

Riots spread across working class districts in the Netherlands

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Last month, amid the unfolding social crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, riots broke out in some of the most impoverished working class neighbourhoods of major Dutch cities.

The riots started in the Schilderswijk district of The Hague, a neighbourhood devastated by increasing social misery, shunned by the media and subjected to continual police harassment. A heavily immigrant area, Schilderswijk faces high unemployment and—as in poorer working class areas in cities across Europe—is increasingly dependent on food banks and dwindling social benefits due to the impact of the pandemic.

According to official reports, roughly one hundred rioters, mostly youth who organised on social media platforms, threw rocks and fireworks at riot police for several consecutive nights, allegedly opened up fire hydrants due to the heat wave, and set dumpsters and bus stops on fire.

The riots quickly spread to the working class neighbourhoods of Kanaleneiland and Overvecht in Utrecht. Amersfoort and Rotterdam followed after, where youth were under heavy surveillance and were forcibly dispersed by *Mobiele Eenheid* (ME) riot police units invoking emergency decrees. According to a Deutsche Welle news report, dozens were detained in The Hague alone by heavily armed police.

The riots were a particularly sharp expression of mounting working class anger and discontent at the extreme social polarization and growing unemployment during the pandemic. Between August 12 and 18, the *Markteffect* research agency carried out a survey that found more than 40 percent of respondents reporting no confidence in the government and the National Institute for Public Health and Environment (RIVM). In March, this figure was only 15 percent.

The growing working class anger and social conflict

has provoked a vicious outpouring of hatred in the press. *De Volkskrant* published a report under the headline “The Schilderswijk riots over nothing, against everything,” claiming that the “easy answer” as to why the riots broke out is simply “boredom.”

It continued, “Before Summer the youth were stuck for long in their little rooms, because the schools were closed. The customary holiday to Morocco is cancelled, so are most festivals and other events. It is searing hot, everybody takes to the streets, where there is not much to do. Then bring your own ‘entertainment.’”

As the riots continued and spread to other cities, the Schilderswijk residents, who are largely of foreign descent, were increasingly subjected to right-wing slanders in the press. Moroccan workers in particular were singled out and scapegoated as part of a vicious xenophobic campaign to create a right-wing consensus for tougher police-state measures to secure “Law and Order.”

According to *De Telegraaf*, Paul Andersson Toussaint, a right-wing columnist, told the paper: “Law and order must be re-introduced. ... Talking does not help, and the soft Dutch approach of talking and involving community leaders has to stop. You have to draw the line and say—to here but no further. The criminal macho culture has to go. There is nothing racist about that.”

The events also provoked comments from Geert Wilders of the far-right Freedom Party (PVV) who has for years been railing against workers of Moroccan descent, claiming there is a ‘Moroccan-problem’ in the Netherlands. Wilders infamously once whipped up an audience to chant ‘less, less’ when he asked whether there should be more or less Moroccans in the Netherlands.

In response to the riots, Wilders tweeted: “Also in

Utrecht, Kanaleneiland, the criminal Moroccans rule. Why is the army not deployed? Make PVV the largest party in 2021, and I will expel all the criminal scum from our country, including their families. All of them.”

In a not very dissimilar vein, The Hague city council member Kavish Partiman, of the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA), gave voice to the increasingly official stance embracing the agenda of the far right. He said, “Cuts in subsidies and benefits to the households where these troublemakers live might be an option. If the parents cannot teach norms and values to their children, perhaps we should forcefully remind them of the norms and values that apply in our society.”

Many politicians, from the parliament to the local council, have since lined up to blurt out their alignment with the far right and call for a tougher crackdown on riots and severe punishments for arrested “troublemakers.”

In fact, the pandemic has exposed before millions of people in the Netherlands and internationally the criminal negligence and political indifference of the ruling elite. This is what truly lies behind the urban youth rebellions: decades of “polder model” austerity, slashing essential health and social services to the bone, diminishing the social position of the working class.

The police crackdown on the protests reflects the calculations of the political strategists of the ruling class, that they must prepare for an eruption of working class opposition. Ever since 2018, there have been consistent waves of strikes in the Netherlands and internationally. Political consciousness is rapidly changing amid growing anger against social inequality, and the ruling elite itself feels ever more isolated and desperate.

Dutch Minister of Justice and Security Ferdinand Grapperhaus, who has denounced the riots as “anti-social,” warned that the riots not only involved youth. “I also see guys aged 30 or 40 walking amongst them,” he added.

The minister is set to speak with the mayors of cities hit by the riots, to determine if the national state could offer more “assistance,” including access to its whopping €6.3 billion police budget. That budget has been raised significantly since 2018. This translates to autocratic police-state forms of rule, more mass surveillance, emergency decrees, illegal arrests and

summary prosecutions, and plans for more “integration and cooperation” between the Dutch military and police.



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