The rise of anti-refugee violence in the Netherlands: What history reveals

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Across the Netherlands, far-right mobs have in recent weeks blockaded motorways, attacked refugee accommodation and set fire to planned asylum shelters, placing hundreds of refugees and their families in life-threatening conditions. What is unfolding is not a spontaneous eruption of "popular anger," as it is often portrayed, but the outcome of a consciously cultivated political campaign by the bourgeois establishment and official media, developed over many years.

On May 6 and 7, riots erupted in and around Den Bosch after municipal authorities announced plans to house approximately fifty unaccompanied asylum seekers, aged fifteen to eighteen, in the Engelen industrial area. Around 100 to 150 demonstrators blockaded the A59 motorway in scenes aimed at intimidating refugees and whipping up anti-immigrant hysteria.

At the same time, Loosdrecht became the centre of sustained anti-refugee agitation directed against a temporary asylum shelter in the former town hall. Following weeks of threats, vandalism and intimidation, the protests culminated on May 7 in a staged "funeral march" involving several hundred participants, including organised far-right thugs.

In Apeldoorn, protests beginning on May 9 against plans to house 240 refugees degenerated into nights of rioting, barricades and attacks involving fireworks. On May 11, an explosion damaged a future shelter for unaccompanied minors in Den Bosch, where police later found remnants of fireworks and flammable liquids.

The following day, rioters attacked the temporary shelter in Loosdrecht shortly after asylum seekers had arrived, setting fires, hurling fireworks and flares at the building, and obstructing firefighters attempting to intervene while around fifteen asylum seekers were reportedly inside.

These events did not emerge in a political vacuum. They were openly linked to organised far-right networks, including Defend Netherlands and Identity Resistance (IDV), which mobilised supporters through social media campaigns saturated with xenophobic propaganda. Similar attacks and protests spread rapidly to The Hague, IJsselstein, Uithoorn and Tilburg. In Uithoorn, demonstrators carried the fascist-associated Prince's Flag alongside banners invoking the Dutch East India Company (VOC), explicitly referencing Dutch colonial plunder. Earlier, riots in Houten forced the suspension of a refugee shelter project that now appears permanently abandoned.

What is unfolding in the Netherlands forms part of a broader international process. Across Europe, immigrants and refugees are systematically scapegoated for housing shortages, collapsing infrastructure, stagnant wages and social decline. In recent years, this campaign has intensified as ruling elites shift further right, elevating anti-immigrant agitation into a central mechanism for diverting anger away from austerity, inequality and militarism. These crises are rooted in decades of attacks on public spending, privatisation, deregulation and financial speculation carried out by governments of every political complexion.

This reactionary campaign stands in direct contradiction to the historical development of Dutch society itself. The emergence of the Dutch Republic—one of the first bourgeois republics in Europe, formed in the Eighty Years' Revolt against feudal absolutism—was inseparable from successive waves of migration and refugee movements. From its earliest rise as a commercial power, the Republic drew immense economic, intellectual, cultural and scientific strength from those fleeing religious persecution and war.

The refugees and the rise of the Dutch Republic

A decisive turning point came with the fall of Antwerp in 1585. Following the Spanish reconquest, Protestants were ordered either to convert or to leave. This created one of the largest urban refugee movements in early modern European history. Vast numbers of merchants, artisans, printers and intellectuals fled northward into the emerging Dutch Republic, settling in Amsterdam, Leiden and Haarlem.

The demographic transformation was enormous. Antwerp's population halved within four years to 40,000, while Amsterdam expanded from roughly 30,000 inhabitants to more than 100,000 within a matter of decades. To absorb the influx, the city underwent massive expansion despite much of it lying below sea level. New canals, districts, schools and workshops were constructed on a vast scale, including the Prinsengracht—later associated with the hiding place of Anne Frank during the Nazi occupation.

Far from being a marginal force, refugees became an integral component of the rise of the Dutch Republic. The expansion of Amsterdam into a global commercial centre, the flowering of Dutch art and philosophy, and the development of early Dutch capitalism were all inseparable from this influx. The wealth and cultural achievements now invoked by the ruling class as "national identity" were themselves products of displacement and migration.

While wealthy Antwerp merchants carried north whatever capital they could salvage, tens of thousands of refugee families arrived with little or nothing. Among them was the toddler Frans Hals, who fled north with his parents and would later stand alongside Rembrandt and Vermeer as one of the three great painters of the "Dutch Golden Age."

