

Dutch caretaker government scraps partial lockdown as infections mount

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Following its European counterparts, the Dutch government has implemented the first stage of its easing of social-distancing restrictions, starting on April 28. The government took this reckless measure even though it is still a caretaker government, the Dutch bourgeois parties having failed to form a government since elections in March.

“We are of course glad that this is possible again, because society yearns for more freedom,” said Prime Minister Mark Rutte.

In fact, it is impossible for society to be truly free without putting an end to the pandemic, which continues to mount. The National Institute for Public Health and Environment (RIVM) reported the number of COVID-19 cases hit 1.5 million, in a country with a population of 17.3 million. The incidence rate is over 300 of every 100,000 persons, and more than 20,000 deaths according to even conservative estimates. Coronavirus infections and hospitalizations are at record levels, with 2,638 in hospital, including 811 patients in the ICU.

Defying the advice of its own Outbreak Management Team (OMT), the government is pressing ahead with policies that will spread the virus and feed the speculative run-up in share markets, as demanded by far-right riots earlier this year.

From April 28, the night time curfew in force since January 23 will be suspended, retail businesses resume operations, and bars and pubs will reopen terraces for customers between noon and 6 p.m.

This year’s Eurovision song contest is scheduled for May 18-22 in Rotterdam with the green light for a live audience. The Dutch government has confirmed that 3,500 people will be allowed to watch six dress rehearsals and three live performances inside the city’s Ahoy Arena.

Predictably, neo-fascists who instigated nationwide riots against health measures earlier this year are jubilant. Tweets by Geert Wilders of the Party for Freedom (PVV), and Thierry Baudet of the Forum for Democracy (FvD) enthused at people “eating bread and honey” while enjoying sunny terraces, as the stock market is “counting out its money.”

The far-right *Viruswaarheid* (Virus Truth) outfit, which was at the forefront of anti-lockdown protests, felt further emboldened to demand the abolition of all remaining coronavirus measures in a summary proceeding at the court in The Hague. Representatives of hospitality associations, as well as mayors opposed to restrictions on restaurant dining, echoed these demands.

This comes as the spread of coronavirus variants and the slow pace of vaccination drives a new eruption of coronavirus cases across Europe and in the Netherlands. The GGD-GHOR community health care umbrella organization also recently reported failures in correctly tracing the 5.4 million vaccinations administered in the Netherlands. This follows “errors” by the RIVM in recording COVID-19 infections and problems with online scheduling of test or vaccination appointments due to continued technical glitches.

Growing numbers of younger patients, aged between 30 and 50, are arriving in hospitals as the Netherlands battle the peak of a third wave of COVID-19 infections. These are the consequences of the criminal “herd immunity” policy of successive Rutte-led governments, which kept workers going to work during the pandemic, including in non-essential industries during its so-called “lockdown.”

The number of seriously ill young people needing hospitalization has exploded, amid the reopening of primary schools and the spread of the UK variant of the

coronavirus. A two-week school holiday in May intersects with the easing of restrictions, however, and so hospitals expect the worst from mid to late May.

In the decades since the Stalinist regime dissolved the Soviet Union in 1991 and the foundation of the European Union (EU) in 1992, health care has been ravaged by austerity, while the financial markets received repeated bailouts.

Just during the three Rutte-led coalition governments in the last decade, some 70,000 health care staff have been laid off, and ICU capacity cut by half. By 2018, five hospitals went bankrupt, as health care workers reported record high levels of burnout. Amid a global eruption of class struggle, Dutch health care workers organized a first-ever nationwide strike in January 2020.

As 82.6 percent of eligible voters cast ballots in the March Dutch elections that returned Rutte to power by default, over 60 percent said “health care” was the main issue for them in the elections, as the pandemic triggers the deepest social and economic crisis the Netherlands have seen in decades.

Mainly due to the treacherous role played by pseudo-left parties and the union bureaucracies, there was no political alternative for workers to express their opposition to the government’s murderous herd immunity policy and to EU austerity measures. Protest votes went into the dead end of the far right, or the liberal D66 party, which capitalized on the bankruptcy of the Labour and Socialist Parties. All of these parties have supported, tacitly or otherwise, Rutte’s ending of social distancing.

The two leading Dutch union confederations, deflecting strikes through “collective agreements” at the negotiation table with the state and corporate management, have kept the 9 million-strong Dutch working class in check and at work throughout the pandemic. They played the role of a well-oiled extension of management, which views them as reliable, well-to-do agents to strangle workers’ struggles in the interests of the financial aristocracy.

The Christian National Trade Union (CNV) has supported the easing of the lockdown, saying it “comes not a day too soon” and adding, “Too many hospitality and retail businesses are currently on the brink of collapse after months of closure, threatening to cost many people their jobs.”

The Netherlands Trade Union Confederation (FNV), the largest Dutch trade union, added that it too is pleased to see bars and restaurants reopen as the virus circulates massively. FNV director Edwin Vlek told fnvhoreca.nl that opening terraces will offer relief to businesses. “It is nice that the catering industry is allowed to do something again and that there is some perspective again.” He added that the FNV is “disappointed by the limitations” that remain on free movement, which mean that state policy contributes “to the recovery of this industry only to a minimal extent.”

Pseudo-left parties acting as gung-ho cheerleaders of the union bureaucracies, like the Dutch section of the International Socialist Alternative, Socialistisch Alternatief (SA), the Pabloite Grenzeloos, and the Communist Platform are maintaining a complicit silence in this social murder.

A week before the easing of social distancing measures, Dutch doctors warned of “an emergency” at hospitals, which are on the brink of collapse. Association of Intensive Care Physicians chairman Diederik Gommers has publicly warned of a “Code Black” scenario, in which patients outnumber hospital beds, and physicians are forced to massively deny care to dying COVID-19 victims.

Wim Schleeckens from Red Team C 19 NL, an independent team of medical experts, told Al Jazeera: “We are maybe in ‘Code Black’ already. Because we keep patients home, we send them home too early.” He added that the government has been “playing with fire.”

In the Dutch city of Venlo, the VieCuri Medical Centre announced on May 1 that it cannot admit any more patients. “We always try our best to provide good care to every patient, but every hospital has its maximum capacity,” stated its spokesperson.



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