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# The long march of the *SP*

*From maoist splinter  
to social-democratic  
mass party*

**ALEX DE JONG**

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# The long march of the Dutch Socialist Party

## Holland turns Red?

The rise of the Dutch Socialist Party (SP) is a remarkable development in the European political landscape. Coming from a Maoist past, the SP, frequently described as 'radical left', since the mid-2000s several times appeared ready to overtake the Dutch Labourparty as the main left-wing party. The prospect of an established social-democratic party being passed by on its left is rare already, but this seeming possibility is all the more puzzling in a country like the Netherlands that seemed to escape the worst repercussions of the post-2008 recession and without particularly strong left-wing traditions.

Especially since 2006, when it captured over 16 per cent of the vote, the SP has attracted international attention from scholars and activists looking at the possibilities for the development of new parties to the left of social-democracy. However, discussions about the SP are sometimes hampered by a lack of knowledge of its trajectory and national context. For such a large party, the SP is not very visible on the international stage. Its members of the European Parliament are part of the European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL) but the SP has not developed links with the European Left Party and in general doesn't invest much resources in building international links.

This essay presents a history of the SP and its changing political program as part of the Dutch political landscape, how a small Maoist group evolved into a social-democratic mass party thanks to hard work, programmatic adaptations, considerable luck and the failures of its competitors.

## Maoist prehistory

The prehistory of the SP dates back to 1965, when a number of pro-China members of the Dutch Communist Party (CPN) were expelled and formed the Marxist-Leninist Center Netherlands. Its leaders were salesman Nico Schrevel (1934) and pipe fitter Daan Monjé (1925 - 1986). On the waves of the radicalization of the sixties, the Maoist splinter managed to recruit a number of people, mostly students, and in 1970 the name was changed into the Kommunistische Eenheidsbeweging Nederland marxistisch-leninistisch (KEN-ml, Communist Unity Movement Netherlands, Marxist-Leninist).

The new party soon had its first success: in autumn that year, over 10.000 workers in the the port of Rotterdam went on a wildcat strike that at its height involved 30.000.<sup>1</sup> They sustained their strike for weeks with the aid of money raised by the KEN-ml. Its role during the strike gave the organization credibility as a party of the Dutch working class and brought it dozens of new members.<sup>2</sup> Schrevel and Monjé were invited to visit Mao's China. The recognition of the KEN-ml by the Chinese government added to its confidence and brought it money. Former KEN-ml members claim the Chinese government gave the organization between 'a few tens of thousands' and 'four hundred thousand' guilders.<sup>3</sup>

Relatively well funded, the organization build its infrastructure and attracted new people, especially youth from the Catholic majority in the south of the country. Left-wing parties had always been weak in the Catholic areas of the country. There, many workers were organized in Catholic trade-unions and supported Catholic political parties. As religious identity became less important during the sixties, radicalizing youth, often students, in these regions looked for alternatives. The weakness of the established workers' parties in these regions made it easier for the Maoists to win support.

Disagreements about the role of ideology and about students in socialist movements led to a split. According to Monjé's workerist interpretation of Maoism, daily experience was enough to drive workers to socialist convictions while Schrevel's approach gave more importance to ideological debates. In 1971 Monjé led the majority of the old KEN-ml to form the Kommunistiese Partij Nederland marxisties-leninisties. The name wasn't appealing in a country that never had a strong communist movement so it was soon replaced by Socialistiese Partij (Socialist Party, in the phonetic spelling popular among leftists at the time). It only had around 120 - 200 members ('enough to win the revolution', Monjé claimed) but inherited a lot of the infrastructure of the KEN-ml.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Tom-Jan Meeus, *Kameraden onder elkaar. Hoe de BVD de weg bereidde voor de Socialistiese Partij*. online at [<http://retro.nrc.nl/W2/Nieuws/1999/02/20/Vp/z.html>].

<sup>2</sup> Wouter P. Beekers, *Mao in de polder. Een historisch-sociologische benadering van het Nederlandse maoïsme 1964 - 1973*. Doctoraalscriptie 2005, 72.

<sup>3</sup> Rudie Kagie, *De Socialisten. Achter de schermen bij de SP* (Amsterdam, 2004), 32, 33.

<sup>4</sup> Beekers, *Mao in de polder*, 72.

<sup>5</sup> Slager, *De Socialisten*, 32, 33.

The SP developed some of its first bases in the Catholic student-city Nijmegen and Oss, a small industrial city where bishops had banned believers from joining progressive parties or trade-unions for decades. In 1974, the SP won over ten percent of the votes in local elections in Oss where it won three seats. In Nijmegen it won two. In big cities like Amsterdam and Rotterdam, where other left-wing organizations had longer and stronger traditions, the SP had more difficulty finding support.

The SP avoided competition with other left forces not only because it was active in other regions but also because of a different focus on organizing. Maoism was very suspicious of the existing trade unions which they regarded as instruments of capital to keep the workers quiet. The SP organized its own small union, *Arbeidersmacht* ('Workers Power'). Other left groups, the communists, the social-democrats and the small radical left, tried to win influence among the organized working class.

The Maoism of the SP stressed the idea of the 'mass line': the party should listen to working people, find out what the most common grievances and problems were and focus its campaigns on those issues. As future party-leader Jan Marijnissen put it in the year he became councilor for the SP in Oss: 'It's not about what we want, but what the people want from us'.<sup>6</sup> The SP was accused by other Maoists of neglecting ideological struggle.<sup>7</sup> The modern SP plays down its Maoist roots but this approach has remained influential in the party and internally the term 'mass line' is still used.

This approach led the early SP to spend a lot of effort on campaigns on a neighborhood level. While other forces within the far left were trying to organize workers at the point of production, the SP campaigned for example for better housing conditions and safer living environments. Many of its members were active in front-organizations set up by the party, like *Bond van Huurders en Woningzoekenden* (Union of tenants and People looking for housing) and *Milieu Aktie Nederland* (Environmental Action Netherlands).<sup>8</sup> The party also organized legal support for people who had a conflict with

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<sup>6</sup> Gerrit Voerman, Paul Lucardie, 'De sociaal-democratisering van de SP'. In: Frans Becker, René Cuperus (ed.) *Verloren slag. De PvdA en de verkiezingen van november 2006* (Amsterdam 2007) 139 - 164, there 150.

<sup>7</sup> Politiek Buro van de Socialistiese Partij en Centraal Komitee van de Kommunistiese Eenheidsbeweging Nederland (ml) *Diskussie* (1975), 7.

<sup>8</sup> SP, KEN (ml) *Diskussie*, 7.

their boss, landlord or the government. It also organized three medical centers with their own doctors. Those activities brought the small party considerable sympathy. Its handful of councilors continuously denounced all kinds of abuses and the party remained very visible in extra-parliamentary, often local actions.

Members of the early SP had a very high level of activity. Selling the party-newspaper *De Tribune* on the streets or in door-to-door sales was a major part of their activities. The hard work paid off and the party grew to a number of around 750 members in the mid-seventies.<sup>9</sup>

The SP however lacked national appeal. Its first participation in national elections, in 1977, was a disappointment with only 0,29 per cent of the votes. Until 1994, the SP participated in all five national elections but never won a parliamentary seat, scoring not higher than 0,55 per cent. In 1982 the party had 22 council seats but its local support wasn't enough in parliamentary elections where the SP often won fewer votes than its local votes combined.

