

Netherlands: Jetten's war cabinet is working with the trade unions to cut social welfare

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On September 29, after months of protests and strike threats, the Dutch minority cabinet of Prime Minister Rob Jetten (D66) announced the withdrawal of planned cuts to social security amounting to more than 6 billion Euros. The bureaucracies of the FNV, CNV and VCP union federations hailed a “resounding victory” and suspended every planned strike action.

This “victory” demands closer examination. The cuts were not cancelled but transferred, to return through the back door of the “polder” – the class-collaborationist Dutch tradition of settlements negotiated between government, employers and unions. These closed-door talks come as a mass movement against austerity, repression and war spreads from France across Europe, met everywhere with police-state measures.

The Netherlands are no exception to this right-wing trajectory.

A war cabinet painted as liberal

In November 2023 Geert Wilders’ neo-fascist PVV won the election and the most right-wing government since the Second World War was installed under the former intelligence chief Dick Schoof. In June 2025 Wilders’ party left the government over the timeline of repressing migrants and the resulting snap election in October 2025 brought Jetten to office.

The liberal D66 won the election with just 26 of 150 seats. In February 2026 Jetten formed a minority coalition with the right-wing VVD and the Christian-democratic CDA that holds 66 seats in the lower house. Painted by the Dutch and international media as liberal and moderate, it carries the previous PVV-led government’s agenda forward with ruthless continuity. The scapegoating of refugees and of some 1.6 million immigrant workers is the indispensable complement to austerity, dividing the working class as capital demands its submission.

Jetten’s cabinet has made rearmament the organising principle of the state: military spending is set to rise from the current 2.2 per cent of GDP to 3.5 per cent by 2035, part of the 5 percent pledge NATO adopted at its June 2025 summit in The Hague. To pay for it, the cabinet planned 6.8 billion Euros a year in structural cuts to unemployment insurance (WW), disability insurance (WIA) and the state pension (AOW), alongside a “Freedom Contribution” (Vrijheidsbijdrage) – a war levy collected by letting income-tax brackets rise more slowly than inflation.

The Dutch strike wave

The first action against the cuts by FNV, the largest trade union

confederation, with 1.2 million members, was a four-hour transport stoppage on June 24. The union itself called it a “first pinprick,” deliberately limited although members had been strike-ready for months. On September 4 port workers in Rotterdam, Amsterdam and Zeeland stopped handling ships for nearly eight hours. Thousands of central-government, municipal and university employees rallied in The Hague on September 8. On September 9 almost the entire national rail, bus, tram and metro network shut down for 24 hours, with majority public support. Construction, metal and hospital workers joined in the first half of the month.

The strike calendar was designed to keep a social and political powder keg from exploding, dispersing the anger across separate dates so that no single day threatened the cabinet’s survival. Yet the opposition from the rank and file outran what the bureaucracy could deflect, and each round of action – the May ultimatum, the June 24 stoppage, the September strikes – was met by the government with a repackaging of the cuts.

In May the cabinet dropped its €2.8 billion plan to raise the pension age more quickly and shelved the cuts to unemployment and disability benefits “in their current form,” leaving its budget-savings target intact. On August 31 the cuts returned in new form: the plan to lower the cap on benefits was scrapped, while the halving of unemployment benefit from two years to one was delayed by a year. On September 29, lacking the opposition votes to pass any budget, the cabinet withdrew them again. Three times the cuts changed shape; the assault on the working class never did.

What the trade-union “victory” contains

The terms of that withdrawal were explicit. The cuts to unemployment benefits (WW) and disability benefits (WIA) were merely shelved, pending talks with the trade unions on reforming disability insurance — talks that, as Jetten and Heinen stressed, must still deliver “budget savings.” Should they fall short, the cabinet will put forward “additional proposals.” The retreat thus left a gap of €2.4 to €3 billion. Documents leaked to the public broadcaster NOS identified the fallback: €1.2 billion in cuts to education from 2031, achieved by withholding inflation adjustments, while defence and justice were exempted from the “savings.”

