

The Netherlands: The SP at a crossroads

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Things are not going well for the Dutch Socialist Party. During the last municipal elections in March the party suffered a defeat, the first time it lost in an election. The SP is the only party in the Netherlands that has always criticized neoliberalism - but now that model has stranded, the party suffers its biggest setback in its history. This makes a discussion about the party and its course more necessary than ever.

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One bad election result doesn't have to spell disaster, especially if it comes after a long line of victories. But it is clear the SP is experiencing something else than a (temporal) electoral setback. Before the municipal elections, there was the disappointing score in the European elections (the party maintained its two seats in the European Parliament), support for the SP in polls is consistently low (the party now has 25 out of 150 seats in parliament, but according to poll figures, it is set to lose more than half of those) and the party is losing members. Right at the moment the SP is proven right in its criticism of neoliberalism, the party suffers a heavy blow.

Many people point to the overall right-ward shift in the Netherlands when they try to explain the election results. This shift is profound, and is visible in first the rise of rightwing, anti-immigrant populist Pim Fortuyn in 2001 and 2002 and now in the popularity of far-right politician Geert Wilders. But to point to the rightward shift of society as the cause of the growth of the right-wing parties and the weakening of the left is just a tautology. The most important factor in the shift of voters sympathies is the antipathy against politics in all its shapes. The number of people who don't bother to vote is steadily growing; politicians are increasingly unpopular; the membership of political parties is declining and people move from one party to another more than ever. The feeling that 'politicians' (in general) are making a mess of things, and that 'the common people' are the victims of it, is widespread.

This unease has its roots in the neoliberal policies of the past decennia; privatization and liberalization has destroyed much of the security people felt and has heavily damaged ties between people. What remains is insecurity, confusion and frustration: fertile soil for people who give a political voice to this feeling.

Party of opposition

During the nineties, the SP was clearly the party of opposition. The Labour Party shed its left-wing past while the SP was rising as the party of dissatisfaction and resistance: resistance against the destruction of the pension system, against a universal market principle and against the sell-out of the welfare state. The SP grew in popularity and its number of seats in parliament increased.

But now it's Wilder's 'Party of Freedom' that symbolizes opposition against politics as usual. With help from the other parties, Wilders managed to put the focus of the public debate not on the economics problems and their consequences, but on 'the islam', he made integration of migrants a central issue in the political debate. The other parties, who all remain loyal to neoliberal dogma, have an interest in not focusing the debate on social-economic issues. If it's up to them, working people will be made to pay for the crisis. And that is a message those parties would like to keep hidden from open view for as long as possible - in any case, until after the parliamentary elections in June.

The SP didn't succeed in breaking the neoliberal consensus and putting economical and social issues on top of the agenda. This meant the party lost ground in the public debate because it is strongest on exactly these points. Because of an unclear approach in the whole debate on 'integration' and a failure to clearly oppose Wilders, the party also lost voters to parties with a more anti-racist profile like the Greens.

An important problem is that the true extent of the crisis is still not visible to many people in the Netherlands - unemployment increased but not on a massive scale and is mainly limited to flexworkers. People's purchasing power is maintained and the enormous cutbacks on government spending are yet to come. We are flooded with messages that the worse is behind us and the economy is recovering.

Any left-wing party faces difficulties in such a situation: it has to confront a mood of 'let's all work together' and 'pessimism will only make things worse'. To counter this mood, a party needs to be able to present a long-term alternative and have a clear view of the crisis. Both seem to be lacking.

Lessons from the crisis

In October 2008 the SP presented a manifesto: 'Lessons of the credit crisis'. It spoke in favor of nationalizing banks that were in danger of going bankrupt, a law on nationalizations and a parliamentary inquiry into the causes of the crisis. There should be more supervision over the financial sector, the power of stockholders should be limited and the culture of outrageous bonuses for top-executives should be ended. Other points included dealing with tax-havens and the introduction of a tax on money flows (Tobintax). A drastically reformed IMF or a new financial authority should have the authority to issue a new international exchange currency to replace the dollar and the system of fixed exchange rates should be reconsidered.

The manifesto made 30 proposals, all concerning the financial sector - nowhere was it made clear that the financial crisis was bound to hit the real economy, nowhere a case was made for structural changes. Even the nationalization of banks and financial institutions was limited to those that 'were in trouble'. The manifesto ended with a plea for a return to the so-called 'Rhineland model', without asking if such a return was even possible.

In the following period this attitude changed little. Of course, at a certain moment the conclusion that the bursting of the financial bubble was the prelude to a worldwide crisis was inescapable but no practical conclusions were drawn from this. The SP committed itself to the struggle to keep the retirement age at 65 but this struggle was not placed in a wider framework. What was and is lacking is a plan of struggle against the crisis measures: for the preservation of jobs, against the destruction of social benefits and for taxing the rich, nationalizing the financial sector and drastically reforming the economy in a social and ecological direction.

The lack of a discussion on the causes of the crisis was remarkable. Of course, many view points

were exchanged but a general discussion in the whole party did not take place. The crisis meant a deep change of social reality – the party has to respond to that change. Such a response needs to be the result of collective analysis and discussion.

The SP has the reputation of being a party of doers, not just talkers. That is a good thing, especially when there's clarity on what the course of the organization should be. But it becomes a disadvantage when times change and old viewpoints need to be reevaluated. A party needs to have room for serious political discussions – this can stimulate the members to be involved in plotting the course of the party and take responsibility for it.

At a crossroads

The coming weeks until the elections of the ninth of June will be crucial. Roughly, there are two possibilities: either the party manages to position itself again as the party of discontent and of the refusal of working people to pay for the crisis. Or the party will get more caught up in trying to manage a crisis-ridden capitalism. If the last scenario becomes reality, the differences with the labor party will become less and less - and more people will vote for Wilders to give voice to their discontent. This course would make the SP lose on the electoral level as well.

The first approach offers no guarantees that the SP can regain its electoral position in the short term. As long as social resistance against the crisis measures is limited, the possibilities for a party that wants to be the expression of this resistance will be limited as well. But this approach at least creates a better long-term perspective. Whatever the result of the elections will be, one thing is certain: we will have a government that is going to implement cutbacks like we haven't seen before. The lower classes will be hit even harder than during the eighties. The SP has its roots in resisting the crisis measures of those years – confronted with an even worse crisis, the party needs to continue that tradition.

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P.S.

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