

New Dutch government lifts COVID-19 measures as infections skyrocket

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At a press conference on January 26, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte (VVD) and newly-appointed Health Minister Ernst Kuipers (D66), declared that many of the COVID-19 measures put in place on December 19 would be relaxed.

The relaxation of watered-down “lock-down” measures takes place as daily infections due to the Omicron variant yhave shot up to an average of about 70,000 per day, surpassing 100,000 in a single day as of the beginning of February. This is the highest recorded level since the pandemic began, and hospitalisations are rising for the first time in two months. But new rules will let cafes, restaurants and bars, cinemas, theatres, music venues, museums, zoos and amusement parks open for the first time in weeks, from 5 a.m. to 10 p.m.

Rutte opened his recent press conference by calling it an “important moment” in the course of the pandemic. “We are dealing with a sky-high number of infections and an increase in the number of hospital patients, and yet we are taking a new step forward. In doing so, we are taking another risk, but for good reason. Living even longer with restrictive measures damages our health and society,” he insisted.

Health Minister Kuipers supported Rutte. Even while admitting that relaxing COVID-19 measures could push daily infections to between 75,000 and 100,000, Kuipers chimed in: “Keeping the most restrictive measures in effect for much longer damages our health and our society.”

Such statements illustrate the utter contempt for the health of the people that animates the new Rutte government. Installed after nine months of closed-door talks between the parliamentary parties, it is in all essentials the same Rutte government forced to resign last January. Its calculations, as laid out by Kuipers and Rutte, boil down to the following: in a country of just

17.5 million people, that has already seen 4.4 million infections and 32,000 deaths, it should take around 20 weeks to infect the entire Dutch population.

On January 10—that is, 271 days after last year’s election—Rutte’s VVD formed a “new” government with a coalition of three other parties: D66, the Christian-Democratic CDA and the Christian Union. These four big business parties have a disastrous record of handling the pandemic, and are stepping up the assault on public health.

It is not hard to see that unprecedented mass infections, part and parcel of the “herd immunity” policy successive Rutte governments have pursued since the pandemic began, will lead to mass suffering, hospitalisations and deaths.

At the end of 2021, as hospitalisations rose past 68,000, the Groningen University Medical Centre was several weeks technically on “Code-Black,” forced to practice triage. Now with the spread of Omicron and breakthrough infections amongst the fully vaccinated, mass infections will bring the chronically underfunded Dutch health care system to the brink of collapse.

This is the shameless, politically criminal record of the Dutch political establishment—from the social democrats to the ultra-right, including pseudo-left groups and various trade union confederations. They are part and parcel of a policy of mass infection pursued by the entire European bourgeoisie.

From day one of the pandemic, the Dutch ruling elite’s official policy—like that of its counterparts internationally—was neither based on science nor on defending public health, but on placing profit before the lives of millions of people.

At the same press conference, Rutte and Kuipers announced further drastic changes to self-quarantine protocols, which have kept changing throughout the

pandemic. These changes fly in the face of international medical protocols and basic sound science. As of the “new rules,” an individual who has tested positive for COVID-19 but has “no symptoms” should no longer self-quarantine, but can return to work. The reactionary and unscientific policy of the European bourgeoisie is thus going from “living with COVID” to “working with COVID.”

The youth are prime victims of this policy, with a “back-to-school” policy, condemning teenagers, children and even infants to mass infection. According to the RIVM (National Institute for Public Health and the Environment), an estimated 2,817 people test positive for every 100,000 residents in the Netherlands. “The highest number of infections per 100,000 inhabitants was seen among 13-to-17-year olds, whereas the largest increase in the past week was recorded in the age groups 0 to 12 years, and 13 to 17 years,” the RIVM stated.

The trade unions are playing a particularly vicious role in keeping schools open, despite growing concerns of the teaching staff at unprecedented levels of mass infection, as well as keeping workplaces and other nonessential services running unhindered, including retail business.

The proposal advanced by the Federation of Dutch Unions (FNV), the largest Dutch trade union confederation, is to insert “shop with moderation” signs in retail stores’ advertisements. “We want the chains to be more sensible with their advertising policy and to call on customers to shop responsibly,” said Linda Vermeulen, director of FNV Handel. This yet again demonstrates the commitment of these well-paid, co-managerial bureaucrats to corporate profits over the lives of the sick, even as workers’ corpses pile high in the thousands.

The Netherlands championed a policy of mass infection from the outset of the pandemic, thrusting aside countless warnings and findings from scientists and other medical personnel in the country and internationally. Rutte, who has been prime minister throughout the pandemic, reluctantly introduced limited public health restrictions but always rejected a strict lock-down. He scaled back these rudimentary measures starting in April 2021, accelerating the lifting of all measures in stages between June and September of last year.

The wholly inadequate social and health policies adopted by Rutte’s previous and current government aim not to reverse their horrific record of public health, but to impose mass infections on growing opposition in the working class. Particularly over the last four years, the Netherlands has seen a re-eruption of working class struggles as part of a growing global upsurge of the international working class.

In order to enforce the urgently needed protective measures to save lives, the working class must take the situation into its own hands and intervene as an independent political force alongside its class brothers and sisters in the Netherlands, across Europe and internationally. This requires establishing rank-and-file safety committees in all schools and workplaces to impose necessary emergency measures to halt the pandemic, based on a global strategy of eliminating transmission of the virus.



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