

Lack of teachers, work overload undermine Dutch education system

Harm Zonderland
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A survey held amongst teachers exposes the disastrous working conditions in the primary schools, high-schools and universities of the Netherlands.

More than 10,000 respondents, all members of the education union AOb, shared their experiences. Teachers reported that they are going to work while sick, that they are training one temporary teacher after another, and that they are not able to give the individual attention and guidance pupils need. The survey report features many quotes from teachers about the situation in their schools.

The main result of the survey is that due to a lack of teachers, the quality of education is at risk, with 84 percent of primary schools reporting a lack of stand-in teachers, and 20 to 29 percent of job vacancies unfilled in 2018.

As a result, teachers keep working while they're sick. A teacher reports: "Co-workers keep going while they should be home in bed. I recently kept working despite a severe bursitis in my shoulder. I couldn't write on the blackboard to explain something. I only stayed at home when I really couldn't go on any more."

This is not an isolated case, as 67 percent of the respondents who work in primary education report that they are regularly working while ill. Another teacher: "Multiple co-workers sick. There is no money to replace sick teachers. All drop-outs due to disease, schooling, leave of absence, etc., are to be covered within the school team, which structurally overloads personnel. Also, one feels obligated when one's sick or out for schooling, because a co-worker has to work extra hours."

School boards are trying to find "creative" ways around teacher absences. Pupils are being divided and assigned to other classes (82 percent in primary education). Another teacher comments: "It basically

comes down to keeping them busy. Not only are the children who are being divided troubled by this, also the children from other classes are hindered in their learning process."

Qualified teachers are replaced with unqualified workers, 45 percent of the respondents working in high schools report. Thirty-eight percent report that in many cases children are simply put into an available classroom to do their homework. A teacher comments: "Unqualified assistants standing in for qualified professionals 'cage' pupils and simply make them do their homework instead of actually teaching them."

The growing number of unfilled job openings and the difficulties with finding stand-ins cause a lot of anxiety among the pupils as well, which in turn causes unrest within the classrooms. Pupils get to see three to five different teachers per week. From the survey: "The children are anxious because they get a different teacher every day. There are no people to provide extra support for weaker pupils. ... Stand-ins feel no need to give extra support or guidance, which causes growing unrest. It hinders students and spreads to other classes."

Overall, 64 percent of primary schools and 45 percent of high schools report growing unrest in classrooms.

All of this exacerbates the situation for those still teaching. When pupils from one class are divided, other classes get bigger. This not only increases the workload for teachers, but also for assistants, tutors and other supportive personnel.

School directors are making phone calls around the clock to find replacement teachers via temporary agencies, who in many cases are either unqualified or students themselves.

From the survey: "Training these new co-workers takes a lot of time. Moreover, they only stay for a short while. And then the whole training thing starts anew."

The quality of the Dutch education system is quickly deteriorating. The Ministry of Education suggested that if primary schools were to hire 15 percent less teachers, resulting in three pupils per class more than now, the problem would be “solved.” But in the survey, teachers report countless times that growing class sizes are a major issue and cause a lot of extra workload. The Dutch education sector has one of the highest number of workers suffering burnouts.

After the 2008 global financial crisis, huge amounts of public money were stolen by the government to bail out banks and finance Dutch co-operation in the criminal US-led wars in Afghanistan and the Middle East. Education spending has been slashed dramatically over the past decade, with many teachers not having seen any pay rise since then, while inflation kept rising. To make matters worse, taxes on basic necessities of life such as groceries and medicine increased by 50 percent at the start of this year.

An entire generation of young students suffers from the ruling elite’s drive for profit. In many cases (43 percent in primary school and 34 percent in high school) students are simply sent home because there is nobody to teach them. The entire working class suffers as well. Unqualified personnel teach more and more classes without professional support, with lower wages than actual teachers. It will be increasingly difficult for young teachers, looking for their first job, to get decent pay.

In 2018, numerous teachers’ strikes in countries the world over have taken place. Each time, the demands were the same: for better wages and reduced workload, against the privatization of education. In the US, teachers in Arizona, Oklahoma and West Virginia went on strike, not only against the state, but also against the will of the trade unions, who did everything they could to end the strikes and impose worthless agreements with no gains whatsoever.

The new year has kicked off with growing protests and strikes in France, Belgium, Germany, the UK, the Netherlands and Mexico and with a large teachers’ strikes in Los Angeles, California. In France, thousands of teachers have expressed solidarity with their class brothers and sisters in the US, by joining “Red Pen” protest groups on Facebook.

In 2018, PO in Actie, a supposedly “grassroots” organisation, succeeded in mobilizing large numbers of

Dutch teachers to stage protest marches and strikes and compelled the government to allocate more funds for education. But the increased funds, incorporated in the 2018-19 government budget, do not repair anything. Billions more are needed every year to meet the sector’s demands.

But the “grassroots” veneer still partially covering PO in Actie should not fool anybody into thinking they are there for the workers. During last year’s protest march in The Hague, WSWS supporters distributed a statement from the European Editorial Board of the WSWS, which had this to say about PO in Actie: “They helped negotiate the sell-out [labour agreement early 2018] and celebrate it as a success. After the dirty work was done, the leaders of ‘PO in Actie,’ Thijs Roovers and Jan van de Ven, announced their resignations on October 1. Neither of them represents the interests of ordinary teachers, but those of the trade unions and the government. Roovers has close ties to the FNV [Bondgenoten, the largest trade union in the Netherlands], and the Christian Trade Union Confederation CNV and van de Ven is a member of the governing party D66.”

The teachers’ union AOb has announced a “week of action” starting March 11, to culminate in a national strike on March 15. The CNV is withholding its participation, as it is currently in negotiations with the government. The established unions do not stage protests and strikes for the workers they claim to represent, but for their comfortable positions at the negotiating tables. They keep the workers in check with their “better than nothing” sell-out deals, which can (and will) easily be rolled back when a new economic crisis unfolds. Strikes are for blowing off steam.

Neither governments nor trade unions represent the interests of the majority of the people, the working class. The fight for jobs, higher wages and better working conditions demands a broad independent political mobilisation of working people based on a revolutionary socialist program.



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