

The June 24 national transport strike in the Netherlands: the political questions

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In the pre-dawn hours of Wednesday, June 24, the rail, bus, tram and metro networks of the Netherlands fell silent. From 4 a.m. to 8 a.m., public transport workers called out by three branches of the trade union federation FNV halted the national rail operator NS and stopped almost all urban and regional transport across the country. By 6 a.m. Amsterdam Centraal stood all but deserted, platforms empty, the strike announced on the departure boards and over the station loudspeakers. Only a handful of services, the IJ ferries and the Schiphol airport train among them, kept running.

Unlike the conventional strikes over better pay and working conditions of recent years, the Dutch transport workers' strike marked a new stage in its political character—forced up from the rank and file and openly confronting the political direction of the state: it was a strike directed against the war cabinet of the minority government of prime minister Rob Jetten (D66) and its drive to cut social security provisions won by the working class through the struggles of the post-war era.

At issue are the gutting of unemployment (WW) and disability (WIA) benefits and a broader assault on state pensions. A survey of FNV members found 98 percent opposed to the cuts and more than 85 percent ready for a protracted strike. Dock and port workers, strike-ready since March, are poised to follow.

The stoppage was the Dutch expression of a class confrontation now opening across the continent and internationally. It erupted in the immediate shadow of the mid-June European Union summit in Brussels, where the heads of government bound Europe to its largest rearmament since the Second World War: to make the bloc “war-ready” for direct conflict with nuclear-armed Russia by 2030, to pour fresh weaponry into the war in Ukraine and to build the “deep precision strike capabilities” needed to strike deep inside Russia itself; a programme that directly extends to national austerity policies.

The date of the Dutch strike was itself a marker. One year earlier, on June 24-25, 2025, the NATO powers had met in The Hague and pledged to raise military spending toward 5 percent of GDP. The cuts now declared unavoidable are the domestic enforcement of that pledge. German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, who set the tone, had already named who must pay: working people in every country must “accept restrictions” to finance rearmament and war.

The Netherlands is one front in a strike wave now sweeping the continent, everywhere driven by the same socio-economic and political conditions: austerity at home to finance war abroad.

In Belgium, workers have resisted the De Wever government's “Arizona” coalition through more than a year of strikes against pension reforms and attacks on wage indexation. Inter-professional strikes in February were followed by a national mobilisation of 100,000 workers on March 12 and another nationwide strike in May, with demonstrators carrying banners reading, “We will not pay the price of their wars,” as the government moves to increase military spending to €34 billion by 2034.

In France, the four rail unions struck together on June 10, declaring a

“state of emergency” on a rail network being broken up by successive reforms and run down through chronic underinvestment, while workers' wages continued to trail rising prices.

In Portugal, the CGTP's June 3 general strike—the second in six months—halted trains, grounded hundreds of flights and closed schools against a labour reform easing dismissals and curbing the right to strike.

In Italy, the June 20 general strike brought to a head a nine-month wave of industrial action against the Meloni government's austerity-and-war budget, uniting opposition to rearmament with protests against the Gaza genocide, as dockers in Genoa, Livorno and Ancona refused to load arms shipments bound for Israel.

Across Spain, Greece and beyond, the same dynamic is at work: the European working class refusing to sacrifice its living standards and social gains to finance its ruling elite's rearmament ambitions and imperialist wars of subjugation and plunder.

Within the Netherlands itself, June 24 was the third national strike since the Jetten war cabinet took office in February, following the two strikes of public sector workers in March and April against its 2026 pay freeze. What is emerging across the continent is not a series of disconnected national strikes, despite the unions' attempts in doing everything to keep it confined, but a single confrontation between the working class and a state machinery being reorganised for war.

A government of austerity, war and repression

The strike was directed at a government that presents itself as the moderate, centre-left successor to the far right and is, in reality, driving its predecessor's entire programme forward. Jetten, the media's “youthful centrist,” won a narrow and unexpected victory over neo-fascist Geert Wilders' PVV last October on just 26 of 150 seats, the smallest mandate ever held by a party of government, and was sworn in on 23 February 2026. Far from breaking with the PVV-dominated cabinet, as Jetten promised during the snap elections, he has carried its right-wing agenda forward at lightning speed and with ruthless continuity.

At the centre of the former colonial power's agenda is imperialist war. The cabinet—D66 governing with the right-wing VVD and the Christian-democratic CDA on 66 of 150 seats—has made rearmament the organising principle of the state. It is enshrining in law a military target of 3.5 percent of GDP by 2035, rising toward 5 percent once “security-related” outlays are added, and has invented a “Freedom Contribution” (Vrijheidsbijdrage), a war tax, to partially finance a €19 billion expansion of the armed forces. The chief beneficiaries are the arms consortiums—Thales, Rheinmetall, Lockheed Martin—whose share prices and profits have soared as social provision is stripped away. Rheinmetall stock alone has risen some 400 percent in three years; its 2025 operating

profit climbed by a third and its dividend by 42 percent.

