

Netherlands: referendum revealed broad opposition to EU constitution

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On June 1, three days after the failure of the referendum in France, voters in the Netherlands likewise rejected the European Union constitution. The “no” vote was even more pronounced than in France. Some 61.6 percent of Dutch voters voted “no” to the constitution, with turnout unexpectedly high at 63 percent. In comparison, voter turnout for the last European elections was just 39 percent.

The large majority for rejecting the constitution treaty stood in stark contrast to the broad front of established political parties arguing for acceptance, exposing the profound gulf between the people as a whole and the ruling elite. The camp arguing in favour of the constitution stretched from the parties constituting the governing coalition—the Christian Democratic CDA, the right-wing neo-liberal VVD and the “free market” liberal Democrats 66—to the opposition social democratic PvdA, the Greens, the trade unions, business federations and practically every newspaper in the country. In parliament, support for the constitution was reckoned at 128 deputies, with just 22 opposed.

From a strictly legal standpoint, the referendum in the Netherlands had a purely consultative character. The decision to hold the referendum was taken in parliament against the wishes of the two largest government parties—the CDA and VVD. Nevertheless, following the agreement to hold a referendum, all parties agreed to adhere to the vote as long as the majority was clear and election turnout exceeded 30 percent.

Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende admitted defeat for his government and said he would respect “the result in its entirety.” The parliamentary vote to ratify the constitution, planned for June 2, was called off. Instead, a debate was organised to discuss the referendum result. Balkenende, however, said there would be no personnel changes in his cabinet.

The high election turnout and the overwhelming majority for rejection shocked the center-right government. The political influence of the “no” camp—consisting of the former Maoist Socialist Party (FR), the right-wing, anti-immigrant List Pim Fortuyn (LPF), and the right-populist Geert Wilders, a former VVD member—is too small to account for the broad popular mobilisation against the constitution.

The referendum vote was utilised by the Dutch people to deliver their verdict on the anti-social policies of the government. Public support for the government has sunk to a historic low of 16 percent, under conditions of a stagnating economy and rising unemployment. The attacks by the Balkenende government on

social conditions and its cuts in welfare benefits were identified by voters with the “free market” liberalisation called for by the constitution treaty, and decisively rejected.

A *Trendbox* opinion poll carried out before the referendum showed that a large majority of younger people and workers opposed the constitution, while the better-off social layers, including most self-employed people and university graduates, were in favour. The referendum thus reflected the profound social divisions in the country.

Early opinion polls had shown a majority in favour of the constitution, in a country that has traditionally been regarded as “open” to Europe. Following the murder of filmmaker and LPF supporter Theo van Gogh, in November 2004, nationalist and chauvinist sentiments assumed a larger presence in the debate over European integration and the constitution. The right-wing populists of the LPF and Geert Wilders argued for their “no” position on the basis of an anti-Muslim campaign, focusing on opposition to the admission of Turkey into the EU. They declared that the constitution would throw open the borders to streams of refugees.

The “yes” camp adapted to these chauvinist arguments, arguing that the constitution aligned all EU member states with the asylum and immigration guidelines that already prevailed in the Netherlands. Under the Balkenende government, the right of asylum has been virtually abolished in the Netherlands. The number of people seeking to enter the country has been continuously declining, and the rights of (unwanted) foreigners have been under constant attack.

However, these issues pushed by the right wing were rapidly overtaken by other social questions. The Netherlands, like other European states, is experiencing a severe economic crisis. As in neighbouring countries, the Dutch government has reacted by reducing taxes for big business and cutting wages and welfare benefits. While business giants such as the oil company Shell have been able to register record gains, the standard of living of the general population has fallen and unemployment has continued to rise.

The social consequences of this polarisation are now clear. Ghettos have developed in the cities, inhabited largely by (unemployed) immigrants; youth crime has risen; and two political murders within the space of two years have rocked the country. Fears are growing of the effects of unemployment, social decline and economic insecurity.

When the debate turned to these social questions and their connection to the proposed constitution, public support began to decline and a change of mood became evident. Support for the constitution plummeted from 73 percent of those polled in December 2004 to just 21 percent in May of this year.

