

Dutch government falls as deaths mount in COVID-19 pandemic

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On January 15, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte announced his government's resignation ahead of national elections scheduled for March 17. He will head a caretaker government until then.

Rutte claimed that his resignation aimed to redress the wrong committed in a 2013-2019 welfare scandal, where the Dutch state falsely accused 26,000 parents of dual-national families of welfare fraud, improperly forcing them to pay back tens of thousands of euros in child benefit. "With this decision, the government wants to do justice to all those parents who have been unprecedently wronged," Rutte said. "The rule of law should protect citizens from the all-powerful government, and that has gone horribly wrong here."

The welfare scandal is a state crime: tens of thousands of families, selected by Dutch welfare agencies via ethnic profiling of those holding Moroccan or Turkish dual citizenship, were financially ruined and humiliated. This cold-blooded ethnic selection of citizens to be ruined is a disturbing sign of growing fascistic sentiment within the state machine, implicating the entire Dutch political establishment. What is driving Rutte's resignation is not, however, a national crisis, let alone Rutte's supposed contrition over his government's anti-Muslim policies.

Rutte brought down his own government amid mounting anger among workers internationally at the ruling elite's "herd immunity" policies on the COVID-19 pandemic, and as Dutch deaths in the pandemic hit 13,000. Governments across Europe are tottering after US President Donald Trump incited a mob to storm the Capitol in Washington on January 6 in an attempted fascist coup. Rutte resigned only a few days after Matteo Renzi pulled out of Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte's coalition government, and Estonia's government fell over a corruption scandal.

Rutte's resignation comes as the bourgeoisie internationally debates a turn to authoritarian forms of rule, against mass anger building in the working class at austerity and "herd immunity" policies.

With the resignation, Rutte aims to weather the storm, win re-election and continue his policies, including "herd immunity" and inciting anti-Muslim hatred, with as few changes as possible. Above all, the resignation aims to perpetuate the political fraud that the Dutch bourgeoisie's policy is liberal and democratic, while it in fact continues a murderous, ever more fascistic policy on the pandemic and against the rights of the working class—especially of immigrant workers.

Rutte's demagogic claims he is sorry his government "unprecedentedly wronged" immigrants are belied by the political establishment's defense of successive ministers from various parties who oversaw the persecution of the child benefit recipients.

Economy Minister Eric Wiebes, from Rutte's own People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), resigned. He brazenly said he did not feel guilty for ruining welfare recipients: "For a long time, I searched for what I could have done differently. I don't feel guilty, but I do feel extremely responsible. I walk around with that, it won't leave me anymore. I have not been able to discover what I could reasonably have done differently to prevent this. That only makes it more sad."

Finance Minister Wopke Hoekstra, now an election candidate of the Christian-Democratic Appeal (CDA), shamelessly declared his profound sympathy for the parents: "The conversations with the parents touched me deeply. Through no fault of their own, they have been brought into serious trouble by the government. This cannot and must not happen in our rule of law, and we must ensure that it never will happen again."

As former Social Affairs Minister Lodewijk Asscher resigned as a Labor Party (PvdA) candidate in disgrace over the scandal, the PvdA hailed him. PvdA chairwoman Nelleke Vedelaar declared, “Lodewijk shows what characterizes a real leader: decisiveness, vision and idealism. On behalf of the entire party, I would like to thank Lodewijk incredibly for his tireless efforts for the party and the future of social democracy.”

As for the Green Left Party and the petty-bourgeois Maoist Socialist Party (SP), they are politically implicated by their decision to join and promote the toothless special parliamentary committee that investigated the scandal in November-December 2020. Green Left parliamentarian Tom van der Lee and SP parliamentarian Renske Leijten sat on the committee and signed its report. While they titled the report “Unprecedented Injustice,” they sent no high-ranking politicians or officials to jail. A better title for their report would have been “Unprecedented Impunity.”

These parties are now working to promote the state machine and whatever illusions can be stimulated that these elections will end state corruption and criminality. Green Left Party chairman Jesse Klaver said: “The House of Representatives must rectify the mistakes it has made in recent years, so that a start can be made on restoring the welfare state as quickly as possible.”

The SP, whose leader Lilian Marijnissen hailed the parliamentary committee report on the scandal as “very tough,” reacted to Rutte’s resignation by issuing a statement titled “Welfare Benefits Scandal: It’s not the End, it’s the Beginning.” It wrote, “In part thanks to SP parliamentarian Renske Leijten, the benefits scandal was revealed. ... We are pursuing our fight for a just government.”

In fact, the endless protection of the Rutte government by the Green Left Party, the SP and their various political allies has primarily benefited Rutte himself. He has been prime minister since 2010, including throughout the period when welfare agencies persecuted the parents. His relentless inciting of anti-Turkish sentiment in the 2017 elections—going so far as to order Dutch police to expel visiting Turkish officials from the Netherlands—helped incite the xenophobic climate in which these abuses occurred.

Nevertheless, despite all the coverage of the welfare

benefits scandal, Rutte’s VVD leads the polls with between 35 and 43 percent of the vote. Second behind the VVD is the far-right Party for Freedom (PVV) of Geert Wilders at around 25 percent.

More astute sections of the bourgeoisie are speculating that this will allow Rutte to win a second term, despite his utterly reactionary record. The *Financial Times* of London wrote: “Ironically, a government collapse may end up protecting Mr Rutte by apportioning responsibility [for the pension scandal] on all four coalition parties, rather than just the prime minister. The Dutch go to the polls on March 17. Should Mr Rutte emerge victorious—as polls suggest—the scandal will be yet another political pitfall that he has successfully swerved.”

Above all, this scandal reveals that, throughout the pandemic, as Rutte refused a lock-down and thousands needlessly died, he had the support of virtually the entire political establishment. Apart from neo-fascists like Wilders, the rest—especially the cynical middle class parties falsely marketed by the media and the ruling elite as the “left”—bent over backwards to protect him.

The elections will solve none of the issues facing the working class. Not only have all of the principal parties supported “herd immunity” policies, but all of them are complicit in the stoking of xenophobic and Islamophobic sentiments. The historically unprecedented event of a fascist coup being attempted in Washington is a warning as to the fascistic forces being strengthened not only by those like Wilders, but above all by the policies of the Rutte government and the parties that have protected it.

Fighting this requires a turn to the international working class, and the building of a movement in the working class across Europe for general strike action against “herd immunity” policies, the growing danger of fascism, and the capitalist system, based on a socialist perspective.



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