It is in this light that the WW and WIA cuts must be understood. They are not mere Dutch budgetary housekeeping; every euro for wars abroad is wrung from the working class at home. There is no “fiscal” need for the cuts: by the unions’ own figures the unemployment and disability funds hold a surplus of some €10 billion, coffers filled by worker’s pay deductions. The money is not lacking; it is simply being moved from social welfare to the war chest.

The war machine being financed at the expense of social need serves genocide. The Netherlands hosts one of Europe’s three F-35 logistics hubs supplying the fighter jets deployed in the destruction of Gaza. In 2024 an appeals court found that continuing exports carried a “clear risk” of facilitating serious violations of international law and ordered them stopped. The government fought the ruling to the Supreme Court, which in October 2025 concluded that the arming of Israel was a matter for the government, not the judiciary.

Against the war in Gaza and Dutch complicity, hundreds of thousands have joined the “Red Line” demonstrations, including a quarter of a million in Amsterdam on October 5, 2025—the largest protest since 1981—alongside student occupations nationwide. Direct exports remain formally suspended, yet components reportedly still reach Israel via the United States, rendering the legal restriction largely symbolic in practice.

The social fabric onto which these social cuts are being imposed is already at breaking point. In 2024 official poverty rose for the first time in five years, to 551,000, after the cabinet scrapped the energy allowance introduced to offset the Ukraine war’s price shock; nearly half of the poor are working poor—employed, yet unable to make ends meet. Schools increasingly hand out free breakfasts to children who arrive hungry, while poverty cuts average life expectancy by nine years for men and seven for women.

All of this in one of the richest countries on earth, where more than fifty billionaires and over 450,000 millionaires live—a concentration of wealth that stands in direct opposition to the rapid deterioration of living standards for the masses. With a shortfall of 400,000 homes there is a massive housing crisis, while more than 200,000 dwellings are held empty as speculative assets

Austerity is accompanied by escalating state repression. A “two-status” law, in force since 12 June, splits asylum seekers into recognised refugees and a lower “subsidiary protection” tier, stripping the latter—most of them fleeing wars—of family reunification and permanent residence. When the Senate threw out the Asylum Emergency Measures Act in April, a measure criminalising undocumented residence drafted by the former far-right PVV minister Marjolein Faber, the Jetten government moved within weeks to revive it through separate legislation.

This scapegoating of refugees and immigrants is the indispensable complement to state austerity. Through May 2026, far-right mobs blockaded motorways and set fire to asylum shelters. This is no spontaneous “popular anger” but a campaign long cultivated by the entire political establishment and its media—the targeting of 263,000 refugees, and 1.7 million immigrant workers, to divide the working class and habituate society to repression.

The role of the FNV trade union bureaucracy

The decisive question raised by the June 24 strike is not the militancy of the workers, which is beyond doubt, but the political role of the apparatus that claims to speak for them. With 98 percent of members rejecting the cuts and more than 85 percent ready to take up a protracted strike, the FNV leadership had every mandate for a serious fight. Instead, it issued an

“ultimatum” in late May, broke off official talks, and called a single “first pinprick” (eerste speldenprik): a few pre-dawn hours of disruption, ending before most of the country had begun its working day.

FNV board member, Edwin Kuiper, described it in advance in exactly those terms, promising that “real” 24-hour strikes “might follow” but not until “after the summer.” Even the token symbolic strike was pared back, with FNV Spoor cutting the rail stoppage to four hours, from 4 to 8 a.m., to limit its reach, because a fuller strike threatened to galvanise broader support within the Netherlands and beyond.

The aim of this deliberate calibration was to prevent the strike from developing into what it could readily have become: a unified movement of transport, dock, logistics and public sector workers against the government. Dock workers had already been strike-ready since March, around 160,000 public sector workers had walked out only weeks earlier and rail workers had brought the network to a halt in 2025. The objective conditions for a broader strike were present.

The labour bureaucracy’s task was to keep each sector apart to stage a brief, segmented, carefully bounded protest that vented mounting anger without disrupting economic life or drawing wider social layers in support, and then to send everyone home until autumn. This is the essential function of the trade-union apparatus: a safety valve, releasing pressure so that austerity, militarisation and war spending may proceed without serious disruption.

That function flows from the bureaucracy’s place within the state itself. The FNV’s chairman, Hans Spekman, installed on May 1, 2026, was national chairman of the Labour Party (PvdA) from 2012 to 2017. His path retraces that of Wim Kok, the union federation chairman who negotiated the 1982 watershed Wassenaar Agreement and then, as PvdA premier, turned the dismantling of the Dutch welfare state into the celebrated “Dutch model.”

