

Right-wing shift in Dutch elections

Peter Schwarz
12 June 2010

After Hungary and the UK, the Netherlands is the third significant European Union country where right-wing parties have emerged as election winners in the midst of the deepest economic crisis since the 1930s.

There are, of course, differences between the Hungarian Fidesz, the British Tories and the Dutch right-wing liberals (VVD). But what all three have in common is that they combine rigid austerity measures in the interests of finance capital with xenophobia or Islamophobia and opposition to the EU from a right-wing, nationalist standpoint.

Furthermore, in Hungary and the Netherlands, groups with openly fascistic tendencies—Jobbik in Hungary and the Party for Freedom (PVV) of the right-wing populist Geert Wilders in the Netherlands—came in third. These parties combine violent hostility to Roma and other minorities (Jobbik) and against Muslims (PVV) with social demagoguery and rhetorical attacks on finance capital. Both are spin-offs of the respective winners, Fidesz and VVD, and are close to them politically.

This shift to the right needs to be explained. It is due to powerful political fluctuations in the middle classes. The impact of the economic crisis has taken a toll not only on the working class, resulting to this point in many workers abstaining in elections, but has also hit the middle classes, who are unsettled and feel increasingly threatened.

These layers no longer look to the Social Democrats for salvation. The Social Democrats, as majority government parties (Hungary, Britain) or as junior partners in a Conservative government (the Netherlands) have slashed government spending, raised taxes and fees for the middle class, obeyed every demand of finance capital, and enforced the dictates of the EU bureaucracy.

For these reasons, sections of the middle class are turning to figures who present themselves as resolute, strong men. Viktor Orban (Fidesz), David Cameron

(Conservative Party) and Mark Rutte (VVD) are similar not only politically, but also in their demeanour. All three are slick careerists who preach social egoism, a weak welfare state and greater police powers for the state.

Mark Rutte is characteristic in this respect. The 43-year-old began his career as a personnel manager for the Unilever group, joined the Balkenende government as a state secretary in 2002 and pushed the VVD in a strictly neo-liberal direction. The party manifesto written by him propagates a “small and compact state” that limits social spending to a minimum.

In the election, Rutte campaigned for cuts in social spending, higher tuition fees, raising the retirement age to 67, a restrictive immigration policy, more police, building new nuclear power plants, a reduction in Holland’s contribution to the European Union, and barring Turkey from accession to the EU.

In this way, Rutte addressed the egotism of the better-off, while the hysterical Islamophobia of his former party colleague Wilders was aimed at the fears of the lower middle class. Wilders blamed Muslim immigrants for all social evils—unemployment, state debt, crime—and thereby sought to deflect social anger against those responsible at the top of society toward the poorest and most oppressed layers. As sociological studies show, he mainly received the votes of members of the middle class who feel threatened by globalisation, fear for their social status and yearn for a strong man.

That Wilders’ demagoguery met with success is due primarily to the role of the Socialist Party (SP), which, like the Left Party in Germany and the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) in France, has presented itself for a long time as a left-wing alternative to the discredited Social Democrats.

The Socialist Party emerged in 1972 from an insignificant Maoist organisation and has, since the

mid-1990s, attracted disaffected voters from the middle class who turned away from the Social Democrats. It became a rallying point for trade union officials, feminists, Attac members, ex-radicals and religious reformers. It reached its peak in 2006, when it nearly tripled its vote and won 25 of the 150 parliamentary seats.

But the Socialist Party had no independent perspective. It acted primarily as a left fig leaf for the unions, which, in turn, cooperated closely with the government. While its voters became more radicalised, the Socialist Party moved closer to the social democratic Labour Party (PvdA), which, in the spring of 2007, entered a coalition government with the conservative CDA. Inside the Socialist Party, there was open discussion about entering a coalition with the PvdA or even the conservative CDA.

The Socialist Party even joined in the campaign against Islam. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the murder of Dutch right-wing populist Pim Fortuyn in May 2002, the SP brought forward a bill in parliament that would make it compulsory for Islamic clergy to undertake a course on integration into Dutch culture.

In the latest elections, the Socialist Party suffered the results of its right-wing policies. It lost 10 of its 25 parliamentary seats. Many of its voters switched directly to Wilders' right-wing populist PVV, which gained 15 seats and is now the third-strongest party, with 24 deputies, behind the right-wing Liberals (31) and the social democratic PvdA (30).

The electoral successes of the right wing in the Netherlands, as in Hungary and Britain, are not the expression of a general rightward development in society. The mood of wide sections of the working class and lower middle class is left wing and oppositional. But this mood does not find any political expression, because the social democratic, ex-communist and "left" petty-bourgeois organisations compete with one another to be at the command of capital.

This is the political source of the growth of right-wing tendencies amongst the middle class. But such a development is by no means inevitable, as Leon Trotsky explained in his analysis of German fascism.

The petty-bourgeoisie "is quite capable of linking its fate with that of the proletariat," Trotsky wrote. "For

that, only one thing is needed: the petty-bourgeoisie must acquire faith in the ability of the proletariat to lead society onto a new road."

But if it does not acquire this faith, because the working class is paralysed or undecided, the danger arises that parties will gain influence that pursue the aim of "agitating the petty-bourgeoisie to a white heat and of directing its hatred and its despair against the proletariat" (Leon Trotsky, *Germany: The Only Road*).

The Dutch vote is a warning. Capitalist society has reached such a degree of rottenness that ultra-right forces can win influence again if the working class does not go on the offensive and break free of the shackles of the social democratic and trade union apparatus and its middle-class appendages. This requires an international socialist programme and the building of new parties as sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact