

Netherlands: Rutte's resignation further emboldens the far-right

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On July 7, Mark Rutte, prime minister of the Netherlands since 2010, resigned. Three days later, he announced that he would not lead his People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) in the upcoming elections in November. Until then he will head a caretaker government.

Rutte is, after Hungary's Viktor Orbán, the longest serving prime minister in the European Union. His ability to cobble together various coalitions in a parliament divided into more than ten parties gave him the nickname "Teflon-Mark".

In 2010, Rutte's first minority government relied on the parliamentary support of Geert Wilders' neo-fascist Party For Freedom (PVV), which until then had been considered taboo. In 2012 he formed a coalition government with the Labor Party (PvdA). In 2016 he brought together a shaky four-party coalition with the Christian Democrats (CDA), the liberals (D66) and the Calvinists of the Christian Union (CU).

Rutte's third government collapsed shortly before the 2021 election, because it had falsely accused thousands of families of social fraud and forced them to make repayments. As a result, 26,000 families were facing bankruptcy. After ten months of negotiations behind the scenes, the same coalition was reestablished. It only lasted eighteen months.

While Rutte's coalition partners changed, his political agenda was moving steadily further to the right. His thirteen years in office were marked by pro-business policies, severe austerity, militarism and abetting the far-right.

Faced with a looming vote of no confidence in his deeply unpopular government, Rutte provoked its demise in a way that will put refugee policy at the center of the campaign and again benefit the far-right in the upcoming election. He insisted on a two-year waiting period before children of "recognised refugees" living in the Netherlands could join their parents, knowing full well that his Christian coalition partners would not accept this.

At a press conference on Friday night, Rutte said, "It's no secret that the coalition parties think very differently about asylum policy and today we unfortunately need to draw the conclusion that the differences are unbridgeable. The fall of a government is never good. But it is sometimes impossible in a coalition country like the Netherlands to come to one agreement."

The far-right has systematically scapegoated migrant workers and asylum seekers, accusing them of responsibility for all social evils, especially the acute housing crisis. While the Netherlands received only 46,000 asylum applications last year, the

longstanding and accumulated housing shortage is the result of decades of relentless cuts to social housing. Currently, the nationwide shortage of homes is at least 390,000 with predictions for a shortage of nearly a million by the year 2030.

Rutte was only able to stay in office for 13 years and to weather various scandals because all parties, from the so-called "left" to the far right, support his reactionary agenda. Faced with a deep social and political crisis the entire Dutch political establishment is maneuvering to divert social discontent from questions such as the rising cost of living, deteriorating working conditions and the war in Ukraine, into anti-immigrant hatred and support for a draconian asylum policy.

When Rutte announced his resignation in parliament all parties in the official opposition, including the nominal left, showered him with praise.

Wilders said, "We have excellently worked together politically, including in the first two years of the Rutte I administration... Your choices were not ours, but you brought them with conviction and that deserves an awful lot of respect."

He went on to briefly outline to the media how closely the two party leaders have been, commenting, "We have known each other for a very long time. We were once colleagues in the VVD. I was even his mentor." In a further tweet, Wilders said that Rutte's resignation would make the Netherlands a "beautiful country again, with fewer asylum seekers and crime, more money and housing for our own people."

The leader of the Green Left Party (GroenLinks), Jesse Klaver responded, "What I would like to say to you, Mark, is: what I have appreciated in all those times that we have crossed swords is that we never made it personal, that we have always kept it substantive."

Lilian Marijnissen from the former Maoist Socialist Party (SP) characterized Rutte's departure as a "sensible decision" and as "good for the Netherlands."

While the official "left" praised Rutte, his government was deeply hated among broad sections of the working class. Following his resignation an opinion poll conducted by the popular TV program *EenVandaag* found that almost three in four respondents said it would be "unacceptable" for Rutte to return as prime minister after November's election.

His resignation came against a backdrop of fierce class struggles across all sectors. Particularly since the beginning of 2023, the Netherlands has been shaken by a wave of strikes in the public and

private sector, as thousands of Dutch workers entered into struggles for better wages, working and living conditions. These struggles coincided with mass protests and strikes in France against President Macron's pension reform.