The party's lively, short-term oriented local work contrasted with a weak national structure and election manifesto's that promised, with broad strokes, the nationalization of mineral resources, banks, pension-funds, work for everybody and eventually, 'making capital serve the people': 'socialism'.<sup>10</sup> The official party-ideology had less and less to do with the party's daily practice and its Maoism disappeared more and more into the background, especially after the beginning of the US-China detente. Marijnissen later remarked that during the eighties the approach of the party was more or less improvised, without 'a real ideology'.<sup>11</sup>

The SP stagnated. Its members became more active in the SP, instead of in front-organizations, but the party didn't succeed in breaking through. A 1982 report of the Dutch intelligence service claimed that outside its own front-organizations, the party had little influence and that the SP 'resembled a well-organized sect more than a party'. That's a harsh characterization but not without basis. Members were completely absorbed by the party which was dominated by the autocratic Monjé.

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<sup>9</sup> Based on an estimation of the intelligence service, cited in *Mao in de polder*, 72.

<sup>10</sup> *De SP maakt er wat van. Verkiezingsprogramma SP Tweede-Kamerverkiezingen 1986*, 4.

<sup>11</sup> Jan Marijnissen, *Nieuw Optimisme* (Soesterberg, 2005), 20.

## A First Metamorphosis

Members of the leadership like Marijnissen and Tiny Kox, at the time councilor and editor of the party newspaper *De Tribune* pushed for a re-orientation. Daan Monjé and the last remnants of the party's Maoist references were pushed aside as Jan Marijnissen was appointed chairperson by the party-leadership in 1988. The party, which had functioned more or less as a federation of local branches, was centralized and the organizational infrastructure improved. According to Marijnissen, the party became more modest; instead of claiming to know the answers, it 'learned to listen and adapt': the approach that guided the party's local work was extended to its national structure and program. Jan Marijnissen, still chair of the party in 2013 and its public political leader until 2008, said that by the mid-eighties, the 'old' SP was replaced by the 'new' SP.<sup>12</sup>

The party's first charter, adopted in 1974, was a rather crude document that denounced capitalism as a 'threat to the existence of the Dutch population'.<sup>13</sup> A new charter, adopted in 1987, adopted a more sober tone but retained its militant anti-capitalism. The goal remained socialism: 'ownership of the means of production in the hands of the people'. This could not be achieved through elections and parliament: 'parliamentary democracy is the most democratic system possible under capitalism' but 'society will never be changed fundamentally through it', 'real political changes happen as a result of changes in the relationship of forces as they exist in society'. The task of the SP was 'to tie all the strings of resistance into a rope strong enough to hang capitalism with'.<sup>14</sup>

More influential than these documents was a new charter presented in 1988, *Een Maatschappij voor Mensen. Handvest 2000* (A society for people. Charter 2000). The new charter called for many of the same things, but in somewhat more general terms. 'Large companies and banks' were to become property of society, 'minerals, land and water' should be 'property of the people'. The criticism of parliamentary democracy was less pronounced and there was no longer mention of 'seizing power' or the class character of the state but *Handvest 2000* foresaw a 'long and intensive struggle' for socialism. The criteria for membership were also changed; before 'members' were activists and the SP put high demands on them. People who couldn't or wouldn't make such a commitment could become 'supporters' but had no voting rights in the party. This

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<sup>12</sup> Marijnissen, *Nieuw Optimisme*, 23.

<sup>13</sup> *Beginnelen van de Socialistiese Partij 1974*.

<sup>14</sup> *Beginnelen van de Socialistiese Partij 1987*, 4.

distinction was abolished and everybody who paid modest dues could become a full member. The party also dropped its claim to be 'Marxist-Leninist', a label that was felt to be a burden and scared away many people who felt sympathy for the party's work. Membership grew to over 15,000 in 1992.<sup>15</sup>

The outward turn of the party found expression in a different approach to campaigns. Instead of organizing its own front-groups or separate campaigns, the party became more willing to work together with other forces in joined campaigns, starting with campaigns against the Gulf War in 1991.

In 1994 the 'SP mark 2' managed to win 118,768 votes, enough for two seats out of 150, thanks to a system of proportional representation with no election threshold. With a less dogmatic image, an improved organizational structure and Marijnissen as a charismatic figurehead, the party campaigned under the slogan 'Vote Against, Vote SP'. The slogan and the characteristic party-symbol, a thrown tomato, were developed with help from marketing professionals. The idea was to promise not more than a small party could deliver: a voice of protest. The campaign clearly distinguished the SP from the colorless, technocratic politics of the ruling parties. The new approach paid off. In 1989, the party had won only 0,44 per cent of the votes but in 1994 it tripled its votes to 1,32 per cent.

### **Failure of the left**

Its electoral score was a remarkable achievement, made possible not only by the SP's strengths but also by the changes in the political landscape around it. The traditional party of Dutch workers was the Labourparty, Partij van de Arbeid (PvdA). During the seventies and eighties, it scored between around a quarter and almost a third of the votes. Between 1973 and 1977 PvdA prime-minister Joop den Uyl headed a coalition with Christian-democrats and progressive liberals, forming the most left-wing government ever in the country.

The balance of forces started to shift after the mid-seventies. The Dutch guilder, pegged to the German Mark, was overvalued and in combination with the oil-crisis the Dutch economy went into recession in the mid-seventies and early eighties. In 1982, the Dutch economy shrunk by 2 per cent. Unemployment quadrupled, approaching one million on a total population of 14 million. Social security costs increased and inflation rates were around seven per cent.

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<sup>15</sup> Sjaak van der Velden, *Links. PvdA, SP en GroenLinks* (Amsterdam, 2010), 224.



CDA-led governments went on the offensive against the welfare-state and workers' rights. In 1982 the new right-wing government declared as priorities cuts in government spending and lowering labor costs. As it failed to meet its target of lowering the budget deficit with one per cent, the government announced more cuts. Another pillar of its policy was deregulation of the labor market. Until around 1983, the union movement tried to turn the tide. But unions were especially strong in sectors that were dismantled like shipping and a large public section strike in 1982 ended in defeat. After these defeats, the trade-union movement committed itself to moderation of wages and a 'shared responsibility' for economic growth and profitability.

Joop den Uyl in 1982 already remarked that crisis and unemployment were used as political weapons to attack trade-unions and 'restore old privileges, increase inequality, and demolish the welfare state'.<sup>16</sup>

The Dutch far left collapsed as the only party that seemed strong enough to many people to resist the attacks was the PvdA: in 1986 it scored almost a third of the votes, eating up most of the support of the far left. The radical Pacifist Socialist Party (PSP) got only one seat. The PSP, founded in 1957 by left-wing socialists, fluctuated since 1959 between 2 and 4 seats and had around 6000 members at the time. The Communist Party of the Netherlands (CPN) disappeared from parliament. The CPN had never been a very strong party but it had a constant presence in parliament and some strong local footholds. It reached its peak of influence in the immediate postwar years but during the Cold War, the party was isolated. Membership dropped to around 10.000 and in elections it won between 3 and 7 seats. It recovered somewhat in the seventies, but it would never surpass the seven parliament seats it won in 1972. Electoral support dropped, membership stagnated around 15.000 and then rapidly dropped. When it was dissolved in 1991 it had less than 3500 members.

A year before, the CPN had joined the PSP and two other small progressive parties (PPR and EVP) to form a coalition GroenLinks ('GreenLeft') which became a party in 1991. Whereas the SP focused on social-economic questions and was clearly oriented towards working people, GroenLinks developed into a progressive party oriented towards the intelligentsia and professionals and made no reference to socialism. Its 1992 charter described its goal as an 'international, democratic, and ecological guided economy with

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<sup>16</sup> Koen Haegens, *Neem de Tijd. Overleven in de to-go Maatschappij* (Amsterdam, 2012), 59.

market elements'.<sup>17</sup> Especially the left-liberalism of PPR (Political Party Radicals), a progressive Christian party, has been influential in GroenLinks, at the expense of the influence of CPN and PSP.

