

The Netherlands: social democrats eulogize murdered neo-fascist Pim Fortuyn

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Only days before May 15 parliamentary elections, the assassination of racist demagogue Pim Fortuyn has set off political shockwaves in the Netherlands. The event has exposed deep divisions in a society that carefully maintained a facade of political harmony based on consensus and tolerance.

Immediately after the news broke that the 54-year-old Fortuyn had been fatally injured by five shots to his head, chest and neck, his supporters rioted through the centre of The Hague, capital of the Netherlands. The same evening they engaged in violent street battles with police.

Mobile police units used water cannon and truncheons to counter the right-wing rioters, who threw stones and bottles. Supporters of Fortuyn were able to force their way into an underground garage adjoining the parliamentary building and set fire to a number of cars.

Together with election placards bearing his picture, many Fortuyn supporters wore swastikas and other Nazi symbols.

To forestall pogroms against foreigners, a speaker for the Dutch interior ministry made comments Monday evening and Tuesday emphasising that the assassin was not a foreigner, but rather a 32-year-old white Dutchman. Later it was announced that Fortuyn's killer was an activist from a Dutch environmentalists' organisation.

On Monday evening, Social Democratic Prime Minister Wim Kok called a special session of his cabinet to decide whether or not to postpone the elections. All political parties agreed to temporarily halt the election campaign.

In talks with the neo-fascist List Pim Fortuyn (LPF), first founded in February of this year, Kok proposed a postponement of the election, but after an hour-long

meeting a speaker for the LPF announced that the organisation favoured holding to the original date. Evidently, the LPF hopes to capitalise on public reaction to the murder of its leading candidate.

Fortuyn was a racist demagogue of the worst sort. He derided Islam as a "primitive culture," called for a halt to new immigration, and declared that his first act in office—should he gain sufficient power—would be to eliminate an anti-discrimination provision in the Dutch constitution. Now the attempt is being made to present him as a political statesman and martyr.

On the evening of the shooting a book of condolences was laid out in the town hall in Rotterdam, the city of Fortuyn's birth. Since then, Dutch and international television teams have carried interviews with supporters of his far-right party, who have gathered in queues at the town hall to write their condolences.

On Tuesday evening Prime Minister Kok called parliament together for a memorial meeting which was transmitted on television and, after a minute's silence, Kok expressed his personal condolences as well as those of his government, not only to the relatives of Fortuyn, but also to all supporters of his organisation.

Dutch European Union commissioner Frits Bolkestein, a member of the right-wing Peoples Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) and former defence minister, spoke of the "worst political incident in Dutch post-war history." Speaking in Brussels, he said the killing was "an attack on freedom, above all, on the right to freedom of speech."

The foreign policy representative of the European Union, Javier Solana, condemned the attack as an assault on democratic values. He said, "I condemn criminal acts, above all those directed against politicians who defend their opinions."

The German *Süddeutsche Zeitung* quoted the novelist

Harry Mulisch, whose book *The Assassination* (1983) made him something of a moral authority among Dutch writers: “He had been earmarked as a Dutch Le Pen or Haider. But this was not the case. He drew his strength from the fact that there was no evil in him. The hallmark of a fascist is his evilness. He, however, was like an innocent boy of 12. This was how he saw himself, I believe. And this was his strength. He could say terrible things about immigrants, but people liked him anyway. This morning my cleaning lady arrived, she is coloured, and I asked her what she thought about the death of Pim Fortuyn, and she began to cry. And this is not just her reaction, but also the reaction of a large part of the coloured population in the Netherlands.”

British Prime Minister Tony Blair and Foreign Minister Jack Straw also expressed shock at the attack, describing it as a blow against democracy.

There are two main reasons for the attempt to portray Fortuyn as a legitimate, if somewhat unorthodox, politician and martyr to democracy. First is a development to be observed in a number of European countries: under conditions where governing social-democratic governments are coming under increasing pressure and are confronted with large electoral losses (as was the case recently in France and in state elections in Saxony-Anhalt in Germany), the influence of extreme-right politicians is growing, nurtured by the turn to the right of the social democrats. While in the past, attempts were made to counter the influence of extreme right-wing parties—an EU boycott was organised to protest the participation in the Austrian government of Jörg Haider’s Freedom Party (FP)—a reorientation is now taking place within the European political elite. They are increasingly prepared to collaborate openly with the extreme right.

A second factor in the eulogizing of Fortuyn is a deliberate effort to sow political confusion and reactionary sentiments in the working class.

Recent events in the Netherlands demonstrate in concentrated form the social and political transformation gripping Europe. For decades this small country abreast the North Sea, between Brussels and Hamburg, was regarded as a model of liberalism. It was the first country to liberalise marriage for homosexuals, has allowed so-called “mercy killing” for the terminally ill, and legalised the sale of so-called “soft”

drugs. But under the surface of this widely praised tolerance, social tensions have been growing to the point where right-wing demagogues openly propagate racist prejudices against Holland’s two million immigrants, including 800,000 Muslims.

As unemployment began to rise in Holland at the beginning of the 1980s, reaching a monthly increase of 10,000 in 1984, the so-called “Polder Model” was developed. Government, trade unions and corporate chiefs developed a close collaboration with the aim of drastically reducing wages, gutting social welfare benefits and slashing corporate taxes. Working hours and conditions were made more “flexible”.

As a result, a huge cheap labour sector came into being, with mini-jobs (often less than 12 hours a week) paying mini-wages. Today the Netherlands has one of the highest levels of “working poor” in Europe.

For the last eight years the former chairman of the Dutch trade unions and current chairman of the social democratic party, Wim Kok, has led a coalition government with the right-wing “free market” VVD and the left-of-centre Liberal Democrats 66. It has attacked the welfare state and legal protections for workers while fostering nepotism in the distribution of public offices.

In local elections at the beginning of March, Fortuyn exploited widespread political opposition and diverted it into racist channels. He won 34 percent of the vote in the former social democratic centre of Rotterdam, making his party the strongest in the city. Thereafter the former professor of sociology, who was openly gay, was widely promoted by the media. Prior to Fortuyn’s murder, opinion polls were estimating that his organisation could win up to 26 seats in the 150-seat Dutch parliament.



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