

Dutch foreign minister van Leeuwen demands population “get used to... civilian casualties and body bags”

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On April 8, Geoffrey van Leeuwen of the People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), a former national security adviser to outgoing prime minister Mark Rutte and the acting Dutch foreign minister for trade and development cooperation, gave a warmongering speech at the University of Leiden. His address was given in the context of the Dutch ruling elite’s full endorsement of Israel’s genocide in Gaza and its deep and direct involvement in NATO’s proxy warfare against Russia.

Van Leeuwen bluntly disclosed the geostrategic aims behind Dutch militarism, stripping away the “peacekeeping” and “humanitarian” pretences of the last decades. The Dutch bourgeoisie, like its NATO allies, is preparing to escalate and instigate wars, specifically against Russia, China, and Iran. Leeuwen insisted that “getting your hands dirty is therefore inevitable” and that the Dutch population should “get used to... civilian casualties and body bags” Workers “must be prepared to pay a price for freedom and prosperity”.

The blanket silence on the part of official media and the political establishment about Leeuwen’s remarks is a serious warning.

By “freedom and prosperity”, Leeuwen means the decades of imperialist war and rampant exploitation since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. The current war in Ukraine, and planned wars against Iran and China, are the result of the geopolitical strategy that the US and other leading European imperialist powers have been pursuing ever since.

The Dutch military, for its part, participated in the first Persian Gulf War (1990–1991), the war against Serbia (1999), the invasion of Afghanistan (2001), the

second war against Iraq (2003), the wars against Libya and Syria (2011). It now contributes to the proxy war in Ukraine and this year participated in airstrikes against the Houthi rebels in Yemen led by the US and the UK.

Dutch military personnel have been deployed to Kosovo, Romania, Lithuania, Mali, Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, as well as to the Strait of Hormuz economic choke point that divides Iran from the Arabian Peninsula.

“We will defend our interests”, Leeuwen stated baldly. “We should not underestimate the effect on spectators such as Russia, China, and Iran... if we do not dare to act here, it is an invitation to those countries to test us further. These are difficult situations, where every choice is difficult and has high costs.”

This would require “toughness,” said Leeuwen, “otherwise it will be difficult to defend our interests in the world. To quote German Chancellor Scholz: it is time for a mental *Zeitenwende*.” The term, roughly meaning an “historic turning point”, was used by Scholz in a February 27, 2022, speech to announce a €100 billion special military fund, as part of an end to any restraints on German imperialism imposed by its Nazi past.

The Dutch foreign minister spelled out the “interests” he was referring to: “a third of global container shipping passes through the Suez Canal – a route that is in danger of being closed by the Houthis. The Netherlands is the fifth maritime power in the world... But it is unimaginable that the Netherlands can protect it on its own. We rely on our partners to keep our container ships safe and the routes open.”

Leeuwen’s speech followed the publication of a 72-page defense strategy white paper, “A stronger

Netherlands, a safer Europe”, which calls for the expansion of the Dutch military, enabling it to play a more aggressive role within NATO.

Hand-in-hand with plans for a military buildup abroad, the Dutch ruling class—aided by all the establishment parties including those nominally on the left, the trade unions and affiliated satellite pseudo-left outfits, as well as the media—are waging a relentless war at home, whipping-up anti-immigrant and pro-war propaganda. They aim to create a reactionary political climate and divert the working class from a struggle against the true causes of their social distress.

In the parliamentary elections in November last year, the extreme right-wing party of Geert Wilders (Party for Freedom-PVV) took the largest number of votes (23.5 percent). As in other European countries and internationally, the election victory of the PVV shows a sharp move to the right by the entire political establishment, and the role played by the political bankruptcy of the “left” in paving the way.

The militarization drive cannot be divorced from the simultaneous onslaught on social spending carried out by successive governments. Under the guise of economic necessity, social spending on healthcare, education, and housing have faced relentless cuts even as new fighter jets, artillery, drones, naval fleets, cyber units, and an expanded special forces staff have been provided for.

In addition to the billions already allocated to Kiev, the 2024 defense budget is expected to rise by nearly 43 percent, a war-budget that is expected to continually rise each year to reach an initial sum of €21.4 billion euros, or roughly 2 percent of the Dutch GDP by 2030.

This sets the government on a collision-course with an increasingly militant working class. A wave of strikes in the public and private sectors has rocked the Netherlands since the beginning of 2023, unprecedented in the country’s recent history. Despite the obstacles put up by the bourgeoisie and the trade union bureaucracy, Dutch workers have begun a fight for better wages, and working and living conditions, taking their place in an international movement.

Antiwar demonstrations have taken place regularly since the start of the Israeli genocide in Gaza. In fact, one of the hubs for the anti-war demonstrations is the University of Leiden, where Geoffrey van Leeuwen was invited by its administration to deliver a pro-war

speech.

The urgent task facing the Dutch working class is to join with workers in Europe and internationally in a socialist struggle against austerity, fascism and war. Above all, this requires the establishment in the Netherlands of a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), whose German section, the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP), is waging an anti-war campaign in the ongoing European elections.



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