The collapse of the far left helped pave the way for the breakthrough of the SP. CPN and PSP members who were unhappy with the evolution of GroenLinks joined the SP during a crucial period, just before its breakthrough in 1994. Their experience in what had been established national parties was surely a valuable addition. The SP also adopted parts of the orphaned base of the CPN. Amsterdam for example had always been a stronghold of the CPN: the SP gained its first council seat there only in 1994. Since then the SP branch in Amsterdam has become one of the largest in the country.

As its competition on the far left declined, on its right the PvdA under the leadership of former trade-union leader Wim Kok abandoned its social-democratic tradition. In 1989, the PvdA returned to government, at first in a coalition with the CDA. It continued the attacks on the welfare-state and, despite strong protests of the trade-unions, lowered sick-pay and restricted access to disability insurance. With this, the PvdA alienated a substantial part of its supporters. The party went through a crisis and its membership dropped from almost 70.000 to a little over 60.000 three years later.

### **Window of opportunity**

The trajectory of GroenLinks and the crisis of a PvdA in government provided the re-organized SP with a precious window of opportunity to capture a substantial part of the left-wing vote. Its two parliamentarians, Jan Marijnissen en Remi Poppe, became very active and visible leaders of the opposition.

The PvdA converted to Blairite 'third way' politics and in 1995 Kok called for breaking with the socialist tradition. After 1994 the PvdA formed a coalition with the traditional party of capital, the right-wing, pro-business, secular VVD (*Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie*, Peoples Party for Freedom and Democracy) and another free-market liberal party. It continued in the same coalition after the 1998 elections until 2002. Labour- and housing markets were liberalized, the railways split up, important parts of social security, health care, and pension privatized, and benefits cut. During these years, especially Marijnissen became identified with opposition to these 'Purple' (social-democratic red and liberal blue) governments.

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<sup>17</sup> *GroenLinks beginsel programma 1992.*

The SP grew quickly and consolidated its position: in 1998 it won five seats, in 2002 nine and nine again in 2003. Meanwhile, especially after the turn of the century, GroenLinks more and more embraced economic liberalism and started to support for instance attacks on protection against dismissal and on pension rights. Its new self-conception was as a 'progressive liberal' party and it unsuccessfully tried to position itself as a future government party. Since 2003 the SP has been the largest party to the left of the PvdA while GroenLinks fell to 4 seats in the elections of 2012 and the SP retained its 15 seats.

The SP's membership strongly increased. PvdA membership declined to around 58.000 in 2000, 34.000 less than ten years before. While GroenLinks had 14.314 members, SP membership increased to 26.000 that year. Four years later, GroenLinks and SP together for the first time had more members than the PvdA, largely because of the growth of the SP. In 2013, PvdA membership was 55.564, of GroenLinks 23.896 and of the SP 45.815.

Part of the explanation for the rise of the SP is the weakness and defeats of the Dutch left and workers movement. Not even the anti-nuke demonstrations of the eighties, the largest demonstrations in Dutch history, had won clear victories. The unions had been unable to stop wage-moderation policies and then embraced those same policies. Trade-union membership started to decline in the eighties from slightly above 35 per cent of employees to less than 25 per cent ten years later.<sup>18</sup>

As its competition on the left crumbled, the SP picked up the pieces. The neoliberal turn of the PvdA enabled the SP to position itself as the protector of the welfare state. All this made the SP's defensive position during the nineties attractive, especially to working people among which it won support.

### **Vote against? The alternative of the SP**

The SP's 'Marxism-Leninism' during the seventies and eighties was characterized by 'a rather vulgar interpretation of class struggle'. It declared 'almost anything' that fell outside the clear contradiction labor-capital 'taboo', in the words of Erik Meijer, a former leading member of the PSP who left GroenLinks to join the SP and become its

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<sup>18</sup> Dick ter Steege, Esther van Groenigen, Rob Kuijpers, Jo van Cruchten, 'Vakbeweging en organisatiegraad van werknemers'. In: *Sociaal-economische trends* 4 (2012) 9 - 25, there 16.

first member of the European Parliament.<sup>19</sup> The party was very hostile to feminism which it considered useless.<sup>20</sup> The old SP's world view was mechanistic: socialism was seen as the inevitable result of 'iron' historical laws. As late as 1987, it was claiming that socialism was advancing worldwide and that this was a 'historical development.'<sup>21</sup> Its election manifesto of 1989, the first one after adopting Handvest 2000, still claimed that 'human progress is unstoppable'.

In the nineties, as defeats of the left accumulated, this world view became unsustainable. In the seventies and eighties, the SP isolated itself from other left currents and didn't show much interest in debates on left-wing thought. Its Marxism was a reified dogma with little relevance for its mostly local practice. When the party cut its ties with Maoism, it also SP jettisoned all references to Marxism.

After waving goodbye to Marxism, the party started to develop a new framework in the mid-to-late nineties. In 1996, Jan Marijnissen published his first book: *Tegenstemmen. Een Rood antwoord op Paars*. ('Vote Against. A Red Answer to Purple', translated into English as 'Enough!, a socialist bites back'.) Marijnissen developed his ideas further in several other books, most notably *Nieuw Optimisme* (New Optimism, 2003) and a book of interviews, *Hoe dan Jan?* (But How, Jan? 2005).<sup>22</sup> In 2009 a new, extended edition of *Tegenstemmen* was published as 'Vote Against. An answer to Neoliberalism'.<sup>23</sup>

To understand the thinking of the SP, it's useful to have a closer look at *Tegenstemmen*, *Nieuw Optimisme* and *Hoe Dan Jan?* in many ways follow the same lines as *Tegenstemmen* and later programs of the party are obviously heavily influenced by it. Marijnissen wrote in 1996 that the goal of *Tegenstemmen* is to 'fundamentally question the ruling political-economic system', and at the center of the book is 'the analysis and criticism of neoliberalism'.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Erik Meijer, 'De SP: van maoïstische sekte tot opvolger van PSP en CPN?'. In: *Kritiek. Jaarboek voor socialistische discussie en analyse 1996*, 57 - 73, there 64.

<sup>20</sup> SP, *Arbeidersvrouw en feminisme*, 1980.

<sup>21</sup> *Beginselprogramma 1987*.

<sup>22</sup> Marijnissen, *Nieuw Optimisme*, Karel Glastra van Loon, Kees Slager, *Hoe Dan Jan? Een gesprek over nieuw optimisme in tijden van crisis* (Amsterdam 2005).

<sup>23</sup> Jan Marijnissen, *Tegenstemmen. Een antwoord op het neoliberalisme* (Amsterdam 2009).

<sup>24</sup> Marijnissen, *Tegenstemmen* 10, 11. Unless noted otherwise, the following quotes are from the first three chapters of *Tegenstemmen*, p. 17 - 73.

Marijnissen describes neoliberalism as an ideology that denies any political criteria except the purely economic ('the interests of the economically and financially powerful'). Until the early eighties, a 'social-democratic consensus' dominated Dutch politics but this started to dissolve in the eighties. It was replaced by a new, neoliberal consensus in the nineties, the essence of which consensus was to remove from capitalism 'social-democratic influences as much as possible'. Marijnissen points to the privatization of health care and the introduction of market mechanisms as examples.

Following the French economist Michel Albert, former CEO of Assurances Générales de France and former chair of the national planning institute of the French government among other things, Marijnissen makes a distinction between 'Rhineland capitalism' and 'Anglo-Saxon' capitalism'. Rhineland capitalism is supposedly characterized by a large degree of government control over the 'free capitalist market' and negotiations between employers and workers. It covers countries like France, Germany, Netherlands, Sweden and Denmark. In the Anglo-Saxon model, 'the British and American version of capitalism', the market is more powerful.

