The move was explained by arguing that ‘we should only make demands that we can make happen in four years, in other words until the next elections.’ But for socialists elections are not only there for that, but especially and more importantly to use such politicized times to lay the seeds of rebellion, of the dream of a better and more just world. And these are the times for doing that. Unlike in the past, the Dutch working class is no longer under the spell of social-democracy. In fact, it is common knowledge that the majority of the electorate has completely lost its faith in traditional politics. Now is the time for the SP to win people to the utopian project that is called 21st century socialism.

One of the most striking aspects in the introduction of the main text that is to be discussed during the 15th Congress is the remark that the SP has to prepare for government responsibility. Perhaps it would be better to prepare for something quite different. Instead of becoming a trustworthy partner for social and Christian democracy, the SP should build and lead the counter-movement of the Left and win as many people as possible for a project that breaks with neo-liberalism and provokes Capital.