Rutte's four successive governments were responsible for policies of severe austerity both in the Netherlands and the European Union. After the 2009 Euro crisis he was, together with German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble, the main advocate of imposing severe austerity measures on Greece, Portugal, Spain and other countries. He increased the budget for the state apparatus – from police, surveillance and secret service to prisons and judiciary – entrenched institutional racism and stepped-up systematic oppression of the socially marginalised and vulnerable.

With 60 percent of Dutch households having struggled to pay their utility bills last year, nearly 5 percent of the population lives below the official poverty line, with an additional 220,000 considered as working poor, 320,000 officially unemployed, 32,000 homeless and 120,000 depending on food banks that grew by a third during the last quarter of 2022.

Given this grim record of deliberate social devastation, the number of households living below the poverty line is expected to shoot up to one million out of a population of just 17.8 million by 2024, according to the Dutch Centraal Planbureau (CPB), which will mean an increase of childhood poverty to 7 percent.

Rutte was also responsible for the criminal handling of the pandemic, carrying out "herd immunity" policies from the outset which have cost over 22,000 deaths officially and at least 375,000 Long Covid patients.

One of the most critical aspects of the current socio-political crisis in the Netherlands is the rapid escalation of NATO's proxy war against Russia. A few hours after Rutte's resignation, Ukrainian President Zelensky tweeted thanking Rutte for the "steadfast principled stand of the Netherlands regarding the Russian invasion and for recognizing the Holodomor as genocide by the House of Representatives."

Since the 2014 far-right coup in Kiev, orchestrated by the US and its NATO allies, brought to power a pro-NATO government in Ukraine, the Dutch government has played a significant role in inciting anti-Russian sentiment. Rutte played a leading role in blaming Russia for the crash of Malaysian Airlines flight MH-17 in July 2014. The crash killed 298 passengers and crew.

Ever since, Rutte's government has stoked anti-Russian hysteria. The total value of the military support that the Netherlands has supplied to Ukraine stands at a staggering €1.9 billion, at the cost of further inroads to already meagre social spending. The Dutch "support package" to Ukraine includes weapons, ammunition, vehicles, maritime vessels, de-mining equipment, bridges, fuel, medical supplies and rations.

As *Politico* noted, Rutte, notwithstanding his right-wing trajectory, was "described by colleagues and friends as a manager, rather than a visionary leader, who succeeded in getting rival parties to talk and find compromises. He was the incarnation of Dutch consensus culture: pragmatic, flexible — and visionless".

In view of the escalation of the NATO war with Russia and class war at home, the Dutch ruling elite has concluded that a "manager" is no longer enough. In the absence of an independent

political movement of the working class, the former colonial power seeks to install an even more right-wing government.

The emergence of the right-wing populist party BBB (Farmer-Citizen Movement) that gained senate power at the recent provincial elections, is a warning. Despite its presentation as a pro-peasant movement by the media, the BBB, founded in 2019, has exploited protest votes directed against the Rutte government for far-right political ends.

According to polls at the end of June, Rutte's VVD and the BBB were neck and neck, with 18 percent of the vote, followed by Wilders' PVV with 10 percent, the GreenLeft, D66 and the social democratic Labour Party (PvdA) trailed with 8 percent each and the Socialist Party with 6 percent.

The responsibility for this shift to the right lies squarely with the parties of the nominal "left". The PvdA, GreenLeft and the Socialist Party have supported Rutte's "herd immunity" policies and are complicit in the stoking of xenophobic and Islamophobic sentiments against immigrant workers. In the absence of an independent revolutionary leadership of the working class, the far-right has been able to exploit the anger and frustration of desperate middle-class and impoverished layers for its reactionary ends.

The PvdA, once a major party of government in the Netherlands, and GreenLeft are so discredited that they plan to field a combined manifesto and candidates list for the upcoming general election. The SP will run its own slate.

What is happening in the Netherlands is part of an international development. In Spain, the ruling class is returning to its fascist roots linked to the Franco regime, on the backs of the social democrats and the pseudo-left. The bourgeoisie in Germany too is reviving its fascist traditions and is engaged in an unprecedented military rearmament.

In the Netherlands, as in Spain, Germany and around the world, there is broad opposition towards the rising danger of fascism, war and militarism, but those political sentiments find no conscious political expression outside the International Committee of the Fourth International.

The urgent task facing the Dutch working class is the establishment of a section of the ICFI and, based on a socialist perspective, building a movement in the working class across Europe to fight against the growing danger of war, austerity and fascism and its source, the capitalist system.



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