Marijnissen quotes Albert's explanation for the spread of the Anglo-Saxon or 'American' model: propaganda for the consumerist 'American way of life', the temptation of large, short-term profits on the stock-market, and a kind 'hedonism' that has proven irresistible, 'even in the frugal and Calvinist Netherlands'. Marijnissen also discusses the economic background of the rise of neoliberalism. Because of the crisis of the seventies, states went into debt while at the same time the US-led liberalization of world trade intensified international competition, putting pressure on wages. Marijnissen voices surprise that the many, for 'everybody visible' setbacks of the policies of Thatcher and Reagan didn't hinder the implementation of neoliberalism in the Netherlands.

Marijnissen criticizes neoliberalism for spreading the belief that humans are selfish beings, only looking out for their own (economic) interests. The neoliberal world view implicitly claims that poverty is the own fault of the poor and leads to government policies that encourage individualism and egotism. 'The state' is 'no longer seen as a protector or regulator but as a parasite', 'the state is distrusted' and 'no longer' plays a role in propagating 'norms and values.' Neoliberalism destroys the inter-personal connections 'that characterize all societies' and is undemocratic because it gives more power to the market. The 'democratic 'one man, one vote' is replaced by 'one dollar, one vote.' The market is incapable of 'seeing the

bigger picture' and taking the long term into account, damaging human living conditions and the environment.

The second chapter of the book is a discussion of socialism, characterized as 'the search for an alternative to capitalist society'. Marijnissen briefly discusses Marx, writing that although he was often wrong in his predictions, a lot of his analysis of capitalism remains valid. The book doesn't specify in what ways. Discussing social-democracy, Marijnissen points out that for the SP, the welfare-state had always been a 'second best option'; as long as capitalism exists, the welfare-state offers the best possible protection against its damaging effects. But, the welfare-state 'doesn't do justice to human dignity' because it takes away people's responsibility for their own happiness. In time, the welfare-state also becomes financially unsustainable under capitalism because 'during times of economic hardship' it has to take care of problems created by capitalism but has to be paid for by this same system.

According to *Tegenstemmen*, the PvdA lost its roots among the people as during the seventies and eighties a new layer of left-wing intellectuals took control of the party. The party became more and more a vehicle for the advancement of their careers and started to orient to the political center to attract votes. The PvdA became alienated from its earlier base among workers and from their concerns. A few years later, Marijnissen wrote that in 1994 the 'PvdA completed its transformation from a left party into a right-wing ally of neoliberalism'.<sup>25</sup> After discussing social-democracy, Marijnissen turns to discussing 'really existing socialism' which he describes as a system in which the 'rigid' rule of the party led to 'abhorrent excesses'. The authoritarianism of the party produced a huge bureaucracy and a paralysis of society which eventually led to its collapse, something which was no 'loss for those striving towards a freedom-loving socialism'.

Before moving on to a discussion of the effects of neoliberal policy, Marijnissen discusses the seeming decline of democracy in the Netherlands. 'Once political parties represented certain ideological concepts and were also the most important intermediary between government and citizen' but 'they seem to increasingly lose those characteristics'. Marijnissen writes that parties should 'make an analysis of society and based on that analysis they should develop a vision of the future. The ideology a party expounds, gives voters an idea of what to expect when this party gains power. Furthermore,

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<sup>25</sup> Jan Marijnissen, *Effe Dimmen. Een rebel in Den Haag* (Amsterdam 1998), 18.

political parties give citizens the chance to participate in the exercise of power: through elections inside the parties, citizens can become candidates for office'.

Unfortunately, parties have become vehicles for the careers of professional politicians. 'The fewer social roots political parties have, the less direct contact they have with the people, the less they see what goes wrong in society and the less they think about the problems of the majority of the people'.<sup>26</sup> Because of this, less and less people are interested in politics or voting.

Except the decline of the parties, Marijnissen gives another reason for the loss of interest in politics: 'the growing powerlessness of politics' as an effect of the neoliberal consensus. To involve people with politics, Marijnissen urges that 'politics and government rid themselves of the careerists and yuppies and once again become a reflection of the whole of society, instead of only of an elite that is blinded by market-ideology. If they do this, they can also again fulfill the tasks a government should fulfill: take care of facilities for public use, control and promote non-material riches like intellectual prowess and cultural wealth, guarantee a division of wealth that is experienced as honest and offer protection to those who need it'.<sup>27</sup>

Finally, Marijnissen discusses his alternative; 'modern socialism'. His socialism is not a 'promise of salvation' but is 'most of all' 'a certain vision of humanity and society, and because of this is meaningful for the here and now'. The socialist view is based on 'the view that humans are the measure of everything' and that 'this should be the highest principle for organizing society'.<sup>28</sup>

For Marijnissen, neoliberalism is an ideology that is influential because a part of the elite has been 'blinded' by it. *Tegenstemmen* isn't entirely consistent on this point, sometimes Marijnissen writes about the 'hidden agenda' of the neoliberals, implying they are working on a political project. But the dominant tone of Marijnissen's view of neoliberalism is that it is a self-destructive idea that has clouded the judgment of politicians who are making themselves superfluous by delegating more and more power to 'the market'.

*Tegenstemmen* sees neoliberalism as driven by morally reprehensible factors like egoism and individualism. Against this, Marijnissen sets an alternative set of morals; human dignity, equality of people and

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<sup>26</sup> Marijnissen, *Tegenstemmen*, 51.

<sup>27</sup> Marijnissen, *Tegenstemmen*, 111.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, 197.

solidarity; values that 'have taken shape in two-thousands years of European history'.<sup>29</sup> These ideas have been very influential in the SP.

In *Tegenstemmen*, socialism became an ethical ideal. The book sees neoliberalism as driven by set an egotistic moral and it is rejected in the name of ethical, fairly conventional ethical standards. The triptych of human dignity, equality and solidarity is a measuring stick. The SP's earlier conception of socialism, informed by Marxism, that socialism means a society with democratic control over the means of production, was abandoned. A few years later, the new meaning of the word became part of the SP's new charter and since then it is a prominent part of their self-conception.

The instrument that should give meaning to these values is the government that has the 'task of taking care of the common interest for now and for the long term'.<sup>30</sup> In the seventies and eighties, the SP saw the state as an instrument of the ruling classes. Handvest 2000 declared that socialism is a precondition for political rule 'according to the wishes of the people'; 'without control over the economy, any democratic system will fail'.<sup>31</sup> However, the view of the state in *Tegenstemmen* is that the state is neutral and that it can be instrumentalised for different ends, depending on the ideology of the ruling party.

Looking at the development of the SP, its capacity to change has been remarkable. First, it took its distance from Maoism, avoiding the confusion many Maoist parties went through as China turned towards the US and Western powers. Then, in the late eighties, early nineties, after the implosion of the Eastern Bloc, it dropped its references to Marxism and Leninism. During the decade in between, the SP lacked a clear ideology. Handvest 2000 was an attempt to rectify this situation and provide the party with a new long term vision. But the party's ideological foundations underwent again deep changes at the end of the nineties.

Many of the ideas developed in *Tegenstemmen* recur in *Heel de Mens* (the English name the SP uses is 'The Whole of Humanity', a more literal translation would be 'The Whole Human Being'), the SP's charter adopted in 1999. *Heel de Mens* defines the 'core' of socialism in words that echo Marijnissen as 'human dignity, the equality of people and solidarity between people'. The driving force of the SP's

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<sup>29</sup> Ibidem, 149.

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem, 208.

