

Dutch health care strike: The defense of health care requires a socialist perspective

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Dutch health care workers are taking a stand today for decent wages and working conditions. After 25 strikes in the Netherlands this year alone, the first ever nationwide health care strike is mobilizing an estimated 150,000 workers at 119 health care facilities, 83 hospitals, 32 outpatient clinics and four rehabilitation centres. This follows a nationwide teachers' strike two weeks ago that raised similar demands.

These strikes come amid a historic resurgence of international class struggle. From strikes by US autoworkers, Indian transport workers and the first national teachers' strike in Poland since the Stalinist regime restored capitalism in 1989, to political protests such as the French "yellow vests" and the Hong Kong movement, workers and youth are rebelling against social inequality. These movements have largely erupted outside of or against traditional parties and trade union channels.

Workers entering into struggle in the Netherlands are confronted with critical issues. The decisive question is the international unification of the struggles of workers and youth and the advancement of a political program and perspective on which they can fight.

For free universal health care

The privatisation of health care in the Netherlands has led to rising mandatory health insurance premiums, ensuring vast profits for insurance companies and private health care providers. These profits are paid for by neglecting public facilities and freezing health care workers' wages and sharply increasing their work loads.

The Netherlands has one of the most expensive health care systems in the world, financed largely out of workers' paychecks via taxation or insurance premiums.

Much of this money goes not to patients needing care, but into the coffers of pharmaceutical and insurance companies and their CEOs and shareholders. In the years 2007-2014, according to the Central Bureau for Statistics, insurance companies' cash hoards doubled from €4 to €8 billion.

These companies plunder patients and especially poorer households, which cannot afford mandatory insurance premiums. Countless millions of euros are flowing into private health care companies' pockets. Eighty-five health care companies made a 10 percent profit these past two years, seven companies booked profit margins of above 40 percent, and two even above 50 percent! In the meantime, strikers receive starvation wages of only €224 per week.

Health care should not be a commodity, nor should its purpose be to provide profits to wealthy shareholders. It must be freed from the diktat of private profit, taken out of the hands of the capitalist exploiters, and run as a public utility by those who do the actual work of caring for patients.

For a socialist programme

Workers must reject the lie that "there is no money" for basic social needs, which capitalist governments and union bureaucrats use to beat workers into submission. In the Netherlands, the richest 10 percent own 68 percent of the country's wealth. Worldwide, eight multibillionaires own as much wealth as the poorest half of humanity, some 3.6 billion people.

The case of the Netherlands illustrates the vast, international growth of social inequality. According to Rabobank, disposable household income has stagnated

since 1977. Most Dutch workers have actually seen a fall in real income since the 2008 financial crisis. On the other hand, health care CEOs earn sky-high salaries, with the highest paid CEO raking in more than €300,000—eight times the average household income of €37,000.

The only progressive solution to social problems caused by this obscene accumulation of wealth is to expropriate the financial aristocracy and place its assets under workers' control. This requires the revolutionary political mobilisation of the working class on an international scale.

Break with the trade unions, build independent action committees

The way forward for workers is to take their struggles into their own hands. Workers cannot fight for socialist policies by appealing to the government or limiting themselves to protest strikes orchestrated by the unions. These bureaucracies are complicit in the privatisation of health care and work relentlessly to coerce workers into accepting social cuts. The recent Dutch teachers' strike exemplifies their role: teachers went on strike, defying opposition from the trade unions, and the unions responded by making a deal with the state behind closed doors to call off the strike.

In every country, these outmoded, nationally-based organizations have undergone a striking degeneration. When General Motors workers in America staged a month-long strike against falling real wages and the expansion of temporary labor, they were sold out by the United Auto Workers union, which is embroiled in a corruption scandal for taking massive bribes from the auto companies and embezzling workers' dues money.

The way forward is to build rank-and-file organizations independent of the unions: workers' action committees. These bodies would appeal to and mobilize the growing opposition among workers, coordinate oppositional action in workplaces across national boundaries, and imbue the developing movement of the working class with a consciousness of its vast power.

Workers need their own party

Workers who break with the unions and take up an independent, international struggle against the capitalist system will face pressing political issues. The fight against social and political reaction demands one thing above all: the formation of a new, independent political leadership in the working class, a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI).

The existing Dutch parties offer nothing to workers and will prove bitterly hostile to independent struggles by the working class. The social democratic Labour Party (PvdA) carried out most of the social cuts in recent decades and has overseen Dutch participation in many of the imperialist wars of the NATO alliance. As for the Green Left and the ex-Maoist Socialist Party (SP), they pursue the nationalist agendas of their affluent middle class social base, whose politics are indistinguishable from Greece's pro-austerity Syriza ("Coalition of the Radical Left") party.

Their cynicism and right-wing records disgust workers, leading some to vote for the far-right. Across Europe, the ruling elite is promoting the neo-fascists: the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) has become Germany's largest opposition party. In Italy, Poland and Hungary, far-right parties are or have been in power, while they are rapidly rising in France and Spain. In the Netherlands, the far-right FvD gained 12 seats in the Senate after the provincial elections.

The ICFI bases itself on its unbroken record of struggle against national opportunism and for the independence of the working class from all bourgeois and petty-bourgeois parties. It stands in the tradition of the Left Opposition and the Fourth International, which, led by Leon Trotsky, defended Marxism and socialist internationalism against the betrayals of Stalinism. Amid these growing strike struggles, it seeks to develop a socialist and internationalist movement of the working class to take state power and reorganize economic life on the basis of social need, not private profit.

We urge workers seeking a way to fight austerity and militarism to read the *World Socialist Web Site*, contact the ICFI via the WSWS, and support the fight to build a section of the ICFI in the Netherlands.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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