Ever since, the “polder model” has meant not the advance of workers’ conditions but cuts negotiated jointly by government, employers and unions in tripartite bodies such as the Social and Economic Council and the Labour Foundation, binding the apparatus ever more tightly to the state. Spekman’s complaint that the cabinet’s proposals are “meagre and extremely unclear” is not the language of an opponent of austerity but of a co-manager irritated by the details of its execution.

The pattern is identical across Europe. In Italy the CGIL has broken up rank-and-file efforts to join the fight against austerity to opposition to the Gaza genocide; in France the CGT and CFDT dispersed the mass movement against Macron’s pension cuts into isolated one-day outings; in Britain and Germany the rail and service unions rely on the same pre-scripted, token stoppages.

The official opposition and the nominal left offer no alternative. GroenLinks and the PvdA, fused this month into a single “progressive” party, Progressief Nederland (PRO), under Jesse Klaver, lament the cuts while accepting the EU deficit rules and the NATO targets that generate them; the ex-Maoist Socialist Party denounces the “Freedom Contribution” in words while backing the EU and NATO framework that drives it.

The Dutch transport workers historic record

The fear running through this apparatus is a fear of the working class’s own courageous historic traditions. Three times in a single decade, strategically placed Dutch transport workers struck first and set the entire class in motion.

In February 1941, when the Nazi occupiers and their collaborators began rounding up and transporting Amsterdam’s Jews to extermination,

the city's tram drivers walked out followed by dock workers, and within a day some 300,000 workers had joined them. It was the only mass strike against the persecution of Jews anywhere in occupied Europe—an act of internationalist class solidarity, that was brutally suppressed and later relabeled by the ruling establishment and its monarchy as “national resistance,” stripping the February General Strike of its class content.

The September 1944 Railway Strike, called to disrupt the movement of Wehrmacht troops and supplies through the occupied Netherlands, came not from below but from the government-in-exile, which had fled to London with the monarchy in May 1940, before the Dutch military had even surrendered. Subordinated to Allied military aims, it left the working class to bear the brutal consequences and pay a heavy price: 30,000 railway workers were forced into hiding from Nazi repression, while the retaliation blockade of food transports to the western provinces helped bring about the Hunger Winter, starving 20,000 to death.

The lesson was driven home again after the war, in the form the bureaucracy fears most: workers turning their power against their own ruling class. In September 1946, as the Dutch state prepared to drown the Indonesian Revolution in blood and reimpose colonial rule, transport workers once again occupied the front rank of the struggle. After military police shot a worker at an anti-war demonstration in Amsterdam on September 21, a 24-hour wildcat strike broke out three days later against the troop transports bound for Indonesia. From Amsterdam to the Zaan region, Velsen, Delft, Enschede and Groningen, workers moved into action. The strike revealed the immense social force concentrated in the transport sector, only to be contained and betrayed by the Stalinist-led trade union apparatus.

Today the successors of those courageous workers, who defied fascism and a brutal colonial regime occupy positions no less strategic. Transport, dock, warehouse and industrial workers sit astride the choke points through which everything moves—food and energy, but also components, munitions and the machinery of war. As Europe's governments pour billions into rearmament, these are the workers on whom both commerce and militarisation depend. An independently mobilised stoppage could halt not only production and trade but the material infrastructure of war itself at its most sensitive points. The mood among workers is outgrowing the union ritual of symbolic action. What holds it back is not unwillingness to fight but a bureaucracy determined to keep the workers struggles fragmented, controlled and safely within the national framework.

Build rank-and-file committees!

The defence of pensions, of unemployment and disability benefits, and of democratic rights cannot be entrusted to an apparatus that is organising their orderly defeat. It requires rank-and-file committees—in every depot, station and port—democratically controlled and independent of the FNV bureaucracy. Such committees would reject the logic of the “pinprick” and fight for what the situation demands: not a token few hours but an all-out, open-ended general strike to defeat the cuts in their entirety; not a cent for war; the opening of the books and the expropriation of the arms manufacturers under workers' control.

Dutch transport and dock workers hold a strategic position: through Rotterdam, Europe's largest port, pass the very arms shipments on which the ruling class depends. Linked with the rail, logistics and port workers of France, Italy and Belgium—who since June 2025 have refused to load weapons bound for Israel, from the blockade at Marseille-Fos to Genoa and Zeebrugge—this social force can bring the machinery of war itself to a halt. To unite workers across sector and border, the International

Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) has initiated the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

In the Netherlands as everywhere, the fight against austerity is inseparable from the fight against war, and both pose the necessity of ending the capitalist system that produces them. The defence of every social gain of the past century now raises the conquest of power by the working class and the socialist reorganisation of economic life—the United Socialist States of Europe. Dutch transport workers, and all those entering struggle, should draw the urgent conclusions: make contact with the IWA-RFC, read the *World Socialist Web Site*, and take up the building of a Dutch section of the ICFI—the leadership the working class needs to link the coming strikes that the transport workers have set into motion to the question of political power.



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