<sup>31</sup> *Heel de Mens. Kernvisie van de SP, zoals vastgesteld door het 9de congres op 18 december 1999*, 9.



commitment to those values is 'moral indignation'.<sup>32</sup> The SP struggles against 'a mentality of everybody for themselves' and doesn't want to accept that 'the economic laws of capitalism determine the limits of politics'.<sup>33</sup> Society needs to be 'thoroughly democratized', this 'implies systematic enlargement of the direction by democratically elected bodies over the economy'. This can take shape through 'laws, taxes but also through changes in the current economic property relations'. Instead of socializing the means of property as the core of socialism, changing property relations are now only a possible means to an ethical end. The view of the state as neutral as developed in *Tegenstemmen* is confirmed in *Heel de Mens*: the 'best instrument' for 'voicing and implementing' the 'will of the people' is parliamentary democracy'.<sup>34</sup>

When Marijnissen claims that since the nineties the SP has had 'an ideology of its own, without the classical basis of Marx and Engels', he is presumably referring to the ideas developed in his books and laid down in the party's charter and election programs.<sup>35</sup> We could call this maybe a form of 'ethical socialism'.

### SP Mark 3

If the post-Marxist-Leninist SP of the nineties was 'SP Mark 2', from the turn of the century, and especially after their electoral peak of 2006, we can speak of a 'SP Mark 3'. Unlike SP mark 1 and 2, SP mark 3 no longer desires socialization of the means of production but a rescue and reinforcement of the welfare-state. According to *Modern Socialisme*, an introductory booklet given to new SP-members, 'socialists stand for robust democratic control over the capitalist free market economy'.<sup>36</sup> Marijnissen's insight from 1995, that inside a capitalist framework a welfare-state won't be able to function in the long run, seems forgotten. The party's 'socialism' is a measuring stick, consisting of values few people would disagree with. With *Heel de Mens* the party affirmed that parliamentary politics are the best way of implementing its ideas. *Heel de Mens* doesn't mention class

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<sup>32</sup> *Heel de Mens*, 7.

<sup>33</sup> *Heel de Mens*, 8.

<sup>34</sup> *Heel de Mens*, 11.

<sup>35</sup> Kustaw Bessems interview with Jan Marijnissen: 'Socialisme is bezoedeld'. In: *De Ondernemer* November 10, 2011 online at [<http://www.deondernemer.nl/binnenland/609410/socialisme-is-bezoedeld.html>]

<sup>36</sup> Ronald van Raak, Jan Marijnissen, *Modern Socialisme* (Amsterdam 2008), 31.

struggle or a specific role of the working class. The party wants to appeal to everybody, its ethical socialism is classless.

These elements, abandoning a post-capitalist horizon for a welfare-state, a political project that is not based on the working class but tries to appeal to the whole population, prioritization of parliament and a view of the state as neutral are characteristic of West-European social-democracy until its neoliberal turn.

The SP-leadership doesn't object to a description as social-democratic. Tiny Kox, currently chair of its senatorial group, said in 2007 that 'there is nothing wrong' with designating the SP as social-democratic, 'as long as it says social-democratic +'.<sup>37</sup> More recently, Marijnissen said if the party would be organized today, he would no longer be in favor of calling it socialist because the term is soiled by the 'total failure in the Soviet-Union, Eastern Europa and Cuba'. Marijnissen: 'Social-democrats with a little extra, that's what I always say'.<sup>38</sup> In Fact, *Heel de Mens* is considerably more moderate than the PvdA's charter from 1977 which called for socialization of basic industries, banks, pension funds and other branches of industry as part of a 'new class struggle'.<sup>39</sup>

From *Heel de Mens* on, the SP has increasingly contested the PvdA on its own terrain. In a book published by the scientific bureau of the PvdA, Gerrit Voerman noted that since the party-congress of 1999 that adopted *Heel de Mens*, the SP has placed itself in the tradition of Dutch social-democracy.<sup>40</sup> The most progressive coalition in Dutch history, the government of Den Uyl, has become somewhat of a benchmark for large parts of the Dutch parliamentary left. The SP has started to refer in more positive terms to the Den Uyl government and also used it as an example for a possible government. For example, in 2005, Jan Marijnissen referred to 'Den Uyl' as an example of how a progressive government could supposedly rule without causing capital-flight.<sup>41</sup> Strategy old and new

The SP's attempt to place itself in the social-democratic tradition is illustrative of its strategy. The statement of the young Jan Marijnissen ('it's not about what we want, but what the people want from us') could be the motto of the SP's development. Tiny Kox puts a similar idea somewhat differently when he said that the SP was 'never intended to remain small and we have deliberately worked on a

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<sup>37</sup> Voerman, Lucardie, *De sociaal-democratisering*, 140.

<sup>38</sup> Bessems, 'Socialisme is bezoedeld'.

<sup>39</sup> *Beginselprogramma Partij van de Arbeid 1977*.

<sup>40</sup> Voerman, Lucardie, *De sociaal-democratisering*, 156.

<sup>41</sup> Van Loon, Slager, *Hoe dan Jan?*, 140.

vision that very many people could embrace'.<sup>42</sup> The SP searches for issues that have been abandoned or neglected by other parties but can attract a lot of support and adopts those – an approach that still shows the influence of Mao's 'mass line'. The SP is capable to pick up issues that have been neglected by other parties because of its social roots. One early example is how in the seventies and eighties, the SP was one of the first parties that drew attention to pollution and poisoning of the soil. The attempt of the SP to position itself as the inheritor of the Dutch social-democratic tradition can be seen as another example of how it tries to connect with existing constituencies.

The other side of this strategy of looking for existing constituencies and absorbing their issues in the party's ideology is that parts of the ideology that can alienate people can easily be dropped. An example is the party's position on the monarchy. For decades the SP was a supporter of a republic, even though the monarchy was a widely supported institution in the Netherlands. But the 2006 election program was silent on the question of the monarchy and since 2010 the SP's election programs call for limiting the role of the monarchy to strictly ceremonial tasks.

The SP prioritizes campaigns it is certain of that will find mass support. The party attempts to organize around issues on which people's lived experience clash with the hegemonic ideas that the Netherlands is a society that values honesty, equality, democracy and justice. Examples are its campaigns to protect health care, care for the elderly or, until 2012, maintaining the pension age at 65 which was (and is) seen as a right people earned with their own labor. The SP often uses terms like 'morality' and 'civilization' as the foundations of its demands. What makes this strategy so successful is that instead of having to win over people to new ideas, it uses accepted values to gather support. Who isn't in favor of civilization?

This discourse frames the policies the SP opposes as aberrations of the social norm, the work of 'greedy' bankers and 'frightened' politicians. More or less implicitly the norm which it wants to restore the social-democratic consensus.

The SP emphasizes how neoliberal reforms like economic privatization have hollowed out the power of parliaments but it's also through the parliament that the party wants to stop neoliberalism. The SP points to the crucial role of political decisions in introducing neoliberal reforms but this doesn't mean those can be reversed the same way. It's easier to give up power than gain it and the 'social-

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<sup>42</sup> Voerman, Lucardie, *De sociaal-democratisering*, 148.

democratic consensus' was a result of an (international) balance that doesn't exist anymore.

Issues that are less popular, like anti-racism, receive much less attention. The party's strategy means the SP has little experience in recruiting people on the basis of ideas or in ideological struggles in which different long term views and conceptions of the world clash. In a country where neoliberal thought is deeply ingrained, the same 'common sense' assumptions that the SP appeals to attract people, can prevent voters from accepting the SP's anti-neoliberalism as a credible alternative. Large numbers of people might agree morally with the SP but are still not convinced that its proposals are feasible. Many more people sympathize with the SP than think that an alternative to neoliberal austerity is possible.

This has caused the SP difficulties in its competition with the PvdA. It's a pattern that in polls before the elections many people will say they are planning to vote for the SP but in the end vote for the PvdA. This was especially clear in the run-up to the 2012 elections: in a few weeks, support for the SP dwindled from a predicted 35 seats to 15 while the PvdA grew from 30 to 38. Part of the explanation for this is that many people will say they are planning to vote SP in order to push the PvdA to the left.<sup>43</sup>

The SP has responded to the (relative) disappointments in elections and the persistence of the PvdA in several ways. After 2006, when it won 25 seats, many SP-voters and members hoped the party would enter government in a coalition with the PvdA, which instead chose to form a coalition with the Christian-democrats. The PvdA and the right excluded the SP, blaming its 'radicalism' and 'unwillingness to compromise'. Especially the PvdA retains a strong influence in the Dutch public debate. That they managed so effectively to put on the blame on the shoulders is an illustration of the relatively weak influence of the SP on the public debate in the Netherlands.

