

Netherlands: the grand coalition and the role of the Socialist Party

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More than two months after the parliamentary elections, Dutch parties have finally agreed on a new government in the Netherlands. Those parties that fared worst in the election have joined together to form a grand coalition—an alliance of the Christian Democrats (CDA) of Prime Minister Jan-Peter Balkenende, the social democratic Labour Party (PvdA) and the religious fundamentalists of the Christian Union (CU). Discussions are currently underway on a new government programme.

The coalition negotiations had been shrouded in secrecy with locations constantly changed. Although voters sent a clear and unmistakable rebuff to both the Christian Democrats and Labour Party on November 22, the electorate is now being kept in the dark about the policies being formulated behind closed doors. The majority of voters rejected the rigorous cost-cutting programme of the Balkenende government, whose billion-euro cuts in social services led to increasing hardships for many. Opposition to the sending of the Dutch army to Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as to the inhumane refugee policies of the government, also contributed to the defeat of Balkenende and his Christian Democratic-Liberal Party (VVD) coalition.

The social democrats, however, were not able to profit from the government's defeat, despite being in opposition. On the contrary, they lost the most votes of any party. Since the 1990s, the social democrats have been seen as the party of wealth redistribution—from the working class to those at the top of society. In was during this time that the PvdA, under then-prime minister Wim Kok, undertook a drastic programme of cuts to the welfare state, thereby paving the way for the conservatives under Balkenende. Current Labour Party leader Wouter Bos is a former top manager of oil giant Shell. During the election campaign, he called for increased taxes for pensioners and a reduction in tax subsidies for homeowners.

It has become obvious that a grand coalition would be deeply unpopular and stand in open conflict with the will of the majority of the population. Under these circumstances, the Socialist Party (SP) under Jan Marijnissen is playing a critical role.

The Socialist Party was the biggest winner in the elections. The former Maoist organisation profited from widespread disgust with the government and opposition parties, and notched up 17 percent of the vote. This trebled the party's representation in parliament to 26 seats.

The SP had even hoped to gain departmental posts as a result, declaring immediately after the elections that it was prepared to

participate in a future government. Its leader Marijnissen signalled the party's "readiness" to participate to the PvdA and even to the conservatives of the CDA. However, to its great disappointment, the SP was not included in the current coalition negotiations. Consequently, the party is now anxious to prove that it would be a reliable partner in any future government.

Similar to the Left Party in Germany and the Communist Refoundation party in Italy, the Dutch Socialist Party talks "left" for as long as it does not participate in government. Its left- and socialist-sounding talk serves to promote illusions that capitalism can be reformed and to prevent an independent movement of the working class developing against the current social order.

One of the central points in the party's election manifesto was "the creation of trust in democracy." It wrote that the mistrust and rejection of official politics by the population must be seen "as a first warning."

The SP had no intention of mobilising people to defend democratic rights. By "trust in democracy" it meant trust in the current state institutions, which the greater part of the population views with apprehension.

The SP has largely dropped its radical demands of the past, such as the withdrawal from NATO, the abolition of the monarchy, and even the "introduction of socialism" in the Netherlands. The closer the party has drawn towards the levers of power, the more it has dropped its verbal radicalism.

The SP promotes illusions in the United Nations as a bulwark against the "US dominance of NATO." "Our alternative," said Tiny Kox, an SP representative in the Senate, "is the dismantling of military arms and the development of a global military cooperation to protect international and human rights. The United Nations should play a large part in this."

The SP even advocates Dutch military operations under the guise of the UN: "We are not in principle against interventions," said Kox. "But we are against military interventions that are without legitimacy and out of proportion, that lack a clear aim, timetable and exit strategy."

On the question of the "war on terror," the SP has also moved closer to the positions of the other parties.

As long as the SP did not have parliamentary representation, it attempted to highlight the underlying social causes behind the "war against terrorism." It argued that international financial and development aid should be used to close the gap between rich and poor and thereby eliminate the main cause of terrorism. Today, the

SP appeals to the Dutch state to fight terrorism with all means possible and to punish terrorists “hard and effectively.” All diplomatic means available should be used and the powers of the secret services expanded and intensified.

