

Defying their unions, Dutch teachers stage countrywide one-day strike

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Thousands of teachers in the Netherlands at 4,300 primary and secondary schools, 80 percent of all schools across the country, staged a one-day strike November 6.

The action was the latest in a series of mass protests across the country, which has been dubbed an “autumn of discontent.” It took place during a two-day parliamentary debate on the education ministry budget for 2020.

Wednesday’s teachers strike is the second following a strike in early February and is part of a protracted struggle for better pay and reduced workload. With 84 percent of primary schools reporting a lack of stand-in teachers, and 20 to 29 percent of job vacancies unfilled by 2018, a majority of primary school teachers report to work despite illness, as four in ten schools have no replacement staff and one in five primary schools and one in four secondary schools have unfilled vacancies.

The teachers’ strike in the Netherlands takes place amid massive eruptions of working-class struggles worldwide, and after the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) sell-out of a 11-day strike, in which more than 25,000 teachers took part, and just two days after a strike by nearly 1,600 teachers in Little Rock, Arkansas.

The Dutch strike comes after the largest union in the sector, the AOb, withdrew its support after the cabinet agreed to its demand to allocate a one-time €460 million (US\$510 million) it claims is enough to close the pay gap between primary and secondary teachers over two years and relieve their workload. Some reports claim that only €363 million of this pitiful pledge is actual new funding.

In defiance of this bogus deal struck between its unions and the government of Prime Minister Mark Rutte last week, Dutch teachers struck on Wednesday

but were disorganised and forced to take individual decisions by school staff on whether or not to take part. As a result, planned mass protests in the major Dutch cities were called off.

In early 2018, PO in Actie, a supposedly “grassroots” teachers’ organisation, which then succeeded in policing the discontent of the teachers with their unions, organised protest marches and strikes to compel the Rutte government to make minor budget corrections that fell short of addressing a systemically underfunded public education system that is starved of billions.

Troubled by the outcome of a recent poll on its website that showed teachers almost unanimously wanted to strike in defiance of the union, PO in Actie, increasingly discredited by its duplicitous role, advised teachers not to go to The Hague but to protest on social media instead. According to the poll less than 1 percent of more than 11,000 teachers asked were in favour of the deal struck with the government and most felt they are not being heard by their unions.

In response to the outrage of its membership and fearing a breakaway of thousands of teachers in independent action, the AOb and the other major teachers union, CNV Onderwijs, changed course Sunday and paid lip service to Wednesday’s strike. AOb’s chair, Liesbeth Verheggen, stepped down with immediate effect while CNV Onderwijs claimed it had been “a mistake” to call off the strike and that teachers who did not report to work would receive strike pay.

The courageous strike of Dutch teachers again demonstrates that there is an enormous gulf between workers and the unions that claim to represent them. While workers worldwide are determined to fight for an improvement in their wages and working conditions, in country after country the trade unions sell out these struggles and divert them into a nationalist dead end.

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. Dutch teachers who want an end to social devastation and to take a stand for higher wages and better working conditions should form rank-and-file action committees in their schools, independent of the unions, their supposed “grassroots” apologists and the capitalist political parties with which these bogus groups are aligned.

The teachers’ committees, democratically controlled by and accountable to the rank and file, should establish contact with other schools, parents, students and workers in the Netherlands and internationally.

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