In response to the accusations of irresponsibility and radicalism, the SP has emphasized its capabilities as a governing party, including in alliance with the right, in several cities. In publications like *Spanning*, its journal for active members, the SP has since 2006 given more attention to parties it considers successful examples of progressive governments, like the Brazilian PT, the Indian CPI(M) but most of all the parties it feels closest to, Nordic parties like the Norwegian Sosialistisk Venstreparti (Socialist Left Party) and the Danish

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<sup>43</sup> Daniel Finn, 'Order reigns in The Hague. The Dutch Elections and the Socialist Party', *New Left Review* 77 (2013) 71 - 86, there 79.

Socialistisk Folkeparti (Socialist People's Party).<sup>44</sup> But it remains unclear how the SP would avoid the difficulties these parties have run into because of their participation in government coalitions with social-liberal parties.

The SP claims the PvdA in 2006 'didn't dare' commit itself to a coalition including the SP.<sup>45</sup> In early 2013, Emile Roemer, the current head of the SP's parliamentary group, wrote that there are two PvdA's; one that wants to abandon neoliberalism and choose a left-wing course and one of 'traditional' party-leaders that 'persists with neoliberal conceptions'.<sup>46</sup> The PvdA paid a considerable price for its neoliberal policies and is far smaller than it was in the eighties in terms of seats and members. This, and the rise of the SP, prompted some PvdA ideologues to call for a return to its social-democratic roots and since 2006 it has tacked left. In an interview for *Spanning* before the 2012 elections, SP MEP Erik Meijer described as one of the successes of the SP that under its pressure the PvdA had again become 'considerably more left-wing'.<sup>47</sup> But after the elections, the PvdA again formed a coalition with the VVD that is carrying through record-numbers of cuts and structural neoliberal reforms.

The hope for re-orientation of the PvdA seems to be limited to ideologues with little influence and to easily broken election promises.

An important question is whether the PvdA would even want to rule together with the SP except in order to domesticate it. In the 2012 campaign, the SP tried unsuccessfully to walk a fine line between stressing their compatibility with the PvdA (the most likely coalition-partner) and not losing its own profile. Steve McGiffen, a British socialist who has worked for the SP, has argued that 'Defending the welfare state takes you into all sorts of areas—including defending Dutch democracy against the European Commission. The problem for social democrats, and it would be a problem for the SP too, is that everything they once stood for is now illegal. That presents you with a problem, but it also presents the EU with a problem. It is all right

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<sup>44</sup> Tijmen Lucie, 'SP leert veel van Scandinavisch links' *Spanning*, 6 (2012), 7, 8.

<sup>45</sup> See for example the SP election program for 2011-2015: *Een beter Nederland voor minder geld*, 5.

<sup>46</sup> Emile Roemer, 'De linkse PvdA praat, de rechtse PvdA regeert', *De Volkskrant* February 20, 2013 online at [[http://www.sp.nl/emileroemer/opinies/1505/De\\_linkse\\_PvdA\\_praat\\_de\\_rechtse\\_PvdA\\_regeert.html](http://www.sp.nl/emileroemer/opinies/1505/De_linkse_PvdA_praat_de_rechtse_PvdA_regeert.html)]

<sup>47</sup> Lucie, 'SP leert veel van Scandinavisch links', 7.

destroying a little country like Greece or Ireland, but the Netherlands was one of the founders, a core member-state that is absolutely central to the EU; you can't imagine the European Union existing without the Netherlands. If you push a country like this into voting for things that the Commission will forbid, it is going to be a crisis for the EU'.<sup>48</sup>

Since 2006, the SP dropped a number of its demands that were used as justification for excluding it from government. In addition to its demand for a republic, it dropped its support for the re-introduction of the 72 per cent tax rate for income above 225.000 euros per year (abolished in 1990 by the PvdA and CDA) and its opposition to Dutch membership of NATO. After the outbreak of the economic crisis in 2008, the SP felt vindicated in its critique of neoliberalism – according to Emile Roemer 'there is no real denial anymore that we were right' – but this is confusing the rhetoric of the centrist parties with their practice.<sup>49</sup> The CDA has gone even further right while the PvdA remains committed to neoliberal economic policies – the difference is that these policies are no longer praised as bringing improvements for everyone but as bitter necessities. The measures Roemer called for, to give real meaning to the supposed disenchantment with neoliberalism ('curtailing the power of the banks and breaking the power of speculators') are as remote as ever.<sup>50</sup>

The Keynesian policies like the SP proposes, such as the creation of a 'national investment bank', are beyond the pale in Dutch political discourse and the SP finds itself with few potential allies. The party has accepted the 'obvious need' for cuts and as such in principle accepts the European stability pact. However, it wants to extend the deadline to reduce the budget deficit to less than 3 per cent GDP from 2013 to 2015.<sup>51</sup> It calls for the cancellation of 'a (larger) part' of the Greek debt and putting the European Central Bank under democratic control. The problem for the SP is that such a proposal remains indigestible for the PvdA and recent election-campaigns have shown the difficulty of mobilizing sufficient support for policies that would clash with neoliberal institutions.

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<sup>48</sup> Finn, 'Order reigns in The Hague', 81- 82.

<sup>49</sup> Emile Roemer, *Tot hier - en nu verder. Emile Roemer vertelt zijn verhaal* (Soesterberg 2010), 98.

<sup>50</sup> Roemer, *Tot hier*, 99.

<sup>51</sup> SP election programme 2013-2017, *Nieuw Vertrouwen*, 65.

## SP and social movements

One characteristic of the SP is the relatively high level of commitment of its members and its visibility in social mobilizations. Of its 45.000 members, up to 5.000 are activists. This gives it a much larger potential for mobilization than either GroenLinks or the PvdA which, even more than GroenLinks, has become a party of a small, often paid cadre and a large, passive membership.

The SP sees participation in mobilizations as auxiliary to parliamentary work. Ronald van Raak, parliamentarian and former head of the SP's 'scientific bureau' wrote that 'actions are a direct form of politics, that involve people with the decision-making process, bring problems to light and put pressure on administrators'.<sup>52</sup> The decision of whether or not the SP participates in demonstrations depends to a large degree on how visible it expects to be and expectations of the responses by the media.<sup>53</sup>

Extraparliamentary activities are a way to propagate its program and attract people.<sup>54</sup> For example, the SP played an important role in the anti-war movement before the invasion in Iraq, but during the decline of attention for the occupation, the SP strongly reduced its involvement. Its practice and publications don't show a perspective of building extraparliamentary movements that can function autonomously from parliamentary politics or of contributing to building the infrastructure necessary for such movements. In a country where most social movements have been very weak, with a handful of sporadic exceptions, for decades, this is an understandable perspective, especially for a party like the SP that always insisted that activities should lead to clear, visible results.

Labour historian Sjaak van der Velden, who at the time was a member of the SP's scientific bureau, wrote in 2010 that the SP 'primarily directs itself to everybody in society who is ill, weak and pathetic. Because of this, trade-union work has been almost completely neglected in favor of work in neighborhoods and health care. Little has been done with popularity of the party among trade-unionists'.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ronald van Raak, 'Meer dan mooie dromen. Het praktische internationalisme van de SP'. In: *Kritiek. Jaarboek voor socialistische discussie en analyse 2008*, 203 - 209, there 206.