Thus, the welfare cuts have not disappeared; they have merely changed authors. What a minority cabinet could not force through parliament is now to be negotiated through “social partnership,” with the trade-union apparatus enlisted as co-author of the very social counter-revolution it claims to oppose. The threat to shift the cuts onto education is turning the class war waged at home to finance war abroad into a scramble among sections of the working class – including immigrants and refugees – for what remains of a budget devoured by rearmament.

FNV chairman Hans Spekman, who was Chairman of the Labour Party (PvdA) from 2012 to 2017, called the outcome “a resounding victory for the unions and for the polder, whose move it now is.” CNV chairman Hans Van den Heuvel (until April a director at the employers’ organisation LTO) was blunter: “The bomb in the polder has been defused and the fuse extinguished.” After they served as a safety valve from June to September, the unions now defuse the powder keg for the Dutch financial oligarchy, monarchy in tow.

The press echoed the claim of victory. Public broadcaster NOS declared the cuts “definitively off the table,” while WNL ran the headline, “Klaver celebrates victory.” Jesse Klaver leads Progressief Nederland (PRO), which was recently formed by merging the Social Democrats (PvdA) and the Greens (GroenLinks). Its name has shed the words “worker” and “left”; its manifesto promises a “broad people’s party” for “employee and employer” alike. Now the largest opposition party in both chambers, PRO is at once the parliamentary partner of the trade unions and the crutch of the minority cabinet.

The party’s pro-war credentials were established long ago. Before the NATO summit, GroenLinks-PvdA supplied the parliamentary majority for the 3.5 percent military budget target. Klaver hailed the September the postponement of the cuts as “a very great victory” and “a first feat of arms for PRO to be proud of” – the language of a party rehearsing for government. He vouched that the cabinet had assured him the cuts were “really gone and would not come back” – a day after Jetten had made their removal conditional.

The pseudo-left satellites of the bureaucracy fell into line. The Internationale Socialisten, Dutch affiliate of the state-capitalist International Socialist Tendency, celebrated the outcome as “the result of persistent union resistance,” praised Spekman for explaining the actions “in exemplary fashion,” and applauded PRO for marching “in unity” with the unions.

Jacobin Nederland, the Dutch edition of the US magazine aligned with the Democratic Socialists of America, earlier urged PRO to “keep its word.” These middle-class outfits, which orbit around the union apparatus and the parliamentary left, lent their voices to the same chorus as the state press.

Within days of the announcement, Klaver and Spekman cut celebration cakes at a bus depot in The Hague. “This is your victory,” Klaver told the drivers, and posted the pictures online. The two men celebrated side by side a deal that moves the cuts from parliament into the hands of the bureaucracy. Both belong to the same privileged layer of functionaries, rotating between party headquarters, parliament and union office, enforcing the dictates of the capitalist state on the working class.

On October 7, a week after suspending the strikes, Spekman was back at the Catshuis, the prime minister’s residence, where the unions had “walked out of talks” in May. Afterwards he said the union felt no obligation to meet a savings target – while not ruling out that “improvements” to WW and WIA could yield money. The cabinet wants agreements by spring.

Transport strikes

The same pattern was repeated in the most recent regional transport strikes. FNV and CNV announced weekly strikes until Christmas over a single collective agreement, while national rail and city transport ran as usual. After one stoppage on October 14, they sold an “improved pay offer” and suspended action until November 7.

The script has historical precedent. Its founding text was the Wassenaar Agreement of November 1982, in which FNV chairman Wim Kok (PvdA)

traded wage restraint for promised shorter hours under the threat of a statutory wage measure. The labour share of national income fell and has never returned to its pre-Wassenaar level; the shorter hours arrived in form of the mass conversion of full-time jobs into part-time and “flexible” ones – marketed abroad as the “Dutch model.”

From 1994 until 2002, Kok was Dutch prime minister and imposed eight years of privatization and market reforms. He served as a model for Tony Blair’s and Gerard Schröders “new labour.” In 2004, the conservative Balkenende government abolished early retirement and overhauled disability insurance, the trade union federations signed a deal that left the measures in place, toning the heat down a little bit.

The Social Accord, which the Rutte government (a coalition of the VVD and the PvdA) agreed with employers and trade unions in 2013, was a dress rehearsal for today: €4 billion in social cuts. Spekman was PvdA chairman at the time; today he chairs the FNV. For 44 years the same apparatus has spearheaded and co-managed round after round of austerity in the name of “social partnership.”

The roles are clear: the union bureaucracy fragments the anger, PRO converts it into parliamentary leverage, and the cabinet buys time. Together, they restrain a working class prepared to fight and keep it tethered to the capitalist state, while the war budget – the real object of the exercise – sails through.

What remains: war, austerity and repression

Unaffected by the “victory” of the unions, defence spending is exploding: it rises to €28.9 billion in 2027, including €3 billion for the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine. On September 11, Minister for Arms Procurement and Personnel Derk Boswijk presented a “service model” under which interviews, selection and medical examination for 18- to 27-year-olds can be made mandatory in stages, with conscription as a “last resort.” The coalition aims to expand the armed forces from about 80,000 to 122,000. The 18- to 27-year-olds it is preparing to call up as cannon fodder belong to the same young, precariously employed layer whose benefits it seeks to cut.

The budget allocates additional funds to the riot police. On September 4 the government announced plans to let mayors forcibly relocate demonstrators and to widen criminal prosecution under the Public Assemblies Act. The Vrijheidsbijdrage, the war levy on wage-earners, remains in the Tax Plan at an estimated €2.7 billion a year.

Other cuts stand: the planned removal from 2029 of household help from municipal care provision, and a “smaller and cheaper” civil service. The government has announced a comprehensive efficiency drive, under which 25,000 of the 160,000 jobs in the public sector will be cut. This is expected to save €900 million a year by 2027 and €3.5 billion a year by 2035. The jobs lost are to be replaced by artificial intelligence. The police and the armed forces are exempt from the cost-cutting measures.

Meanwhile Dutch non-financial corporations booked €93.3 billion in gross pre-tax profit in the first quarter of 2026 alone. The question is whether the wealth workers produce serves social need or the capitalist oligarchy and its war machine.

The Dutch events amid a European mass movement

What is unfolding in the Netherlands is part of an international upsurge of the class struggle. In France, high-school blockades that began in

September merged on October 17 with “yellow vests” protesting fuel and living costs: 550,000 marched, according to the Interior Ministry, some 2,400 were arrested, curfews followed, and Prime Minister Sébastien Lecornu held open a state of emergency while pressing ahead with a €54 billion austerity budget.

On October 21 Greek teachers, public-sector workers and pupils marched in more than 50 cities chanting, “From Greece to France, we fight for free public education.” Belgian students have faced mass arrests over education costs; Spain heads to a snap election on November 29 amid mass housing protests; and German pupils are striking against conscription.

Behind it all stands the European Commission’s “Readiness 2030” plan: up to €800 billion in additional military spending across the bloc by the end of the decade. Everywhere, the sequence of events repeats itself – austerity at home sold as fiscal necessity, rearmament sold as strategic necessity, and union bureaucracies dissipating the resulting anger in nationally isolated protests.

On October 30, dockworkers’ unions in France, Italy, Greece, Turkey, Morocco and the Basque Country, representing more than 40 ports, have called an international day of action against war and the militarisation of ports. No Dutch union is among them – although Rotterdam is Europe’s largest port and the September 4 stoppage showed what Dutch dockers can do. That absence measures the gulf between the international character of the class struggle and the nationalist framework in which the FNV and the like confine it.

The answer is not an appeal to the FNV, CNV or PRO to “do more.” What is required is the building of rank-and-file committees in every depot, port, hospital ward and government office, independent of the bureaucracy, fighting for the permanent and unconditional withdrawal of the cuts and rejecting any polder deal that trades one section of workers against another.

These must link up with dockers in Genoa, Piraeus and Marseille, with French, Belgian and Greek youth, and with German workers facing the same war budgets, to prepare a Europe-wide general strike against austerity and war. The International Committee of the Fourth International has initiated the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) for this purpose.

The September strikes proved the social power of the working class; the October “suspensions” of strikes show how that power is being contained. The decisive question is whether workers remain bound to a bureaucratic strategy of managed retreat, or arm themselves with an independent socialist and internationalist programme: the fight for workers’ power and the United Socialist States of Europe. Building the Dutch section of the ICFI as the revolutionary leadership of the working class is the task these events pose point-blank.



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