Vermeer lived and worked for roughly fifteen years in the house of his mother-in-law, Maria Thins, whose family had fled religious persecution to Delft. His domestic world was inseparable from refugee communities shaped by exile, religious conflict and the upheavals of the Dutch Revolt.

Although Rembrandt was not himself a refugee, he worked within an art market and intellectual milieu profoundly shaped by migrants and refugees from the southern Netherlands. Joost van den Vondel, from a Flemish refugee family, became the leading dramatist and great poet of the Dutch language; often described as the "Dutch Shakespeare."

Baruch Spinoza, born into a Sephardic Jewish refugee community in

Amsterdam, elevated this experience to a philosophical principle. Rejecting all notions of ethnic hierarchy, he wrote in 1670: “In regard to intellect and true virtue, every nation is on a par with the rest, and God has not in these respects chosen one people rather than another.”

The wealthy merchant refugees also played a central role in the economic foundations of Dutch capitalism. Figures such as Dirck van Os were key architects in the establishment of early financial institutions and the Dutch East India Company (VOC), which spearheaded colonial expansion across Asia, Africa and the Americas. Historians have described this as a massive “brain drain” from the south to the north that permanently altered the social, cultural and economic landscape of the Republic.

None of this implies a humanitarian idyll. The Dutch Republic remained a bourgeois society riven with contradictions and founded upon exploitation, the transatlantic slave trade and colonial plunder to the East Indies. But relative to its contemporaries, it provided greater space for refugees to participate in economic and cultural life.

That historical legacy persisted into later centuries through the emergence of the modern working class and the socialist movement. In the 1930s, Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Germany and Austria again sought refuge in the Netherlands. Whatever protection they received came not from the Dutch ruling class or the monarchy—which ultimately accommodated and collaborated with fascism—but from workers and broader layers of the population who opposed antisemitism and defended democratic rights.

In 1940, writing from exile in Coyoacán, Mexico, Leon Trotsky captured the essential dynamic of decaying capitalism in the epoch of imperialism with extraordinary precision:

“The world of decaying capitalism is overcrowded. The question of admitting a hundred extra refugees becomes a major problem… In the epoch of its rise, capitalism took the Jewish people out of the ghetto and utilised them as an instrument in its commercial expansion. Today decaying capitalist society is striving to squeeze the Jewish people from all its pores; seventeen million individuals out of the two billion populating the globe—that is, less than 1 percent—can no longer find a place on our planet!”

As Trotsky further added: “The bourgeoisie has managed to convert our planet into a foul prison.”

These observations retain full force today. The history of refugees in the Netherlands expresses both the rise and the decay of capitalism. What is unfolding is not a rupture, but continuity under conditions of systemic breakdown.

From austerity and war to xenophobia

Anti-refugee politics in the Netherlands did not emerge from nowhere. It was systematically cultivated over decades through the steady rightward shift of official politics; from the anti-immigrant demagogy of Pim Fortuyn in 2002, intensified after the 2004 murder of Theo van Gogh, to the normalisation of xenophobia by governments since.

In July 2023, Mark Rutte and the VVD collapsed their own coalition over asylum policy, elevating migration into the central axis of political life and preparing the conditions for a far-right breakthrough.

The November 2023 elections brought a coalition dominated by neo-fascist Geert Wilders’ PVV, with Dick Schoof installed as unelected prime minister—marking an unprecedented integration of far-right politics into the state apparatus.

The new government swiftly moved to tighten asylum policy: permanent residency rights were targeted for abolition, temporary permits reduced from five to three years and family reunification sharply restricted. These measures were driven by then asylum minister Marjolein Faber (PVV), who claimed they would reduce “pressure” on housing and public services. In a country that in 2025 counted 20+ billionaires and over 317,000 millionaires, the attempt to target 238,000 refugees and asylum seekers are both reactionary and absurd.

The economic fraud is clear. The Netherlands faces a housing shortage of roughly 400,000 homes, while over 200,000 dwellings remain vacant—held off the market for speculation and profit. Since the 1990s, successive governments have dismantled social housing through privatisation and deregulation, producing a system dominated by real estate capital.