<sup>53</sup> Kagie, *De Socialisten*, 148.

<sup>54</sup> Van Loon, Slager, *Hoe dan Jan?*, 123.

<sup>55</sup> Van der Velden, *Links*, 202.

Among trade-unionists, the SP is more popular than the PvdA and prominent trade-union activists are SP members. But it's also true it does little to organize this sympathy. With a few exceptions, the early SP had very little influence in workplaces.<sup>56</sup> Since its workplace paper, *Solidair*, ceased publication the party doesn't seem to attempt to organize work among trade-unionists. Jan Marijnissen: 'However you look at it, the party is separate from the trade-union movement. We have our own ideas about how things could be different but we are not going to operate in an organized way in the unions'.<sup>57</sup>

The SP works according to a kind of division of labor between trade-unions and parties that means the party doesn't intervene in the unions. When the unions organize a campaign, the SP is a reliable supporter, but it remains on the outside. This gives it a disadvantage compared to the PvdA that still has a lot of influence among the union leadership which remains reluctant to mobilize against governments that include their party.

### **Broken taboos**

One of the more infamous episodes in the history of the party is its 1982 pamphlet *Gastarbeid en Kapitaal* ('Guest Labor and Capital'), explaining the party's view of migrant-workers (until the end of the eighties called 'guest workers' because the assumption was that most of them would return to their country of origin). During the sixties, Dutch companies started to recruit workers from abroad because the labor market was tight and they were cheaper than Dutch workers. The first of these migrant-workers came from Southern Europe and later especially from Turkey and Morocco. This kind of recruitment ceased in the seventies as unemployment rose. But Turkish and Moroccan communities grew further because many workers brought over their families to the Netherlands.

Nowadays, it is not unusual to hear SP-members claim that history has proven them right but at the time they were harshly attacked by other parts of the left because of *Gastarbeid en Kapitaal*. A problem with these claims is, they often misrepresent the pamphlet, that it is pretending it about offering language courses to guest workers and pointing to difficulties that can arise when people with very different cultures live together.

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<sup>56</sup> Kees Slager, *Het geheim van Oss. Een geschiedenis van de SP* (Amstel 2009).

<sup>57</sup> Sjaak van der Velden, 'Een zwakke vakbond speelt rechts in de kaart', *Spanning 2* (2010) 3- 5, there 5.



But *Gastarbeid en Kapitaal* is not about those issues. It focuses on 'the problem' of guest workers, especially Muslims. On the first page is the claim that the 'backwardness' of their home-countries compared to the Netherlands and their 'consistent attitudes' regarding religion leave them 'practically no chance' in 'our (Dutch) society'.<sup>58</sup> A Turkish administrator is quoted while saying that 'foreigners regard every employer as a lord whom they are grateful for the bread they earn. Those people want to submit'. This, according to *Gastarbeid en Kapitaal*, shows 'the large difference between the average Dutch worker and the average foreign worker'.<sup>59</sup>

There is no discussion of organizing common struggles between foreign and Dutch workers; the only practical suggestion is that foreigners should, after two years, be forced to adopt the Dutch nationality and adapt to Dutch 'customs' or leave with financial aid from the government.

The SP's position on immigration and cultural differences improved in the nineties. In 1994 the party opposed the regularization of undocumented migrants with the argument that this would attract more (undocumented) migrants but in parliament the party supports the most progressive proposals.<sup>60</sup> The SP has been prominently involved in mobilizations for the regularization of undocumented migrants. Since the late nineties its election programs call for the regularization of certain categories of undocumented migrants and it opposes the recent penalizing of being 'illegal'. It has also developed its position on what is called 'integration', the living together of different cultural communities. It supports policies against ethnic ghetto-formation, making employers responsible for providing language lessons to migrant workers and prioritizing the struggle against discrimination in the labor market.

These changes are connected with the changing composition of the party. In the Netherlands, migrants are concentrated in the urbanized west of the country. This is the region where the SP traditionally had a relatively weak presence. The party is strongest in the smaller cities and the countryside – areas with smaller migrant communities. Since the turn of the century however, the party has grown considerably in the large cities and started to attract more migrants and their

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<sup>58</sup> Socialistiese Partij, *Gastarbeid en Kapitaal* 1983, 1. The pamphlet has never been reissued.

<sup>59</sup> *Gastarbeid en Kapitaal*, 14.

<sup>60</sup> SP, *Stem tegen, stem SP. Verkiezingsprogramma Socialistische Partij*, 1994.

children. In 2003, the SP congress declared that the party should especially attract migrant-youth.<sup>61</sup>

Still, the party's position on questions of racism remains contradictory. It's not just that party-members still refer positively *Gastarbeid en Kapitaal*, in 2006 the SP also supported the 'inburgeringsplicht' (literally 'the duty to become a citizen'). This law requires migrants from outside the European Union and a number of western countries as well as certain groups of already naturalized migrants to follow courses in 'Dutch citizenship' that they have to pay themselves. The SP's support led to disappointment among members.<sup>62</sup>

Despite the rise of racism in the Netherlands, the SP is relatively silent on this question. It has hardly published anything on the topic and is reluctant to take part in specifically anti-racist activities. SP-leaders like Marijnissen see racism as the consequence of a failed 'integration' policy.<sup>63</sup> The implication of SP leaders is that racism specific struggles against racism are a diversion and that it will largely disappear when other, social-economic issues are tackled.

In 2008, the SP, PvdA and GroenLinks declined an invitation to participate in an anti-racist demonstration because the protest was supposedly too much focused on attacking Geert Wilders, a far-right politician whose party at the time had 9 seats. Earlier, the SP had refused to participate in the organization of the protest and its Amsterdam branch discouraged members from participating because it was supposedly targeting too much the person of Wilders and not his ideas.<sup>64</sup>

In this period, the SP's wish to avoid subjects it fears are controversial among its own supporters, its focus on parliament and its neglect of anti-racism came together.

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<sup>61</sup> Mahmut Erciyas, 'SP steunt inburgeringsplicht en stelt migranten wederom teleur', in: *De Fabel van de illegaal* 79 (2006) online at [<http://www.doorbraak.eu/gebladerte/11248f79.htm>].

<sup>62</sup> Erciyas, 'SP steunt inburgeringsplicht en stelt migranten wederom teleur' online at [<http://www.doorbraak.eu/gebladerte/11248f79.htm>].

<sup>63</sup> Jan Marijnissen, 'Racisme in Nederland', online at [<http://www.sp.nl/nieuws/tribune/200606/janm.shtml>].

<sup>64</sup> Brenda Peeters, 'Kamer weigert tegen Wilders te demonstreren', Elsevier March 20, 2008, online at [<http://www.elsevier.nl/Politiek/achtergrond/2008/3/Kamer-weigert-tegen-Wilders-te-demonstreren->]

In another echo of the party's workerist past, the SP opposes specific organizations or working groups of women, migrants or sexual minorities. It considers such structures divisive. The early SP was very hostile to feminism and the women's movement but in this regard there is a similar development visible like in its position regarding immigration. Symbolically, in 2003 Anja Meulenbelt, a well-known Dutch socialist-feminist who was attacked as petty-bourgeois by the SP in the eighties, became senator for the party. The SP also calls for harsher penalties against discrimination based on gender or sexual orientation.

## **Voters and members**

After the jump in memberships in 2003-2004 the party reached just over 50.000 members in 2007-2009, after its peak of almost 17 per cent in the parliamentary elections of 2006. Membership dropped slightly after the defeat in the elections of 2010 when the party dropped to less than 10 per cent, losing 10 seats in parliament. Since then, membership figures have stabilized and in 2013 over 45.000 were members of the SP. This makes the SP the third party in terms of membership: the CDA still has the largest membership with over 61.000 members. Second is the PvdA with less than 55.000 members and still slowly declining.

