

# Dutch caretaker government imposes partial lockdown as COVID-19 surges

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The Netherlands is at the centre of a resurgence of COVID-19 that is now tearing across western and central Europe, infecting more people than ever before during the pandemic.

COVID-19 infections are out of control. Daily new cases reached record highs of 50,377 in Germany on Thursday and 13,152 in Austria and 16,364 in the Netherlands on Friday. This has brought seven-day incidence rates per 100,000 inhabitants to over 309 in Germany, 807 in Austria, and 556 in the Netherlands. There are growing warnings that in certain regions, such as Limburg in the Netherlands, hospitals ICUs will soon fill up and be forced to deny care to seriously ill patients.

A week ago, after much deliberation, the Dutch caretaker cabinet reintroduced rudimentary public health measures, such as the mandatory use of the face mask in public spaces and the use of QR-coded vaccination passes.

On Friday, however, as infections continued to soar, Prime Minister Mark Rutte felt obliged to announce a three-week partial lockdown, something he had previously excluded. “Tonight, we are bringing a very unpleasant message with very unpleasant and far-reaching measures,” Rutte said in a televised address. “The virus is everywhere and needs to be combatted everywhere.”

Bars, restaurants and many businesses must close at 7 p.m., people can only receive four visitors at home, and sport events must take place without a public audience.

This came as, in Austria, Chancellor Alexander Schallenberg announced a lockdown for non-vaccinated individuals, who are required to stay at home except to buy groceries, go shopping, or seek medical care. Austria is also authorizing vaccination for children starting at age 5.

In the Netherlands as in Austria, however, these partial lockdown measures will not eliminate transmission of the virus but will, on the contrary, allow it to circulate.

Schools will continue to remain open, as well as nonessential essential workplaces, as they did last autumn. This will ensure that workers continue to go to work to produce profits for the banks and major corporations, and that the virus will continue to kill thousands every day in Europe.

Of particular concern are reports that considerable numbers of vaccinated people are falling seriously ill in the Netherlands. Fully 45 percent of Dutch hospital admissions for COVID-19 and 31 percent of ICU admissions are of vaccinated individuals, according to AFP.

Workers can place no confidence in the reactionary Dutch political setup to resolve the crisis caused by the pandemic. Nearly 8 months after the general election on March 17, four parties of big business led by caretaker prime minister Mark Rutte’s Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) are mired in protracted talks on negotiating a “new” government—a fourth Rutte cabinet.

Two weeks ago, on again-off again government talks passed the 225-day mark, the previous record in Dutch history. They are set to bring back the deeply unpopular government that ruled since 2017.

Rutte’s right-liberal VVD, the left-liberal D66, the Christian Democrats and the conservative Christian Union have formed the Dutch government since 2017. They were forced to resign over a child benefits scandal back in January and have since ruled as a caretaker government. An I&O Research poll found that satisfaction in the outgoing cabinet “has declined sharply.” Only four in ten voters are “satisfied” with the current cabinet.

Nevertheless, the four parties have decided to form another government, which they plan to complete before Christmas. Earlier, D66 unsuccessfully attempted to form a five-party-coalition with the Social Democrats and the Greens.

D66 leader Sigrid Kaag, who resigned as foreign

minister three weeks before her decision to enter coalition talks, told AP she expected the “new” coalition to be “more progressive, more generous and more humane.” Similarly, Rutte promised that “it will be a new start, a new culture, with a new program.”

The handling of the COVID-19 pandemic by the Dutch and European ruling classes thoroughly exposes this empty rhetoric. While policies of eliminating circulation of the virus were employed in a number of Asia-Pacific countries, including China, the Dutch government was especially aggressive in its implementation of the European bourgeoisie’s policy of “living with the virus.” As a result, while under 5,000 people died in China, a country of 1.4 billion, in the Netherlands, a country of only 17 million, nearly 19,000 people have died.

The wholly inadequate policies adopted by Rutte are not an attempt to reverse this horrific record but are above all driven by growing fear of the response in the working class. Indeed, the re-eruption of struggles of the Dutch workers has once again come to the fore as part of a growing global upsurge of the international working class, particularly in the United States.

By the end of September and October, 80,000 workers from all professional levels at eight university hospitals in Amsterdam, Leiden, Utrecht, Groningen, Rotterdam, and Maastricht went on a one-day strike demanding fairer working conditions and decent wages. A third one-day strike is planned by the end of November.

Alongside the hospital staff strikes, the Dutch railway workers (NS International) also entered a one-day strike in September demanding higher salaries, which brought a day of train services between Amsterdam and Brussels to a halt.

In early July and again in September, 4000 childcare workers from 660 childcare locations went on a national strike for the first time in 20 years, demanding better working conditions. They opposed a back-door “collective labour agreement” reached by the CNV trade union confederation with the BK and BMK employers’ organizations.

The FNV, the largest trade union federation in the Netherlands, and affiliated parties, prominently the ex-Maoist Socialist Party and its political satellites, have once again played a key role against these strikes. They isolated and limited them to one-day token protests, betraying strikes one after the other, blocking a united struggle of the working class against Rutte’s mass infection policy.

The Dutch unions, based on the Wassenaar Agreement

concluded nearly 40 years ago, were pioneers in mainland Europe to embrace the role as executives or labour contractors imposing austerity and growing inequality in workplaces. However, they are being buffeted by an increasingly powerful movement from below.

Since July, hardly a month has passed without protests exposing the social and political powder keg created by the ruling classes’ response to the pandemic. In September, 15,000 people took part in a demonstration in Amsterdam calling for an end to the housing crisis and to homelessness, which is conservatively estimated at 40,000 and has increased by 74 percent in the last six years alone. According to one study, the rate of homelessness in the population in the Netherlands (0.23 percent) is higher even than in the United States (0.18 percent).

The FNV, just like its German counterparts, made sure that the strikes remained nationally isolated. They blocked any effort to coordinate and unify strikes of the Dutch railway, health care and childcare workers with the protests of workers and youth in Amsterdam against the mounting housing crises and with workers and youth striking simultaneously across the border in Germany. This again underscores their allegiance to the national bourgeoisie and its policy of enriching a few and protecting their wealth.

The decisive question is the collective mobilization and unification of the struggles of the working class, across Europe and internationally, to impose a scientifically guided policy to eliminate the transmission of the virus and stop the COVID-19 pandemic.



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