

Dutch government exposed by disastrous handling of COVID-19 pandemic

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When the pandemic hit the Netherlands in late February, the Dutch government adopted a reckless wait-and-see posture, even when it was clear that COVID-19 was potentially fatal. After allowing the virus to spread freely for several weeks, it imposed a partial lock-down with school closures and told workers to work from home if possible as bars, restaurants and sports clubs closed. This was promoted as an “intelligent lock-down,” but it amounted to pursuing a “herd-immunity” strategy.

This callous, politically criminal policy involved deliberately allowing the virus to run unchecked throughout the population, with no vaccine available and no proof that surviving the disease grants immunity. Still, only a tiny minority of the Dutch population has become infected with COVID-19. “Herd-immunity,” if it were attainable, requires at least 60 percent of the population to be infected. With a mortality rate above 1 percent, that would entail sacrificing over 100,000 lives.

The Dutch ruling elite’s central concern is to ensure the continued accumulation of profit for the capitalists at the expense of the working class, the vast majority of the population. While office workers could work from home, factory and logistics workers could not. They were largely kept on the job, with the complicity of the trade unions, even in jobs where social distancing was not feasible and personal protective equipment (PPE) unavailable. If factories and logistics hubs partially closed, it is only because raw materials and parts imports dried up due to international lockdowns.

Whatever meagre measures were half-heartedly taken to prevent an explosive spread of this highly contagious and fatal virus were implemented on behalf of the financial aristocracy to force workers back to work to produce profits for the banks. A “back-to-work”

campaign, as in Germany or the United States, did not occur in the Netherlands, as the majority of the workforce never stopped working in the first place—even during the worst of the pandemic.

Despite the “social distancing” measures, the Dutch government’s response to COVID-19 is not so different from the Swedish government. Stockholm refused to impose social and travel restrictions, a decision which, according to Swedish state epidemiologist Anders Tegnell, led to preventable deaths. Sweden counts over 65,000 confirmed cases and more than 5,200 deaths, in a population of only 10 million.

Yesterday, the Netherlands counted 50,223 confirmed cases of COVID-19, 11,871 hospitalizations and 6,107 deceased. What do these numbers say of a small, wealthy European country of 17 million inhabitants whose health care system is lauded as “among the best in the world”?

First of all, these numbers are major underestimates due to the very limited testing policy in recent months. Tests were at first only available to people with severe symptoms and health care workers who came into direct contact with the virus. However, even health care workers faced bureaucratic difficulties in applying for tests and appointments. More than half of the testing capacity was not utilised in the first two months, resulting in a dangerous spread and a near-collapse of the health care system.

According to a survey held by the trade unions among 6,600 health care workers, 85 percent said they had been overloaded and over half felt physically and mentally exhausted. Many of them saw the nightly “round of applause” for health care workers as a cynical gesture. The Rutte government proposes a one-time €1,000 “bonus” for health care workers, but many

considered this to be too little, too late.

Through decades of austerity and the resulting privatisation of health care to massively enrich the financial oligarchy, health care workers are robbed of decent wages, secure jobs, adequate staffing levels and even PPE.

As a result, health care workers were insufficiently protected during the first wave of the pandemic due to PPE shortages. Nearly 17,000 health care workers have tested positive for COVID-19 over the past months, or almost one-third of the total of confirmed cases; 11 have died. More than 10 percent of those who tested positive, and over half of those hospitalised, have died. The Dutch death toll is shockingly high compared to Turkey which, with nearly five times the Netherlands' population, has fewer dead: 5,097.

This is a direct result of privatisation and austerity policies that have been pursued across Europe for decades. To maximise profits, PPE stockpiles built up to confront pandemics such as this one were used up and only purchased, and produced, on demand. Layoffs and wage cuts resulted in severe under-staffing and insufficient capacity. Only 1,050 intensive care (IC) beds are available, with IC nurses and doctors caring for two, sometimes three patients each.

Despite warnings of a coming second wave of COVID-19 infections, the Dutch government shows no signs of even considering making necessary preparations.

The coalition parties, headed by the neo-liberal Peoples Party of Freedom and Democracy (VVD) led by Prime Minister Mark Rutte, have refused to increase health care budgets. Economic “support” measures meant for workers, including wage subsidies, failed to reach large swathes of workers, mostly those under the age of 25 on precarious flex-contracts. It seems likely those subsidies will not be prolonged after October.

In contrast, Rutte's promise to do whatever his government could do applied fully and immediately to “national icons” such as KLM and the Schiphol Airport. The Dutch government has pledged state guarantees for loans up to €3,5 billion for KLM alone, the Dutch wing of the Dutch-French airline group Air France-KLM, while the French government pledged €7 billion for Air France. In an empty show of goodwill, the CEOs of KLM and Schiphol publicly refused their bonuses, though they still raked in 30 times the salary

of the lowest paid worker in the company.

Military expenditures also continue unabated. This year's €11 billion military budget will be largely spent on upgrading and modernising the Dutch army, and to expand the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter fleet from 37 to 46 planes. Almost €200 million is spent on deployment, and nearly €10 million allocated to “secret” projects.

Dutch mainstream media, both the state-funded NOS and commercial newspapers such as *De Volkskrant*, *Telegraaf* and *Algemeen Dagblad*, function as government mouthpieces. Their very sparse criticisms of the official handling of the pandemic lean to the right, focusing on inciting nationalism and xenophobia. Without holding the ruling elite in any way accountable for its mismanagement of a historic public health crisis, media pundits have consistently called to “get the economy going again” and to lift limited lockdown measures.



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