

Likely shift to the right in Dutch elections threatens EU

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The significance of the Dutch parliamentary election on 15 March stretches well beyond the borders of this country with 17 million inhabitants. As in the United States, the ruling class throughout Europe is responding to the capitalist crisis and growing social tensions by abandoning democratic forms of rule and returning to nationalism and war.

The election in the Netherlands will serve as the prelude to the French presidential elections. The right-wing candidate Geert Wilders and his Party for Freedom (PVV), which is currently almost neck-and-neck in the polls with the right-wing liberal People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) of sitting Prime Minister Marc Rutte, is channeling the mounting social anger in a nationalist and Islamophobic direction.

A victory for Wilders would provide a boost to Marine Le Pen, leader of the Front National (FN), in France's presidential elections in April and May. If she wins, this would be the end of the European Union and the framework within which European politics has operated since the end of the Second World War. Le Pen and Wilders both intend to push for an exit from the EU and the European currency union.

On 21 January, Wilders met Le Pen in Koblenz, Germany, with other right-wing extremist parties which compose the "Europe of Nations and Freedom" group in the European Parliament, to celebrate Trump's entry into the White House. "Make the Netherlands great again," tweeted Wilders after Trump's election. Other participants in Koblenz included Frauke Petry, chairwoman of the Alternative for Germany (AfD). With Trump, Wilders and Le Pen, she hopes to obtain a boost ahead of Germany's federal election in September.

While opposition to Trump in the working class and among the youth is growing globally, Europe shows that his election as US president was neither an American nor an individual phenomenon. And like Trump, Wilders did

not fall from the sky.

Wilders began his political career as an economic liberal in the VVD during the 1980s. In 1998, the admirer of former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher won a seat in parliament. He broke with the VVD in 2005 over the question of Turkey's membership in the EU and founded the PVV, which he runs like a business. Wilders is the only member; he searches for election candidates and parliamentary deputies by means of adverts and personally selects them, without making them party members.

His influence grew following the financial crisis of 2008. As in every European country, the state in the Netherlands propped up the financial market. The then-Christian Democratic (CDA) Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende and his social democratic (PvdA) Finance Minister Wouter Bos made available more than €85 billion to Dutch banks. The money was subsequently squeezed out of the population through social spending cuts. Since then, Wilders has portrayed himself as a representative of the "common people" and channeled social anger in a nationalist and Islamophobic direction.

The orgy of cuts and privatisations of social welfare systems was accompanied with agitation against immigrants by all governments, whether led by the social democrats, Christian democrats or right-wing liberals. Immigrants were made scapegoats for the social and economic decline. In the previously tolerant country, the right to asylum and immigrants' rights were significantly restricted. The social democrats and VVD have also joined in the xenophobia during the current campaign.

The Netherlands has been closely aligned with Germany in the growing national divisions that have emerged in the EU since 2008. The country, which has traditionally relied on trade, is heavily dependent on exports, 70 percent of which go to the EU. More than 60 percent of all imports come from EU member states. Germany has

been by far the Netherlands' most important trading partner for many years. At €167 billion (2015), the volume of trade between the two countries is among the highest in the world. The major seaport in Rotterdam is one of the largest deep-sea ports in Europe. The direct access to the Rhine and Europe's largest inland port at Duisburg, Germany, has made the Netherlands Europe's hub for the international exchange of goods.

Germany and the Netherlands have been the two main countries demanding more spending cuts from Greece so as to bleed the Greek population white to rescue the banks.

Germany and the Netherlands also cooperate closely in the military sphere. As a NATO member, the Netherlands has participated since 1998 in the military interventions in Yugoslavia, Africa (Ethiopia/Eritrea), Afghanistan and Iraq. Dutch troops are currently involved in the NATO military build-up in Eastern Europe. Several hundred soldiers are in the process of deploying to Lithuania on the Russian border, where they will be part of NATO's first battle group led by the German army. Meanwhile, Dutch submarines are patrolling in the Mediterranean.

As in every country, the Dutch ruling class is responding to the mounting political, national and social tensions with militarism, xenophobia and nationalism. The election thus carries with it the potential of being the beginning of the end of the European Union.

While the centrifugal forces have to date been concentrated in Britain, which always occupied a special role, and countries in the south or east like Hungary or Poland, two founding members of the European Economic Community (EEC), the EU's predecessor, are now affected.

Brexit, Britain's exit from the European Union, already initiated the breakdown of the European Union. Originally demanded by the right-wing United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), exit from the EU is now the official policy of the Tory government of Theresa May and a minority section of the opposition Labour Party.

The defeat of Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi in last December's constitutional referendum was the next blow for the EU. The banks and EU representatives saw the referendum as the last chance to resolve the banking crisis within the framework of the EU and the euro.

On March 1, the president of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, published the so-called "White paper on the future of Europe." The scenarios outlined in it all assume that the tensions will intensify and political divisions will deepen. The document proposed a major

programme of military rearmament to overcome these problems.

Then last weekend, heads of government from Germany (Angela Merkel), France (François Hollande), Italy (Paolo Gentiloni) and Spain (Mariano Rajoy) appealed for a "Europe of different speeds" in Versailles, i.e., for the larger nations to press ahead alone. The main issue was military cooperation. This was initiated by the EU foreign and defence ministers meeting in Brussels on Monday. They agreed upon a joint headquarters, which is initially to lead EU military missions abroad.

Since Brexit, discussions have been ongoing in Germany about the need to seize on the crisis of the European Union and the election of Donald Trump as a chance to rise to the status of a hegemonic political and military power, based on its economic weight, capable of challenging Russia and the United States.

Austerity and militarism are the policies of the EU's defenders. But to impose these against the wishes of the population, authoritarian forms of rule are required. This is why the right-wing opponents of the EU are receiving a platform from sections of the political and media establishment to divide the working class with their xenophobia and impose the policies of social cuts and war.

The working class in the Netherlands has no real choice in the elections March 15. The only alternative to the two roads offered by the bourgeoisie, Balkanisation of Europe or a militarised European great power, is the United Socialist States of Europe. Only the establishment of workers governments in every European country and the unification of Europe on a socialist basis can prevent the relapse of the continent into nationalism and war, and create the preconditions for the use and further development of the continent's vast riches and productive capacities to meet the interests of society as a whole.



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