

Wave of strikes, protests in Dutch public sector

Harm Zonderland and Dietmar Henning
27 September 2018

Anger is building in the Netherlands over the anti-social policies of the major political parties and the trade unions. More strikes have taken place since the beginning of the year than throughout the whole of 2017, which, with 32 walkouts, recorded the highest number of work stoppages since 1989. Primary school teachers have led the protests.

Thousands of teachers have repeatedly gone on strike over the past year to protest low wages and increased workloads. The largest protest took place on October 5 last year, when 60,000 teachers demonstrated in Den Haag, the seat of the government and parliament.

Next Tuesday, October 2, teachers plan to protest in Den Haag once again, but this time together with other public-sector workers.

In the Netherlands, primary schools account for the first eight years of schooling. Children go to school from the age of four and attend a so-called “basis” school until the age of 12. According to a national study carried out by the central statistics agency (CBS), between 2011 and 2015, 20 percent of all primary school teachers suffer from symptoms of burnout. No other professional group has such a high level of chronically overworked workers.

Pay for primary school teachers is well below average. With a monthly wage of €2,346, they earn 30 percent less than an average academic. This has resulted in a decline in the number of new teachers. It is predicted that in 10 years there will be a shortfall of 11,000 primary school teachers.

The sustained protests have failed to bring about any improvement in the situation. The trade unions negotiated a new collective agreement for teachers that took effect this month, which includes a mere 2.5 percent pay increase and a one-time payment of €750. The Dutch government indicated that it will invest a further €270 million in teachers’ pay. However, primary school teachers had demanded an additional €1.4 billion.

The strikes and protests gained momentum once again after the government revealed a plan to abolish the dividend tax for financial firms and large corporations. This will result in between €1.4 billion and €2 billion being handed

over to big business annually. This in a country that is already considered a tax haven.

At the same time, the sales tax rate, which applies to items such as medicines and groceries, will be increased by six percent to nine percent. The general rate of sales tax already stands at 22 percent.

The government coalition ruling the country of 17 million is composed of four parties—the neo-liberal VVD of Prime Minister Mark Rutte, the Christian Democrats (CDA), the formerly left liberal party D66, and the small Christian Conservatives (CU).

Social inequality has been rising for years. Of the 4.8 million households with two or more people, 112,000 are millionaire families. The richest 10 percent of the population controls 68 percent of the social wealth, or €726 billion, while the poorest 10 percent is €65 billion in debt.

More than 1 million people officially live in poverty. In 2017, the Food Bank, a social programme for the most impoverished sections of the population, distributed almost 40,000 food parcels to needy individuals per week. Around 113,500 people were dependent on this programme.

Real wages are either stagnant or in decline. Almost one in five people (19 percent) is employed in a sector where the average purchasing power was lower in 2017 than it was in the year 2000.

This year, consumer prices will more than consume most nominal wage increases—by 2.1 percent according to a recent projection by the Central Statistics Agency. A major reason, as in other countries, is the sharp rise in housing and rent prices in large cities such as Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Den Haag and Utrecht. House prices rose in the second quarter of this year in these cities as compared to last year by between 11.9 percent and 14.4 percent.

In addition, 80,000 too few apartments have been built annually over the past decade. Interior Minister Kajsa Ollongren of D66 has pledged to build 70,000 apartments per year over the next decade, but this will not resolve the fundamental problem.

In the meantime, large providers of social housing are

selling big chunks of their housing stock to finance investments in the stock market or the high salaries of their top managers and board members.

Young adults and workers in part-time or temporary jobs find it increasingly difficult to obtain a property loan. The number of temporary contracts via job agencies has risen sharply, with an ever-growing percentage of the workforce holding down two or three part-time jobs. No other country has seen such a dramatic rise in the number of low-paid, temporary jobs as the Netherlands.

These trends, which accelerated following the 2008 global financial crisis, resulted in the collapse of the social democratic PVDA and the trade unions. These organisations, which for decades preached the social compromise laid down in the Wassenaar agreement of 1982 and the so-called Polder Model, and led the way in decimating social services, have almost completely collapsed. Whereas in 1960 nearly four out of ten workers were trade union members, only two in ten were union members in 2017.

In the Dutch elections in March 2017, the PVDA lost 29 of its 38 parliamentary representatives, leaving it with only nine deputies in the current parliament. In municipal elections held a week later, the PVDA received around 7 percent of the vote.

While the working class is searching for a way out of the protracted social decline, the ruling elite is moving ever further to the right. This includes the ex-Maoists of the Socialist Party (SP), which embraced nationalist and xenophobic policies during the election.

Since December 2017, the 32-year-old daughter of long-standing SP leader Jan Marijnssen has led the party's parliamentary group. Lilian Marijnssen explicitly declared that she wants to win back voters of Geerd Wilders' far-right PVV with a right-wing campaign. Addressing herself to immigrants, Marijnssen wrote, "If you live here, you have to respect Dutch cultural norms. We make no compromises on that." SP leader Ron Meyer stated that the party would become more activist, more oppositional and more national.

Under these conditions, action committees to organise the strikes and protests have emerged.

The first initiative was "PO in Actie," which is now made up of some 44,000 primary school teachers. Teachers in secondary schools have formed "VO in Actie," those in middle and technical schools have established "MBO in Actie," college teachers have founded "HBO in Actie," and university professors have set up "WO in Actie." They are all demanding more staff, a reduction in workloads and higher pay.

However, the means to achieve these demands is the subject of intense debate on social media. The primary school teachers' "PO in Actie" recently announced a united

front—"PO Front"—with the Christian Democratic and social democratic trade union associations CNV and FNV, the teachers' union Aob, and the schoolmasters' organization.

For the protest on October 2, a coalition of 21 organisations, including action committees and trade unions, has called for the participation of members and other public-sector workers, including health care workers, police officers and soldiers.

The police have no intention of taking part. They will be on the other side on October 2. Nor are members of the military the allies of teachers. While teachers have been handed a miserly 2.5 percent wage increase, military personnel will receive a 4 percent pay increase from the beginning of the year. The military is to receive further funding of €1.5 billion, which will be primarily invested in modernising equipment and expanding the size of the force. Some 2,500 new positions are to be created.

No party has yet supported the protests. However, at protests in Den Haag last June, the widely despised political parties were invited to participate. This not only gave the social democratic PVDA the opportunity to posture with its dishonest demands, but also the far-right PVV of Wilders.

To achieve the demands of teachers and all workers in the Netherlands for decent pay, pensions and social benefits, action committees that are entirely independent of the establishment parties and trade unions must be founded. They must discuss the necessary political and social orientation to wage their struggle. The entirely justified demands can be realised only if the control over society exercised by big business and the capitalist state is challenged by means of a socialist programme.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact