

3,000 Dutch public service workers protest in The Hague

Our reporters
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Teachers, health care-givers and other public service workers participated Tuesday in renewed protests against public sector cuts with demonstrations in The Hague, the capital city of the Netherlands. Anger over the high levels of social inequality swelled after the neo-liberal-conservative coalition government led by Mark Rutte (VVD) announced the abolition of the country's tax on dividends. Around 3,000 took part in Tuesday's protest march through the city centre.

The protest was called by a broad coalition of trade unions, teachers' action groups and other organisations. The protest over intolerable workloads in the public sector and education, staff shortages, low salaries, but above all the abolition of the dividend tax, was expected to draw more participants. However, the organisers had done everything to keep the protest as small as possible.

The social-democratic umbrella organisation FNV had been resistant to call a demonstration in the first place and the unions categorically ruled out a strike in the public sector. The decision to prevent any strike action and the union's call to hold a protest in the evening after work was strongly criticised on social media in the run-up to Tuesday's demonstration.

Members of the German Socialist Equality Party (SGP) and Dutch supporters of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) distributed a statement from the European Editorial Board of the WSWS, which called for the setting up of independent action committees and declared that the fight against cuts in the public service required a socialist perspective and the building of an ICFI section in the Netherlands.

The statement was eagerly read by the workers in attendance. The discussions with WSWS reporters reflected the enormous discontent over working

conditions, the government and its anti-social policies. Many workers and young people are looking for a political perspective to halt the social counterrevolution, which is supported de facto by the official opposition parties and the trade unions.

Mart, who works in higher education, said, "They have been cutting back on the education sector for ten years and now they want to get rid of the dividend tax. The €2 billion that will be given to the banks and corporations each year could be spent on education and health. In fact, since I was born in the 1980s, there have only been cuts. That's why I'm here." Mart said he hopes that ongoing protests will pressure the government to change its policy, but is sceptical. "The unions negotiate and negotiate, but the last deal we had was hardly an improvement."

Ben is a bricklayer who lives on the German-Dutch border. The father of two teenagers had travelled well over a hundred kilometres to attend the demonstration. He lost his job following a lung infection and is now employed as a bricklayer on a temporary basis, at two-thirds of his pay. "The construction sector is doing well, so we should all be able to make a little more money," he says. But that's not possible with temporary work, which pays low wages. This, together with the abolition of the dividend tax, was why he came to the demonstration, Ben said.

The bricklayer added that he does not believe that any change in government policy can be achieved through such protests. "There should be much tougher actions and strikes. I am taking part this evening, but proper strikes should be organised."

Erwin and Judith work in the health sector. "There has been an ever-increasing workload in recent years, with fewer people doing more work for less. Many of my friends have quit their jobs, because there is no time

for the nice things associated with our job, like actually caring for people.” Judith said.

“We have no more time, for example, for walks or similar activities. We have our hands full in our daily work with administration, documentation and the like. Nursing is increasingly being taken over by other companies whose employees are paid less. Caring is being outsourced and privatised.”

Erwin added, “Health care cuts have spawned a business model that enriches others.” In addition, there are fewer and fewer caregivers but more and more managers. “For every euro that goes into the health sector, there is an increasing proportion of managers, rather than nurses and caregivers for those who really need help.”

Discussing the political causes of this development, Judith said, “The unions have been sitting around the table with companies, negotiating for years, but nothing gets any better.” Erwin added, “Unions are too much part of the system. The whole society is going in the wrong direction.”

“It should be the duty of society to look after the elderly and the sick,” Judith said, “but instead, those who need help are refused it, while big business gets all the help and support it needs.” “We need a bit more socialism,” Erwin stated.

“When the banks needed money, they got billions,” Judith added, “but when the health care sector needs money, they tell us there’s no money. The problem is that politicians do not represent the interests of the people, but rather the interests of the banks and corporations.”

Erwin had voted in past elections for the Socialist Party but said that’s over now. “They are too narrow-minded and nationalist. In recent years, they have become increasingly hostile to foreigners. They have turned to the right.”

Sophie and Freek are geriatric nurses in the outpatient care service from Utrecht and had just completed their training. They spoke about growing staff shortages. “That’s why we can no longer accept many patients and in practice they’re being denied care,” Freek said. “At my workplace, I have to send four to five people away every day because of a lack of staff.”

“It simply makes our work hard,” Sophie continued. “When we have to keep telling the patient: ‘No, I’m sorry, unfortunately we cannot do that.’ Or,

‘Unfortunately, I do not have the time, or, our facility has no room for you.’ Rejecting people because there is simply no staff, that’s what bothers me most in my job.”

The workers rejected the claim that there is no money to care for the elderly or for nursing. “There’s always money! It’s just a question of where it goes,” Sophie said. There will be more long drawn-out negotiations between the government and the unions, Freek believes. “There may be changes. but they will not be the changes we want.”

Workers are “confronted with political issues” and “the whole situation is approaching breaking point,” Sophie said. “You really notice this tension everywhere, even in your daily work. A colleague of mine retired a few months ago and told me that she has never seen a situation like this in the 45 years she has been working. Things have never been so bad. Many of those participating today can see this turning point and they recognise that everything is going down the drain.”



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