

Dutch government's malign neglect accelerates resurgence of COVID-19

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The Netherlands has become a major hot-spot in western Europe for COVID-19 infections, with record numbers of confirmed infections each day. Daily infection rates are skyrocketing, with many clusters amid the Netherlands' 17 million population—in the capital, Amsterdam, the political centre, The Hague, and the port city of Rotterdam.

When COVID-19 first hit the Netherlands in February, the government deliberately took only half-hearted measures as the virus spread in the four major cities—Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, and Utrecht. Its so-called “intelligent” lock-down was limited to closing schools, sports clubs and the hospitality sector, and to the 1.5 metres social distancing. The use of face masks was limited to public transport, and COVID-19 testing reserved for hospitalised patients with serious symptoms. By June, these limited restrictions were effectively lifted; bars, restaurants and schools all reopened.

Due to the Dutch ruling elite's reckless policy, by mid-September, record numbers of COVID-19 cases were reported with around 1,500 daily cases by September 14, nearly doubling by the end of the week, surpassing the number of cases confirmed during the initial surge in March-April. By the end of the first week of October, daily cases had surpassed 5,900.

According to the *National Institute for Public Health and Environment* (RIVM), 6,544 people had died of COVID-19 in the Netherlands on 8 October. The Dutch *Central Bureau for Statistics* (CBS) however, claims more than 10,000 COVID-19 deaths in March-June alone, possibly because the RIVM did not count cases where COVID-19 was marked as cause of death, but it did not receive laboratory confirmation.

Amid a mounting death toll, the universal response in the political establishment and the corporate media

throughout has been to minimise the threat to life, in line with the ruling class' homicidal herd immunity policy.

In Netherlands and around the world, capitalist governments insist that no serious measures be taken to halt the resurgence of the virus, herding workers back to work to produce the profits needed to pay off massive state bailouts for the banks and big corporations.

New infections now exceed 50 per 100,000 residents in all Dutch provinces except Zeeland. The Rutte government euphemistically labelled North- and South-Holland, Brabant, Flevoland and Groningen provinces “worrisome,” placing them under a “stricter” regime since September 28. These include a 10 pm curfew for restaurants and bars and the banning of gatherings of over 50 people. However, workers must still report even for non-essential work and children to schools and childcare.

In reality, these “stricter” measures of the Rutte government are the same as those implemented during the “intelligent lockdown” in March/April, with no significant effect on public health. The Dutch government refused from the start to implement effective containment measures and treated the pandemic as an economic, rather than as a public health crisis.

The Dutch *Security Council*, the *Outbreak Management Team* (OMT) and RIVM all mendaciously advise against face-masks, claiming there is no scientific consensus on their efficacy. After nearly a year of global pandemic claiming over a million lives, little has been done to provide personal protective equipment (PPE) to workers whose jobs are essential for the community. Public health and the health care system's ability to handle the onrush of dying patients

caused by their reckless “herd immunity” policies are not treated as a serious issue.

The government recently mandated testing priority for healthcare and school workers, as thousands of potentially ill people are refused a test.

Calls are growing stronger to abandon all attempts to limit the pandemic and just “let it rip.” In an appearance on the Dutch talk show *Op1*, Ira Helsoot, professor of the Governance of Safety and Security at the Radboud University in Nijmegen, declared: “It is terrible, but we have to accept there will be more victims.” By summer, a far-right campaign was formed to protest against the minimal social restrictions imposed by the government.

The campaign organisers called themselves initially as *Viruswaanzin* (Virus Insanity) and organised protests involving celebrities’ fan-following on social-media, demanding an end to the restrictions in the name of “freedom,” somewhat as in Germany (see: “Far-right protest against COVID-19 restrictions in Berlin: A put-up job”).

The organisation, funded by the far-right Forum for Democracy (FvD), later changed its name to *Viruswaarheid* (Virus Truth). It continues to claim that PCR tests to establish the presence of the SARS-CoV-2 virus are “unreliable,” that Intensive Care Unit patients are “actors on the payroll of the RIVM,” and that the coronavirus is “not worse than the flu.”

These are attempts to manufacture consent for the fascist official “herd immunity” policy pursued by governments in the interest of big business across Europe. During the first outbreak, British prime minister Boris Johnson infamously suggested the people might “take it on the chin.” More recently, French banker-president Emmanuel Macron callously demanded that people “learn to live with the virus.” The trade unions and their defenders maintain a politically complicit inaction.

The middle class *Socialistisch Alternatief* (SA)—the Dutch counterpart of the *International Socialist Alternative* (ISA) linked to Socialist Alternative in the United States and the SAV in Germany, and entrenched in the union bureaucracy—writes on its Dutch website: “As for the workers, the coming years or even decades, come down to organising all strength to combat the consequences of the crisis. A bright spot in the crisis-darkness is the FNV [Netherlands Trade Union

Confederation] insisting on a wage increase of 5 percent.”

The FNV, the largest Dutch union, has less than a million members after a historic collapse of its membership but negotiates contracts for over 5.1 million workers, over half the nearly 9 million Dutch workforce. SA concludes: “The FNV and other unions need to work for wage increases, affordable housing and work or education for everyone and a responsible health care system where pandemics are prevented. There is every reason now for the labour movement to take the future into their own hands.”

In reality, the Dutch unions and their defenders like SA have overseen for a long period a horrific stagnation and decline in living standards. Now, with empty promises of minor wage increases, they are demanding that workers and their children go back to work and school, risking their health and their lives. The union bureaucracy can then bargain, in line with its separate class interests, for a slice of massive European Union-funded bailouts, like the €1 billion state loan and the €2.4 billion in state loan guarantees for KLM airline.

Workers in all sectors must take their safety and that of their communities into their own hands through the formation of rank-and-file safety committees in every workplace. This goes hand in hand with the preparation of a general strike against the deliberate endangerment of lives by Prime Minister Mark Rutte’s government in the Netherlands, and governments across Europe, in the interests of the financial oligarchy.



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