

Socialist Party leads polls in Dutch elections

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According to opinion polls, the Socialist Party (SP) is set to win Dutch parliamentary elections due on September 12.

The latest polls indicate that the SP, which originally emerged from a Maoist group, would win 36 seats in the 150-seat Lower House. This would more than double its current total of 15 deputies, placing the party in front of the right-wing Liberal Party (VVD), led by Mark Rutte, which has just 31 seats and heads the governing coalition.

Polls project the Labour Party (PvdA) will win just 16 seats (previously 30) and the Christian Democrats (CDA) 14 (previously 21). The two parties that have dominated Dutch politics for decades would have a combined vote lower than the SP.

The far-right, anti-Islamist Freedom Party (PVV) of Geert Wilders is also recording losses. Polls give the party 18 seats in a new parliament, instead of its current 24.

Political observers now say that Emile Roemer, the leading SP candidate, could be the next Dutch prime minister. The 50-year-old teacher would, however, have to find several coalition partners. There are currently 10 parties represented in the Dutch Parliament. This figure is expected to rise to 12 after the election.

The political upheaval revealed in the polls is a direct consequence of the euro crisis, as political shock waves are now hitting the fifth largest economy in the euro zone. To understand the root causes of this development, however, it is necessary to go back 30 years.

In 1982, trade unions and employers' organisations signed the Wassenaar Treaty. It laid the foundation for the so-called Polder Model, whereby "social partners" and the government worked together to cut wages and social spending and deregulate the labour market, to increase the Netherlands' global competitiveness.

The Polder Model really took flight in the 1990s, when the social democrat and former union leader Wim Kok, became prime minister. Kok's policies foreshadowed many of those implemented later by Tony Blair and "New Labour" in the UK and Gerhard Schröder in Germany under the rubric "Agenda 2010".

The result was a strong polarisation of the hitherto relatively egalitarian Dutch society. According to the OECD, relative poverty increased in the Netherlands and Ireland during the 1990s more than in any other country. Minorities were

excluded, rents shot up in the cities and the years of redistribution of wealth from the poor to the rich rocked the political system.

Under conditions in which the Social Democrats and trade unions were closely identified with the Polder Model, right-wing populist parties were able to benefit from the social tensions. Pim Fortuyn and, after Fortuyn's assassination, Geert Wilders combined classic right-wing issues such as xenophobia and Islamophobia with gay politics and identity politics as a whole. On this basis, the PVV notched up considerable electoral successes, winning support from impoverished neighbourhoods and among aspiring middle class layers. In 2010, Wilders's PVV assumed third place in the Dutch parliament behind the right-wing liberals and the Labour Party.

After long and fruitless negotiations, Wilders finally decided to tacitly back a minority government led by Mark Rutte. Rutte's free-market, pro-banker course quickly debunked the populist demagoguery of the PVV, however.

When Rutte then presented an austerity package of €16 billion to meet the deficit criteria of the European Union in the spring of 2012, Wilders jumped ship. He withdrew support from the government, arguing that he would "not allow our pensions to be bled dry due to Brussels", and set the course for early elections. This month's election will now be the fourth in 10 years.

Under conditions of widespread social and political instability, the SP is offering its services as a seemingly untainted force to save the Dutch capitalism.

Founded in 1972 as a Maoist group, the SP moved rapidly to the right. It soon ditched what it called its "flirtation with Maoism" and focused on the "practical struggle" in the trade unions. In 2000, the party announced its "strategic objective" was the "breakthrough into parliament".

The SP's "socialism" is limited to a hazy commitment to "respect for human dignity, equality and solidarity." To the extent that the party criticises existing conditions, it does so in the name of a glorified past, in which people trusted one other and worked together across social and class lines.

Typical in this respect were Roemer's comments during the parliamentary debate on the Rutte government's budget. Roemer said: "Society cannot function without trust. Trust between shopkeeper and buyer, between employer and worker, between doctor and patient, between lawyer and client. The last

twenty years have seen this trust partly through government policy, come under pressure, and the policies of this government will certainly not improve this.”

