

Right-wing Rutte government wins re-election in Netherlands

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Incumbent Prime Minister Mark Rutte is projected to have won the March 17 Dutch elections and is set to lead a fourth coalition government after a decade in power in the Netherlands. It was a widely expected victory by default, under conditions where none of the established parties opposed Rutte's policies of austerity and "herd immunity" on the COVID-19 pandemic.

Official election results are to be finalised and announced on March 26. However, exit polls show Rutte's right-wing People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) won 22 percent of the vote and 36 seats, three more than in 2017, in the 150-seat Tweede Kamer. This slight increase was mainly due to first-time voters and a shift in votes away from the VVD's own former coalition partner, the conservative Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA), and the 50Plus retirees party.

The liberal D66 party, another VVD coalition partner, emerged as the main beneficiary of the 2021 elections, with its highest vote ever since its foundation in 1966. It won 15 percent of the vote and 24 seats, five more than in the previous election, becoming the second-largest party in parliament. While as many as a quarter of D66 voters came from the VVD, many also came from former voters for the ex-Maoist Socialist Party (SP), the Green Left, and the Labour Party (PvdA).

The elections have only confirmed that the Dutch political establishment is utterly impervious to the social aspirations and demands of the working class. In the last decade, Rutte has led three coalition governments, imposing draconian austerity and police-state measures, and slashing social spending by €47.4 billion just in the 2011-2016 period. Rutte's "herd immunity" policies have helped lead to a situation where a country three times smaller than the US state of New York, with a population of 17.4 million, has seen 1.2 million cases and 16,260 dead of COVID-19.

The Dutch far right continued to gain ground, winning a

total of 29 seats. Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom (PVV) performed worse than predicted, however, coming only third with 17 seats, three fewer than in 2017. The Forum for Democracy (FvD) of Thierry Baudet, who received widespread media coverage during the election campaign, is expected to quadruple the number of seats it had, to eight, having obtained 5 percent of the vote.

The far right capitalized on riots they organized against the curfews the Rutte government imposed as a token social-distancing measure against the pandemic. It could only do so, however, because no political party spoke for opposition to Rutte in the working class, on his left, calling for a lockdown policy determined by scientists and medical professionals to halt the spread of the virus.

This reflects the political bankruptcy of the PvdA, Green Left, and the SP, all of whom essentially accepted Rutte's political agenda. This allowed D66, and thus the Rutte government, to politically profit by posing as the only alternative to the far right. The Brussels-based German think tank, International Politics and Society, wrote that D66 were "the loudest opponents of Dutch right-wing populism. And D66 totally overran the left parties."

While the PvdA, which has stagnated for years, remained unchanged at nine seats, the SP and the Green Left each lost almost half their seats to finish with respectively nine and seven seats. "It's painful," GreenLeft leader Jesse Klaver told Politico-Europe, adding: "GreenLeft has gained in many elections in a row, so it takes some getting used to losing now."

SP leader Lilian Marijnissen said, "we'd hoped for more, and perhaps expected more too," and Politico reported that Marijnissen's "gut feeling was that the coronavirus crisis had dented the party's results."

The SP's alignment on Rutte's herd immunity policy not only explains its electoral failure, but also exposes it as a petty-bourgeois party hostile to the workers. The SP

ran a campaign based on accepting the European bourgeoisie's herd immunity policy, and instead, dividing the working class by relentlessly targeting Muslims and immigrants with calls to step up draconian police-state measures. Marijnissen made clear in public interviews she could join a Rutte government.

Campaigning on this right-wing basis, the SP ceded many of its votes either to D66 or to the FvD, 8 percent of whose voters were former SP voters.

They played a crucial role in the political calculations of the Rutte government and the entire Dutch bourgeoisie, who organized these elections in an attempt to bury a devastating scandal threatening to bring down the government.

Rutte's coalition officially resigned in January following the exposure of the state's witch hunt, over a decade, of at least 20,000 beneficiaries of child benefit. Public parliamentary hearings exposed a ruthless and vindictive state apparatus, which falsely alleged benefit fraud and ruined families, primarily of immigrant backgrounds, demanding that they repay years of child benefit. The ruling establishment as a whole was implicated in this fascistic persecution of immigrants and Muslims.

The election was designed to present voters with a false choice between the political status quo and neo-fascist reaction. On this basis, despite the Rutte government's murderous and reactionary record, it seems that Rutte was able to hang on to power.

The population has clearly been politicized by the pandemic and the deepest social and economic crisis the Netherlands and Europe have seen in decades. An I&O Research and Ipsos-EenVandaag poll found that voter turnout in the Dutch election reached a 30-year record. With 82.6 percent of eligible voters casting their ballots, over 60 percent said "health care" was the central issue for them in the elections.

With the SP and its political satellites working to block a movement to the left among workers, however, there was no alternative for workers to express their opposition to herd immunity policy and to European Union austerity measures. Under these conditions, the vote went either to the dead end of the D66 or of the far right.

As one distorted expression of mass discontent towards official parties, three new, smaller parties entered parliament. The Farmer Citizen Movement (BBB) secured one seat. Two middle class parties, the free-market Volt Europe party and the BIJ1 party led by former TV and radio presenter Sylvana Simon, attracted a mostly

Amsterdam-based constituency centred on postmodernist identity politics of race and gender.

Alluding to entrepreneurs funding Volt Europe, the *New York Times* ran a piece on the Dutch elections throwing the limelight on Volt, stating, "for years, right-wing populists have been a driving force in the Netherlands. But this week a pan-European party called Volt shook things up." The *Times* speculated that Volt, whose leader in the Netherlands, Laurens Dassen, investigates money laundering for ABN Amro Bank, could join the Rutte government. It also highlighted the BIJ1 party, which it called "anti-capitalist."

The COVID-19 pandemic provides a particularly devastating exposure of the bankruptcy of such organisations, however, which ignore critical needs of the working class and adapt themselves to the policies of militarism and social austerity dictated by the European financial aristocracy.

Half the Dutch population does not have access to affordable housing, with homelessness doubling between 2009 and 2019 to 40,000, a million people live below the official poverty line, and more than 30 percent of the entire workforce subsists on flex-contract jobs. None of these critical issues were seriously addressed in the campaign. The Netherlands—the last country to start a vaccination programme in Europe, which slashed half its intensive care units under the last three Rutte governments—brought him back to power by default.

Whatever reactionary coalition government emerges from the talks following this election, it will be viciously hostile to the working class. The way forward to mobilise the working class against the herd immunity, austerity and militarist policies of the capitalist class is to build its own party, sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International in the Netherlands and beyond, to fight to build a socialist movement in the working class against austerity, the pandemic and war.



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