

Dutch caretaker government accelerates lifting of social-distancing measures

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Like its US and UK counterparts, the Dutch government is accelerating its scrapping of remaining social-distancing measures, following a rapid ease of restrictions since April 28, risking a surge of infections come summer. “In fact, this is the end of the lockdown,” said Prime Minister Rutte at a televised press conference on May 28.

Starting today, restaurants are allowed to serve indoors with a maximum of 30 socially distanced customers. At the same time, cinemas, theatres and museums will reopen to those with bookings. Private homes will be able to have four guests rather than the current two a day. Secondary schools are also to reopen by June 7, five weeks before the summer break.

“The cabinet wants to largely unlock the Netherlands sooner than planned, starting June 30,” news agency NOS reported, though most Dutch adults are still not fully vaccinated. Currently, only 9.2 million jabs have been administered, two-thirds of these being first vaccinations. The population of the Netherlands was 17.28 million in 2019, according to Eurostat.

Over the past 15 months, there have been over 1.6 million infections and at least 20,000 deaths from COVID-19 in the Netherlands. Over 2,500 infections and a dozen deaths are still recorded each day, testifying to the broad circulation of the virus. Yet the government has moved up the launch of its so-called “third phase” of reopening by four days, to June 5, pointing to a drop in new infections and fatalities late last month, even as more virulent strains of the virus, like the so-called Indian variant, spread internationally.

It is yet another indication of the subservience of the entire Dutch political establishment to big business, the Amsterdam stock exchange and the demands of the far right.

An estimated 140,000 routine hospital operations

were reportedly delayed as hospitals were flooded with COVID-19 cases. The Dutch communal health services (GGD) issued a statement signed by the public health directors from the 25 GGD branches declaring that they are short at least €600 million a year to sustain routine health care. “Basic care is too impoverished,” continued the GGD, adding that “the lesson of the pandemic is that basic care has not been sufficiently funded.”

But US pharmaceutical firm Pfizer has used a letterbox company in Capelle aan den IJssel in Zuid-Holland to hold \$36 billion of its annual revenue last year and avoid paying tax on windfall vaccine profits, the investigative journalism platform Follow the Money revealed. Although Pfizer develops medicines and vaccines based on publicly-funded research, it had paid little tax, and almost no tax in the Netherlands, the report concluded. Pfizer’s revenue soared 42 percent in the first three months of the year. The Netherlands rank as the world’s fourth-largest tax haven.

According to a recent Dutch Central Bureau for Statistics (CBS) report, in 2020, absenteeism due to illness among employees was highest in health care, where absenteeism was always above average. This is the direct consequence of decades of austerity that led to chronic under funding of medical infrastructure and staff, leading to work overload with stagnant wages and high burn-out rates, even before the pandemic.

After frontline health care workers, the highest burnout rate for 2020 was recorded in education, for the fourth year in a row, as partial COVID-19 distancing measures led to rapid shifts between online and hybrid teaching that massively added to non-paid working hours for educators. Education is one of the professions most prone to burnouts: 27.4 percent of staff, compared to a national average of 17 percent, suffer from burnout

complaints. Education is also plagued by acute staff shortages.

“We want to make it possible for the students to go to school for at least another six weeks before the summer holidays start,” outgoing Education Minister Arie Slob declared at a press conference, echoing the position of Rutte, a vocal advocate of “back to school” policies.

Secondary schools are to give all students in-person lessons five days a week starting May 31, which will be mandatory across all Dutch provinces by June 7. At school, students are only to keep their distance from teachers and staff, and not from each other. Face masks will be mandatory only in school hallways.

Across the English Channel, British schools are already seeing rising COVID-19 outbreaks, despite the roll-out of the vaccine, since Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s Conservative government lifted most restrictions on May 17.

According to NOS, many secondary school teachers hesitate to stand in front of full classes. “Many employees in education are concerned about their health,” declared Henrik de Moel, director of the General Union of Educational Personnel (Algemene Onderwijsbond, AOb). De Moel noted that “not everyone has had their turn for even the first vaccination.”

The unions have worked closely with the Rutte government, however, to block strike action and subordinate workers in education and other sectors to Rutte’s policy of allowing the virus to spread. They declared that they feel “forced to advise” teachers of their right to collectively invoke the Working Conditions Act, if necessary, to protect themselves. The AOb blandly added that “in recent weeks, many colleagues in secondary education have expressed serious concerns about their safety if the schools were to reopen fully without proper measures.”

Continuing to posture in order to avoid strikes, a consortium of five education unions (AOb, CNV Onderwijs, FvOv, FNV Overheid and Leraren in Actie), has submitted a joint letter to the Dutch House of Representatives. It respectfully noted the “concern” felt by the unions that it would be best if secondary schools reopened fully after the summer holidays, and not before.

The unions’ one-and-a-half page document endorsed the policy of the European Union and the Rutte

government to let the virus circulate in workplaces and schools, asserting that “currently the situation at the schools is manageable, as pupils go to school on average for 2.5 days.”

On the other hand, Dutch magazine *Quote 500* has released its 2020 list of the richest people in the Netherlands: the wealth of the 500 richest in the country rose by €6 billion from 2019 to 2020, to €186 billion. More than half (265) increased their wealth over the past year, as millions were plunged into poverty across Europe. The Netherlands had 38 billionaires by the end of 2020—five more than in 2019—led by beer mogul Charlene de Carvalho-Heineken, with €12.1 billion in recorded assets.



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