

# Grand coalition government formed in the Netherlands

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Wednesday's parliamentary elections in the Netherlands returned former Prime Minister Mark Rutte of the free market *Volkspartij voor Vrijheids en Democratie* (VVD, the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy) to office, to the surprise of many.

The new government, which will most likely include the Social Democrats, has already announced a sharp attack on workers' social rights.

The VVD received 26.6 percent of the vote, gaining 41 seats in the 150-member Lower House, ten more than in the past. The social democratic *Partij van de Arbeid* (PvdA) received 24.8 percent. With 39 seats, an increase of nine, they are now the second-largest party.

Leading PvdA candidate Diederik Samsom immediately agreed to enter into a coalition government with Rutte and the VVD. "The Netherlands needs a strong and stable government as soon as possible," he stated, "and the Social Democrats have today offered their cooperation."

The anti-immigrant Party for Freedom (PVV) of Geert Wilders dropped from 24 to 15 seats. The Socialist Party (SP), which led the polls a few weeks before the election and whose leading candidate, Emile Roemer, was being treated as a future prime minister, won only 15 seats.

The Christian Democrats (CDA) and their lead candidate Sybrand Buma obtained just 13 seats, eight fewer than in the past. It is the worst result in the history of the Christian Democrats, who for decades dominated Dutch politics.

The liberal "Democrats 66" (D66) won two more seats, obtaining twelve deputies in the parliament. Since there is no minimum threshold required to enter parliament in the Netherlands, five more parties will be represented, including the Greens, who lost seven seats and now only have three deputies. The Pirate Party,

which contested the elections, failed to win enough votes to enter parliament; only 0.3 percent of voters supported them in the ballot. Around 74 percent of the twelve million registered voters participated in the election.

During the election campaign, the VVD announced plans to impose more savage cuts. In the health sector alone, the party wants to cut seven billion euros (US\$9.2 billion). Their likely coalition partner, the PvdA, is set to support this programme. In the election campaign, the PvdA's only obvious difference with the VVD was that they wanted to implement the cuts over a somewhat longer time span.

The new government will lead a frontal attack on workers' rights. Consumption taxes will rise, health care will be slashed and pensions cut. The unemployed will be forced into low-wage work by a reform of unemployment benefits modelled on Germany's Hartz IV program, introduced by German social democrats (SPD) and Greens. Plans for this are already drawn up.

Given massive public opposition to such measures, it is possible that the two government parties, despite their ten-vote majority in parliament, will bring a third party into the government to help enforce these attacks. There are plenty of candidates for the role of junior partner. It appears that the front runner is D66, with its twelve deputies.

D66 had once before been in government with the other two parties. From 1994 to 2002, the so-called "purple coalition" of the PvdA, VVD and D66 ruled the country. At that time, the former union leader Wim Kok led the government for the PvdA. A new version of this government constellation would take on the task of abolishing the last vestiges of social provisions, reducing wages and worsening working conditions.

Before the elections, the government of the VVD and

CDA, supported by the conservative *Christen-Unie*, the Greens and D66, adopted an austerity package of €12.4 billion. Poverty and unemployment have increased rapidly, and the financial markets have the country in their sights. Its budget deficit last year, at 4.7 percent of GDP, stood well above the Maastricht criteria.

Given this tense social situation, the election victory of the Conservatives and Social Democrats cannot be explained by their popularity, but only by the lack of a serious alternative. The ex-Maoist Socialist Party (SP) led pre-election polls because they had formulated limited criticisms of the fiscal compact and the VVD's plans for cuts.

The VVD and PvdA responded to this—supported by the media—by presenting the election as a decision for or against Europe, painting a possible exit from the euro in the darkest of colours. In early September, the employers' association VNO-NCW called on television for the unconditional preservation of the EU.

“Without Europe, there is no Schiphol airport [in Amsterdam], or the port of Rotterdam,” one employer claimed.

The VVD combined their promotion of illusions that the EU can be reformed with a chauvinist anti-immigrant campaign to mobilize right-wing layers that had previously voted for Wilders. Like French President François Hollande, the PvdA claims the cuts can be carried out over a longer time span and supplemented by economic development programmes.

The SP could not oppose this campaign, as they share the same right-wing positions and defend EU membership. The SP not only called for a halt to immigration, but also spoke out for budget cuts and enlarging the police force. Above all, it spoke in favour of remaining in the euro zone and EU, and like the PvdA stoked illusions in the possibility of reforming the European institutions.

Only a small fraction of the electorate cast their votes in favour of the SP. The absence of a progressive alternative thus led to the re-election of the government.

In Germany in particular, the result brought relief because Berlin feared a change of government in the Netherlands would mean losing a pro-austerity ally in Europe. German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle (Free Democratic Party) congratulated Rutte on his

electoral victory. The election outcome strengthened Europe, he said.

From Brussels, European Parliament President Martin Schulz (SPD) welcomed the election as a “great achievement for Europe.”



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