Political circles reacted to this reversal with a frantic campaign in favour of the constitution. "Old hands" such as the former social democratic prime minister, Wim Kok, went public on the issue. The constitution had many advantages, Kok stressed on Dutch television, including the "tackling" of international crime, "a joint asylum policy," and "common social policies." Leading figures in German politics such as Economics Minister Wolfgang Clement of the Social Democratic Party and Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer of the Greens joined the fray and agitated for the constitution in the Netherlands, with Fischer arguing that it would strengthen the position of the smaller member states.

Representatives of the official "no" camp, on the other hand, stressed the loss of the national sovereignty. Jan Marijnissen of the Socialist Party warned that the Netherlands would become "an impotent province" if the constitution were accepted.

The right-wing populist Geert Wilders supplemented nationalist agitation on the sovereignty question with anti-Islamic demagoguery. "The political elite wants to admit Turkey into the union," he warned, "an Islamic country of millions that will have an enormous influence on the federal super-state. Because of the new European constitution, Turkey will have more influence on Dutch legislation than the Netherlands itself."

As the referendum date approached, the campaign for a "yes" vote on the part of the political establishment became more and more hysterical. They resorted to every sort of defamation to blacken and revile opponents of the constitution. Balkenende accused his opponents of systematic lying, and justified on that basis a special government fund to broadcast TV spots and commercials propagandising for a "yes" vote

Piet Hein Donner, minister of justice and VVD member, warned of the danger of a Balkanisation of Europe and intra-European wars if the constitution were rejected. His party allies in the European parliament had a TV commercial produced bearing the title "Never Again!" The ad showed horrific pictures of Nazi atrocities in Auschwitz, the massacre in Srebrenica and the terrorist attack in Madrid. The spot concluded with the slogan: "Therefore, 'yes' to the constitution." Once its existence became known, it provoked a storm of angry opposition, and it was never shown.

When it became clear that the public was immune to this campaign, and polls continued to show declining support for the constitution, the same politicians began to revile voters, accusing them of "apathy" and "lack of interest." Laurens January Brinkhorst (Democrats 66), the vice prime minister and economics minister, was quoted as saying, "It would have been better if no popular vote had been agreed to. The topic is too sensitive for the population."

Shortly before the vote, Balkenende declared that if the people wanted to punish the government, they should wait until 2007 (the next parliamentary election). But, he said, "If you want to move the economy forward, you must vote 'yes.'"

The rapid-fire rejection of the European constitution by France and the Netherlands has been met with despair from within the European Union. The constitution was designed to advance the political integration of the European Union in the interests of its political and economic elite, enabling Europe to adopt a single voice internationally and stand up to the US.

Instead, Europe is paralysed. Concerns are being voiced that the failure of the constitution could unleash centrifugal forces capable of undermining the very existence of the European Union. Commission President Manuel Barroso warned member states against taking any "independent initiatives or one-sided resolutions" without consulting the EU leadership.

Acting European Union Council President Jean Claude Juncker said, "It is a dangerous situation which threatens to diminish the global influence of Europe." Juncker intends to submit new proposals at the EU summit planned for Brussels in the middle of June. There is, however, no consensus as to what these proposals should entail.

In July, the council presidency will be handed over to the British Labour government, which has already angered the European Union Commission by suggesting it will drop plans to hold its own referendum on the constitution.

It remains clear, however, that the ruling class in Europe will continue to respond to pressures from the world economy and its growing confrontation with the US by launching fresh attacks against the working class. Günter Verheugen, the vice president of the European Union Commission, told one German media outlet: "We submitted a strategy to increase the competitive position of Europe, turning Europe into the most dynamic and competitive region of the world and restoring full employment. Nothing can be allowed to change this policy and nothing will change it. It must be continued, even more forcefully."

This can only be understood to mean that the ruling classes acknowledge the rejection by the European masses of their policies, but remain unflinching in their determination to continue their attacks against the rights and social conditions of the working class.



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