The SP is often derided as a party of angry, white, male, middle-aged workers. In reality however, the composition of the party is much more heterogeneous and representative of society as a whole. In 2001, the percentage of women was 37 per cent, in 2011 it was 40 per cent.<sup>65</sup> Almost one fifth of SP-members is below 40. Relatively many SP-members are also members of a trade-union: around one third of the party-members is also member of a trade-union, as compared to 20 per cent of total employees.<sup>66</sup> It is also striking how many SP-members support environmental organizations, in 2005 almost a quarter of them said they were supporters of for example Greenpeace.

Going against the cliché again, SP-members have a higher education than on average in the labor force. In 2011, forty-two per cent of SP-members had a higher education. The percentage of SP-members

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<sup>65</sup> 2011 figures are based on internal inquiry among members in 2011. E-mail from party secretary Hans van Heijningen to the author, October 22, 2013. Earlier figures: 'Het profiel van de SP-leden' online at [<http://www.sp.nl/partij/leden/profiel.stm>].

<sup>66</sup> Ter Steege, Van Groenigen, Kuijpers, Van Cruchten, 'Vakbeweging en organisatiegraad', 16.

with higher education has increased strongly in recent years: in 2001, only 28 per cent of the members had completed a higher education.

The average SP voter resembles the cliché a little more but is still very different. Of the SP-votes in 2010, 58 per cent came from women.<sup>67</sup> SP voters have clearly lower education and lower incomes than the average Dutch citizen. They are also more likely to live outside the urbanized western part of the country, the 'Randstad' that includes major cities like Rotterdam, the seat of government The Hague and the capital Amsterdam. The Catholic south of the country, consisting of small to medium cities and countryside, is still home to a disproportional large percentage of SP-voters. SP voters are also more likely to be older, over 50 years and over.

In 2006, when the SP gained almost 17 per cent of the votes, the party took votes from across the political spectrum, many of them from the PvdA but also mobilizing people who didn't vote before. In the elections of 2010 and 2012 however, the party's votes remained below ten per cent, with many voters either returning to the PvdA or staying at home. Quickly after the elections of 2010, the number of party-memberships also declined from just over 50.000 to around 45.000. Just like the number of votes, party-memberships seems to have stabilized in this moment.

Then there is the question of the ethnic background of SP-voters and members. It's difficult to gain access to information about the participation of migrants and their children in the SP, since the party doesn't have specific work among the migrant communities.

The structure of the SP is based on delegates: at branch meetings, members elect representatives to the congress and to the regional structures. The regions and congress elect a party-leadership. The highest organ in the SP is the party-council which consists of the chairpersons of the branches and members of the party-leadership.

The SP leadership has a strong position and enjoys a lot of credibility because of the growth of the party. Especially Jan Marijnissen still plays an important role in the party. Other influential members, like Tiny Kox or members of parliament have also been members of the SP since its first incarnation. The SP doesn't have a length of mandate or limits on the number of positions one person can fulfill – enabling for example Marijnissen to be chair of the party since 1988

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<sup>67</sup> Synovate, *Nieuwkomers, weglopers en trouwe kiezers. De profielen per partij*, Online at [[www.politiekebarometer.nl/pdf/profielen.pdf](http://www.politiekebarometer.nl/pdf/profielen.pdf)].

as well as chair of the SP fraction in parliament between 1994 and 2008.

This core of leading members is one of the continuities of the party throughout its history and especially Marijnissen has played a very important role in the development of the party.

One of the things that make the SP unique in the Netherlands is its 'afdrachtregeling' - the SP's elected representatives hand their allowances over to the party. Those whose duties require a full-time commitment, like its parliamentarians, receive a salary in keeping with that of the average Dutch worker. This set-up is regularly criticized by other parties because it would endanger the personal independence parliamentarians are sworn to maintain. Inside the SP though, the 'afdrachtregeling' remains very popular. It's seen as an important characteristic of the party, proving that SP-members are not out for personal gain.

### **A better Netherlands starts here?**

'In the seventies, we all were a little crazy', Tiny Kox claimed looking back at the early SP. However that may be, among the many left groups of the seventies, the dogmatic and sectarian Maoists, nicknamed 'the Red Jehovah's Witnesses', were unlikely candidates to make the breakthrough to a mass-party. This skepticism was not unfounded, in many ways the SP that made its breakthrough in the nineties was a very different party. A key element of continuity throughout all its twists and turns since the mid-eighties was a cohesive leadership-team that was able to maintain the integrity of the party. It could do this because of its credibility as the party seemed to go from success to success but undoubtedly also because the relatively vertical organization of the SP.

Since the early nineties, the SP evolved from workerist communism to Keynesian social-democracy.<sup>68</sup> On the Dutch political scene, it has remained an extraordinary phenomenon. The 'little bit extra' or 'plus' SP-leaders like Marijnissen and Kox add to the qualification of 'social-democratic' is not insignificant. In the nineties, not only socialism but also the idea of a distinct collective identity of working people was marginalized and neoliberal assumptions about society became accepted across the political spectrum as common sense. It's the

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<sup>68</sup> Gerrit Voerman, 'Een politieke kameleon: over het aanpassingsvermogen van de Socialistische Partij in Nederland', *Vlaams marxistisch tijdschrift* 38 (2004), nr. 1, 48-58. Voerman stresses the adaptability of the SP as an explanation for their succes.

merit of the SP that, in some way or another, the socialist tradition in the Netherlands is kept alive.

Despite all its shifts on a number of its core issues, especially the defense of health care the SP is refusing to budge. And no other party in the Netherlands can mobilize its members the way they can. Its self-conception as 'socialist' (no matter how much the word has been reinterpreted') and anti-neoliberalism make it unique in Dutch politics. All this makes the SP an unique and often indispensable ally of social movements.

Since 2006 and increasingly since the disappointment of the 2012 elections, the SP seems uncertain of how to proceed. The SP says it is ready to rule but the same qualities that make it attractive to voters, its anti-neoliberalism, make it unlikely that other parties will go for a government coalition with it. The 2012 campaign was a failed attempt to grow so big that the SP could not be ignored by the centrist parties but the party proved unable to translate sympathy into actual support. The SP now faces to choice to concentrate on being an opposition force or continue to make accommodations to the political center. It has managed to consolidate a considerable base of around 10 per cent of the vote but what to do now? Except from winning votes and winning more people for its perspective, it needs to develop into a stronger social force. Its current trajectory seems however to lead to an even stronger parliamentary orientation - but it wouldn't be the first time the SP amazes observers. <sup>69</sup>

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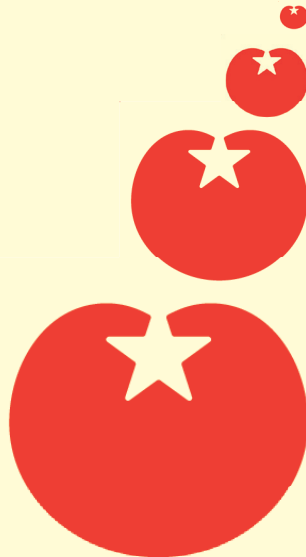
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## ***Borderless brochures***

- \* The New Right in the Netherlands
- \* The long march of the SP



## *The* long march of the SP

The Dutch SP has undergone a remarkable metamorphosis. After beginning as a maoist splinter, it took its distance from China and maoism in the second half of the seventies. In the late eighties and early nineties, after the implosion on the Eastern Bloc, the party dropped its references to marxism and leninism. Its leader Jan Marijnissen played an important role in creating a new ideology for the party, redefining its socialism as an ethical commitment to human dignity, equality and solidarity. The SP is the only left-wing party in the Netherlands that has succeeded in competing with the social-democratic Labour Party but there is doubt whether it can become a real alternative in the long run.



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