

Dutch elections: A hangover instead of an earthquake

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September 13, 2012 - *Links international Journal of Socialist Renewal* — The Dutch Socialist Party (SP) won 15 seats in the Netherlands’ national elections on September 12, the same number it had before. With the prognoses of two weeks ago fresh in memory - when the SP according to opinion polls stood to win around 35 seats, around 24 per cent of the vote, and international media like The Economist raising alarm over SP-leader Emile Roemer’s “far-left party” - that result was a disappointment for Dutch leftists. But it shouldn’t come as a surprise.

Those polls predicted a political earthquake. For a moment, it seemed as if the traditional social-democratic party, the Labour Party (or PvdA in the Dutch initials) would be overtaken by a party to its left. To understand why instead the ruling right-wing party won a large victory and the other big winner was the Labour Party, we need to look at what kind of earthquake these polls predicted.

The SP is not very similar to Greece’s SYRIZA or the France’s Front de Gauche, to name two parties it has been compared with. Its election program was a progressive social-democratic program that proposed measures like increased spending on social housing, the environment and public transport and an increase in the minimum wage. In terms of changing property relations, there were some proposals to (partially) reverse a number of the privatisations that took place in the last two decades (for example the railways and the postal service). There were no proposals to nationalise, for example, parts of the financial sector.

Regarding the austerity measures promoted by the European Union, the SP rejected a centrepiece of this, the “European Stability and Growth Pact”, which demands the budget deficit of EU countries should be below 3 per cent in 2013. But the party did commit itself to the same goal, only two years later in 2015. An increase of the pension age from 65 to 67 after 2025 was accepted as inevitable.

Labour Party supporters move left

The SP’s program is to the right of what the Dutch Labour Party was saying in the 1970s and is not that different from what one might hear in the circles of France’s Parti Socialiste of Hollande.

That this party is still labeled “far left”, and clearly is the most left-wing national political force in the Netherlands, indicates the general political mood and balance of forces. And it shows how far to the right the other parties, including the Labour Party and the Greens, have moved (with the

possible exception of the small Animal Party, a pro-animal rights group).

The SP is the only party in the Dutch parliament that rejects neoliberalism. Of course, despite the relative mildness of the SP's program, the right was still foaming at the mouth when polls showed the SP could possibly become the biggest party in the country.

A large proportion of the people who said then they would vote for the SP were Labour Party supporters. There exists a longer-term trend of Labour Party voters, sick of the betrayals of this "third way", social-liberal party, moving further to the left. An important development in the Dutch left and workers' movement is this shift of a considerable part of the old social base of social democracy to the SP.

Among trade unionists, for example, the SP is now more popular than the Labour Party. As the Labour Party has moved to the right, disappointed PvdA supporters found the SP willing to play the role that had earlier been played by social democracy. And this time, even more Labour Party voters said they would vote for the SP as it seemed like it had a chance of becoming the biggest party. If the SP had become the largest party, it would have prevented the current right-wing prime minister of the extremely neoliberal VVD, Mark Rutte, from returning for a second term.

'Roemer or Rutte'

"Roemer or Rutte", that was a central message of the SP's campaign. This wasn't the first time participation in government was a central theme in the SP's campaign. In 2006, the party won a record number of seats (25), in a mood of enthusiasm similar to what we saw a few weeks ago. That time, the other parties managed to exclude the SP from the formation of a government coalition and successfully put the blame for this on the SP's supposed 'radicalism' and 'unwillingness to compromise'. To avoid a repetition of this, the SP leadership decided the party had to make a number of concessions, lose its radical image and show it was prepared to govern. This approach seemed successful – for a while.

But since people were not asked to vote for the SP's program and its solutions for the crisis, but for a future prime minister, the "experienced" Labour Party became more and more a logical choice for many of them. The moment the Labour Party won only a nose-length over the SP in opinion polls, voters started massively to leave Roemer for the leader of the Labour Party, Diederik Samson, since he seemed to have more chance of preventing a return of Rutte.

Right-wing media campaign

The right-wing campaign in the media against the SP undoubtedly played a role in this — but such a campaign was entirely predictable. That right-wing ghost stories about how the "Maoist" Roemer was going to "turn the Netherlands into Greece" and how in general the SP's policies were irresponsible radicalism seemed credible to many people, including many who consider themselves to be on the left, only shows how deeply rooted the neoliberal ideology still is in this country. This campaign not only rallied the right behind the VVD, it also scared many potential SP voters, back into the arms of the supposedly "more responsible" Labour Party.

Equally predictable was that the Labour Party, under pressure from the SP, adopted a much more left-wing discourse than it had used for years, trying and succeeding, to win back many voters. At the same time, it viciously attacked the SP. The SP found it difficult to respond to those attacks since it had entered the campaign stressing it had a lot in common with the Labour Party, the party that

would be the most logical partner of the SP in any coalition. The choice for a moderate profile and election program cost the SP part of its appeal as the party of social protest without enabling it to beat the Labour Party at its own game posing as the “responsible” and “realistic” choice for a progressive government.

Deeper roots

The failure of the SP’s attempt to become the country’s biggest left party has deeper roots than mistakes in its election strategy. The 35 or 37 out of a total 150 parliamentary seats the most optimistic polls predicted showed a party whose temporary electoral popularity was not reflected by a corresponding leftward shift in society. For the last decade the total number of seats for the left in parliament (Labour Party, Greens and SP) fluctuated between the 35 and 43 per cent. The exception were the elections in 2002, when the country did see a real political earthquake with the breakthrough of the populist, islamophobic far-right, now represented by Geert Wilders, and the left was reduced to 42 seats.

Although the country has seen a few high-profile strikes the last few years, especially by teachers and cleaners, the number of strike days in 2011 was the lowest since 2003. The trend for this year seems to be little different. Other social movements have been weak as well. Despite the continuing appeal of the far right (Wilders lost heavily in the this election but still managed to win 15 seats), the country has seen very few anti-racist protests. And despite continuing Dutch involvement in the occupation of Afghanistan the anti-war movement is practically non-existent; it was small even when Dutch troops were still in both Afghanistan and Iraq. In short, few people have gone through a process of politicisation and struggle that matched the kind of leftward shift the polls seemed to predict, nor did the political debate in society show a sharp turn to the left.

Right-wing government

For now, the big winner is the VVD. This party took part in the most right-wing government the country has seen since the WWII and it is the most vocal supporter of deep cuts and strict austerity. And it won around 10 more seats, becoming the largest party in parliament. In fact, it has never been larger in parliament. Where the PvdA posed as “left”, the VVD adopted an aggressively right-wing tone, attracting a considerable number of the supporters of Geert Wilders with anti-immigrant and “law-and-order” themes. The second big winner is the Labour Party, winning new eight seats and now with just three seats less than the VVD. The most likely scenario is a coalition of Labour and the VVD, plus at least one more party.

For the left, the main question now is what conclusions will be drawn from this by the SP. Before the elections, the SP moved to the centre on such issues as the pension age to become “acceptable” for the Labour Party and parts of the right as a potential coalition partner. Because of the Dutch electoral system, any government needs to be a coalition of multiple parties, usually three or more, to have a majority.

Will the SP decide it needs to move further to the centre – or will it return to its roots as the party of anti-neoliberal protest? Both options are still open. Despite the disappointment of the elections, the SP is still a very strong party with a large representation in parliament and thousands of active members. If it consistently fights the neoliberal consensus in Dutch politics, it can play a major and much needed role in social struggles in the Netherlands.

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P.S.

* <http://links.org.au/node/3026>

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