

Workers' unrest in the Netherlands

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Elementary school teachers are to strike May 30 in the southern provinces of the Netherlands, as part of a wave of working class struggles that brought the number of strike actions in the small country to 32 in 2017, the highest number since 1989.

According to the Dutch Central Bureau for Statistics (CBS), a record number of 147,000 workers participated in the strikes in 2017. A year before, there were 25 strike actions but these involved only 11,000 workers, far fewer.

The number of working days lost to strikes soared from 19,000 in 2016 to 306,000 for 2017. Significantly, strike actions have become more frequent each year since 2011, except for a small decline in 2016. CBS states on its web site that in 8 out of 10 cases the strikes were initiated and ended by the central trade unions, mostly over conflicts about the Collective Labour Agreement (CAO). Almost 20 percent of the strikes were initiated solely over wage issues.

The role of the central trade unions FNV and CNV has been very much the same as in the United Kingdom, Germany, the United States and elsewhere, which is always one of suppressing workers' unrest and "toning down" of strike actions. The unions consider nationwide strikes too "disruptive," and argue strongly for regional, one-day strikes and sometimes for "protest marches," which are little more than street parades.

The political influence of the unions, represented by the social-democratic labour party PvdA, is all but depleted, as PvdA saw its parliamentary seat-count drop dramatically in last year's national election. The Dutch "Polder Model," which consists of continuous negotiations between government, employers and trade unions, has been very successful in suppressing popular unrest, but as CBS statistics show, the Dutch working class is beginning to resist.

Teachers in Dutch elementary schools held several

national strike actions in 2017, demanding improved school funding, which has been cut drastically over recent years, and for higher wages and a reduction in workload. Specifically, elementary school teachers demand equal pay compared to their colleagues teaching in high school and the creation of more support jobs such as classroom assistants and administrative workers.

Full tuition funding for college students is being converted into student loans, so graduates start their adult professional lives already carrying enormous debts.

The teachers union tries to dampen down strike action and argues for regional strikes, and the government says there is not enough money to meet the demands. In reality, school funding has been cut dramatically for the past decade due to austerity measures, funneling the money to large banks and corporations through bail-outs and tax cuts. The abolition of the dividend tax in the Netherlands is one of the most recent examples of government hand-outs to the already rich and to international finance capital.

According to Dutch labour law, a trade union can be set up by as few as two people. They have to be co-workers and have their statutes validated by a solicitor. Dutch elementary school teachers have made use of this and founded their own, single-use trade union, taking matters into their own hands and organising the strike actions via social media.

It is because of this action alone that the government was forced to raise the education budget by approximately €700 million. But this is not nearly enough to repair the damage caused by austerity measures and does little to nothing to relieve the pressure on educators. In contrast, the Dutch military saw its budget increase by €1.5 billion to build up towards the military spending level of 2 percent of GDP demanded by NATO.

The teachers' strikes are still ongoing. Regional strikes resemble a relay race, with the southern provinces taking their turn to strike on May 30. During the national strikes, the national media reported on the standpoints of both the employers and the trade union. It also mentioned some responses from teachers explaining how badly they need proper education funding. Public support was hardly given a voice in the media, while hostile statements from parents could be read in any newspaper article on the subject. During the regional strike actions the national media turned deafeningly silent.

Bus and train drivers working for privatised public transport companies have been negotiating with employers via the unions for equal pay compared to their colleagues working for the national railway company NS. A train driver working for NS earns up to 10 percent more than his or her colleague working for the private company Arriva.

More importantly, workers also demand loosening of the tight duty rosters. In some cases, bus drivers work nine-hour shifts, driving for four hours straight until they have a 15-minute break. If drivers fall behind schedule due to heavy traffic, they see their break-time reduced and in some cases there is not enough time left to even go to the toilet.

In order to gain public transport concessions, private companies have to compete ever more aggressively, squeezing every last drop of labour power and money out of their workers. In 2017, regional bus drivers held "public-friendly" actions, allowing people to travel for free. A court ruling prohibited this, characterizing the refusal to collect fares as "stealing from the company."

In early January 2018, in a stunt to generate attention to their plight, bus drivers had cars with trailers carrying portable toilets driving behind the bus. When negotiations and the publicity stunts failed, and "public-friendly" actions were prohibited, workers went on national strike on April 30 and May 1.

More than 80 percent of regional public transport (bus and train routes in the provinces) was shut down with only some bus routes operating to keep airports and hospitals accessible. An article on the web site of Dutch newspaper *Algemeen Dagblad* stated that the employers organisation VWOV filed a lawsuit demanding strike action be prohibited, accusing the unions of making unjust use of the right to strike, but

the judge ruled in favour of the workers. According to the court, the workers' right to strike in this case was more important than the "damage and hindrance" a national strike would cause.

Again the trade unions cowardly backed down from national strikes, considering it too "disruptive" and turned towards regional relay-strikes. FNV negotiator Paula Verhoef said on the television programme *Nieuwsuur*: "We do realise [the strikes] are inconvenient for passengers, so there will not be another national strike, but we will pressure regionally."

Media reports concentrated on unsupportive reactions: Students have trouble attending college or exams, people can't go to work, and grandparents can't visit their grandchildren. The comments section of the popular Dutch news site *NU.nl* shows a good number of such reactions, but there are also many comments of solidarity. Some bus drivers commented with their personal experiences. One of them stated that if he's 10 or maybe 12 minutes delayed due to heavy traffic, he only has 3 to 5 minutes left for a quick sandwich, coffee, cigarette perhaps and/or restroom visit.



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