The SP makes no efforts to disguise its nationalism, its loyalty to the state and its hostility to an independent mobilisation of the working class. When it comes to the issue of enforcing anti-immigrant policies, there is little to choose between the SP and Wilders’ PVV.

In the 1980s, the party issued a text titled *Guest Labour and Capital*, which demanded that migrant workers either adapt to the language and customs of the country or emigrate. The party argued perversely that the presence of uneducated migrant workers allowed “capital” to split workers on the principle of “divide and rule”.

On its web site, under the heading “Opinions,” the party writes on the subject of “foreigners” that as long as hundreds of thousands of people were unemployed, it would be “undesirable to fetch workers from abroad.” The SP’s election manifesto takes the same line: “Where possible asylum seekers should be intercepted in their own region.”

The SP is convinced of the need for fiscal consolidation. “You can’t continually spend more than is coming in. That’s true, and that’s why I’m in favour of economies,” Roemer declares on the official SP website. He wants to vary the implementation of the current policies, because “cuts which are too deep or too rapid are disastrous for the economy and for employment.”

The SP even tries to present attacks on pensioners—over which Wilders’s PVV withdrew its support for the government—as progressive. The party proposes to keep the retirement age at 65 years, while also trying to present a later retirement age as attractive: “The social partners make binding agreements about how the over-65-year-olds can work longer in order to increase working potential and relieve the pressure on the social system.”

In 2005, the SP campaigned against the European Constitution, which was overwhelmingly rejected by Dutch voters. But like many other of its positions on political issues, its opposition to the EU cannot be taken seriously. Roemer adopt a Euro-skeptical stance, “without scaring his unadventurous followers at the same time with the proposal to withdraw from the EU or the euro area”, commented the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.

One year ago, Roemer demanded a parliamentary debate on cosmetic reforms to the EU, and not for Dutch withdrawal from the EU or the EU’s abolition: “We need a Europe that lends its ear less to the multinationals and more to the citizens, a European development in which people are taken into account,” he said.

Were the SP to join the government, it would rapidly ditch its criticisms of EU austerity measures. It would take up its “responsibility,” the SP web site declares: “The SP recognises the special responsibilities which a role in government, of

which it already has experience at local level, brings with it. Financial management within policy frameworks which are the result of compromise with other parties, deciding when to compromise and when to stand firm...none of this is straightforward for a party which wants to change the Netherlands and the world.”

The SP makes absolutely clear its willingness to form a coalition with all other parties. For the start of its election campaign in Arnhem, Roemer called in front of 2,500 supporters for “a social alliance between like-minded political parties, workers, employers and social organisations. Everyone who can underwrite our goals of less poverty and narrower social differences, more caring for each other and more confidence in one another, I challenge to work hand in hand with us and then, after September 12th, to build on this.”

The SP has gone so far as to form a joint list with the Social Democrats and the Greens, who supported Rutte’s austerity programme after the Freedom Party withdrew its support.

If anyone is in any doubt about the SP’s loyalty to the state apparatus, a glimpse at the party’s programme is sufficient to dispel any confusion. The SP calls for a massive upgrade of the state apparatus. “More police on the street leads to greater safety in the neighborhood,” it says. Policemen belonged “mainly on the street and not behind a desk.”

The SP also wants to ensure the judiciary can work more effectively—not by pursuing criminal financial speculators but rather by guaranteeing public law and order: “Energetic judges and quick execution of the penalties imposed to help increase confidence in the judiciary.”

This is the same language used by affluent sections of the British petty bourgeoisie after the youth riots in the UK in the summer of 2012. Such layers feared for the safety of their property and personal wealth. They respond to the outbreak of years of pent-up anger by workers and youth with demands for strong intervention by the state.

It is no coincidence that the SP is currently the mouthpiece for such sentiments, or that the party has its base in the provincial south of the Netherlands rather than in the big cities. Its embrace of provincialism and nationalism obscures the root causes of the global crisis and directs layers of the petty bourgeoisie, fearing social decline, against the most defenseless sections of society.



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