On the subject of the growing division between rich and poor, the SP manifesto contained the following passage: “We fight against prohibitive rents and unacceptable working conditions and for the protection of the environment and better healthcare for everyone; against the further erosion of social security and for equitable wages for everyone; for equality of opportunity and against the growing worldwide gap between rich and poor; against growing social polarisation and for a society of compassion.”

To achieve these aims, the SP bases itself on the reform of Dutch capitalism. It wants to reduce the recently introduced healthcare fee by 90 euros per person. However, it does not advocate a reversal in the privatisation of the healthcare sector. The state should provide more money for education, retirement pensions and other social services, while ruling out increases in taxes for the wealthy in order to finance these measures.

The SP also fails to spell out how it would attempt to revive reformism through a coalition with the CDA and PvdA. It does not explain why the PvdA abandoned its reformist programme and transformed itself into a party that carried out a massive redistribution of wealth to the rich. For the SP, these issues are pragmatic ones: “In the Netherlands, we have a long history of coalitions. These cannot work when you give ultimatums in advance. You have to negotiate with one another and see what comes out of it,” said Tiny Kox.

For the SP, the interests of refugees and immigrants, the weakest sections of society, are completely alien. Ten years ago, the SP had already adopted the “boat is full” rhetoric of the right-wing populists.

In December of last year, the SP parliamentary fraction opposed and prevented the minority government’s attempt to open the country’s borders to workers from the new European Union states from eastern Europe. It criticised the government initiative as a lever to attack the wages and working conditions of Dutch workers, and based itself on a policy of division. The SP expressly rejected the idea of a common struggle of European workers for their common rights.

For the SP, refugees are seen merely as political pawns. This was demonstrated in the dispute over the halting of a deportation order for 26,000 long-term asylum-seekers, an act that did not prevent 12,000 from being deported.

On December 12, the PvdA put forward a motion in parliament for an immediate halt to the deportation of the 26,000 asylum seekers. It was passed with a majority of one. The SP and the Christian Union voted with the PvdA to support its passage.

The motion did not arise out of a concern for fundamental principles on the part of the PvdA. On the issues of immigration and asylum, all parties more or less stand behind the hard-line deportation policy of the government. Rather, the social democrats sought to place pressure on Balkenende in order to improve its own negotiating position.

Rita Verdonk, the minister for immigration and integration from the right-wing liberal People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy

(VVD), announced that she would not halt the deportations in line with the parliamentary order. Parliament then formally reprimanded her, an action that normally leads to a vote of no confidence in the minister and his or her resignation.

The VVD reacted by threatening to leave the government. This would have meant the breakup of the minority cabinet, and the Netherlands would have been without a government for the first time in its history.

The looming constitutional crisis resulted in a rotten compromise on the part of the political establishment. Verdonk remained as minister but lost her immigration portfolio. The deportation stop remained in force, albeit only for families and small children who had previously been deported. But the stop order is so vaguely formulated that it provides no real protection for these families. A final decision on this question has been left to the next government.

The SP did not reject this compromise. It did not publicly reproach the government or the opposition because it does not want to endanger its chances of ministerial posts and their associated benefits, even if this means trampling on the backs of the weakest in society along the way. The SP did not stand up to Verdonk and her open repudiation of the democratic principle that it is the elected parliament that controls the government.

Instead, Marijnissen characterised the outcome as a “strange but significant compromise between the government and the opposition.” Kox saw the manoeuvre as an “interesting thing” that the “left majority” had accomplished.

Immediately after the election, the Labour Party appealed to the prime minister to invite the SP to the coalition negotiations. On the one hand, it feared a further loss of votes if the SP remained in opposition. On the other, the PvdA signalled its willingness to work together with the SP as a means to increase support for the PvdA’s anti-social policies. However, after the first round of coalition talks, Balkenende announced his refusal to engage in talks with the “socialists.”

“Cooperation between the CDA and SP is not something that the CDA wants at the moment,” bemoaned Marijnissen. However, he said that “other coalitions are conceivable, including those in which the SP participates.”



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