Rents and house prices have skyrocketed, particularly in major cities, while young workers are forced to remain in their parental homes into adulthood. Waiting lists for social housing stretch beyond a decade, and homelessness has risen sharply. Meanwhile, billions are diverted to NATO rearmament and military expansion.

The current government associated with Rob Jetten (D66) has largely maintained and administratively consolidated these measures, with a new asylum legislation, originally drafted by none other than Marjolein Faber, due to be enforced on 12 June, demonstrating that anti-refugee policy is not limited to the far right but reflects a broader ruling-class consensus spanning the entire parliamentary setup.

The role of the official left and the trade unions

This rightward shift has been reinforced by the official “left” and the trade union bureaucracy. GroenLinks–PvdA frames migration as “pressure” on housing and services, adopting the central premise of the far right: that social crisis is caused by refugees rather than by decades of austerity. The ex-Maoist Socialist Party (SP) has long moved in a similar direction, embracing xenophobic and border-enforcement logic.

The trade union leadership, particularly the FNV, has systematically contained workers’ struggles within corporatist frameworks. Strikes in logistics, transport and public services are isolated and depoliticised, subordinated to negotiations with the same state responsible for austerity and migration policy.

Most significantly, despite organised attacks on refugee shelters, neither the unions nor the parliamentary left has mounted serious mobilisation in defence of asylum seekers. Responses have been symbolic, fragmented and politically contained. This vacuum has allowed far-right groups numbering only a few hundred activists to exercise an influence far beyond their numerical strength, given that the counterdemonstrations were higher in number, but organised working class opposition was absent.

The conclusion is unavoidable: no section of the entire political establishment offers a solution. From VVD to GroenLinks–PvdA, from D66 to the SP, from government to unions, all have contributed to the same capitalist framework with economic austerity, militarism and the scapegoating of refugees. Appeals to the state, courts or parliamentary parties cannot halt this trajectory. These institutions are the instruments through which ruling-class policy is implemented and crisis managed.

The few hundred far-right thugs now terrorising refugees and poisoning social life must be stopped by the working class. The rich history of the Dutch working class—most powerfully expressed in the February Strike of 1941, when workers walked out in mass defiance of Nazi deportations and stood in defence of Jewish refugees—demonstrates the social force against fascism and persecution. That legacy of working class solidarity, born in struggle and tested in the darkest moments of the twentieth

century, must be revived and renewed today.

The Netherlands has seen a significant escalation of class struggle over the past two years. Most significantly, a series of “Red Line” anti-war demonstrations against the Gaza genocide culminated on October 5, 2025, when an estimated 250,000 workers and youth marched through Amsterdam—the largest protest in the country since the anti-nuclear demonstrations of 1981.

In the industrial arena, thousands of NS rail workers brought the entire national network to a halt with two 24-hour strikes in June 2025, demanding a 7–8 percent pay increase against an offer of just 5.75 percent over 27 months. Most recently, the struggle has been led by public sector workers. On March 3 and again on April 14, 2026, some 160,000 central government employees—including administrative workers, cleaners, and food inspectors—staged national 24-hour strikes against a government-imposed pay freeze, with inflation running at 2.4 percent and workloads mounting after years of staff shortages.

These strikes are part of a broader international trend, as the working class everywhere comes into conflict with the ruling classes, who are imposing austerity measures at home while simultaneously pouring trillions into militarism and war. The right-wing campaign against refugees and migrants is part of the ruling class’s strategy to impose its right-wing agenda under conditions of intensifying class struggle. It aims to divide the working class, politically disarm it and ultimately suppress it. The various pseudo-left forces play a central role in this.

They endlessly advance the conception that the task of refugees—those permitted to remain after the tearing apart of families and friends and the deportation of countless others—is simply to find a “regular job,” learn the language and “integrate” into a society in which they are compelled merely to survive.

History demonstrates the opposite. The earlier generations who arrived as refugees in the Dutch Republic did not “integrate” into the old feudal structures; they became part of the social forces that helped overturn them and lay the foundations for a new society. That precedent—and that possibility—remains the most important lesson the present situation has to offer.

This experience points to a decisive conclusion: the defence of refugees is inseparable from the struggle for a new society founded on socialist and internationalist principles, and on the abolition of the domination of private profit over social need. Throughout history, refugees and the emigré—part of the international working class—have repeatedly contributed to, and even participated in the creation of, new social orders under changing historical conditions. The present epoch is no exception.