The centre cannot hold

The results of the Dutch national elections in September came as a surprise to many. Together the right-wing, free-market VVD and the Labour party (PvdA) captured 52% of the vote. The results have been portrayed as a ‘return to the centre’ for Dutch politics after ten years in which traditional governing parties declined while new parties made significant gains, such as the left-wing Socialist Party (SP) and the far-right PVV of Geert Wilders. This time, however, the big winners were again the parties of the so-called political centre. But the elections do not indicate an end to political polarization. The VVD moved even further to the right, combining free-market fundamentalism with anti-immigrant rhetoric that attracted a large number of votes from the far right. The PvdA, on the other hand, promised fairer policies than those of the previous government and protection of the most vulnerable groups in society. Many people voted PvdA to block the return of VVD Prime Minister, Mark Rutte.

Ironically, by forming a coalition with the VVD, the PvdA will return Rutte to the office of PM. However, the contradictory promises of both parties and the opposing motives of their supporters will make cooperation more difficult than ever and PvdA voters are likely to be disappointed to see their party facilitating the very right-wing policies they hoped to stop.

As the crisis continues, Dutch society will be increasingly hit by the declining economy and subsequent austerity policies. Will Labour succeed in selling austerity as the only option or will progressive forces succeed in building a popular alternative? The real question is whether or not the elections will have an impact on the crisis.

Eurocrisis

Struggles in the south need international solidarity

The crisis in the south of Europe, therefore, cannot be explained as an inherent weakness in the southern economies or a flaw in the character of their citizens. Reduced ambition could be understood as a consequence of the way in which the eurozone was built and in recognition of the fact that the northern countries have profited from the structural inequalities built into it. The creation of the eurozone in the late 1990s was a term ‘solution’ to the inherent contradictions of capitalist growth, which were temporarily repressed but have now reappeared even more violently.

In Europe, the struggle for a socially just way out of the crisis is also a struggle against those institutions of the EU that continue to insist on austerity regardless of their effects on the people. However, this does not mean a return to nationalist projects or the defense of patriotic interests against the EU. As in the south, local elites have become immensely rich through the crisis project and have the most interest in maintaining these anti-democratic institutions, while the working class shoulders the costs.

If we hope to find a progressive solution to this crisis, and to create a more equitable and fair society, we must build a mass international movement. This movement must be based on the solidarity of workers in all countries. Now that the people of southern Europe are rising in struggle, we must join them. Let the achievement of the Portuguese people be an example to us all.

What is borderless?

borderless is a radical bimonthly paper written in English for non-Dutch speakers interested in Dutch politics and on events and social struggles in the Netherlands and around the world. borderless is written and published by a collection of Dutch and non-Dutch activists living in Amsterdam. We consider ourselves socialists, feminists, anti-racists, ecologists and workers, fighting some of the many economic and ecological crises facing working people worldwide. We oppose capitalism, a political-economic system that is based on exploitation and wagelessness, on devastating communities around the globe. We oppose all attacks on the civil and human rights of citizens, immigrants, workers, and minorities both inside and outside the Netherlands. We stand in solidarity with all people engaged in the struggle against exploitation and oppression.

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Editorial

Alex Merlo

September 15, 2012, may have marked a turning point in the history of Europe. Hundreds of thousands of people gathered in the main squares of Portugal in a massive mobilization the scale of which has not been seen there since the revolution and fall of the dictatorship in 1974. The mobilizations came in protest of the latest round of austerity imposed on the country by the ‘Troika’ (EC, ECB, and IMF) including a further 7% reduction in wages. What was decisive about this event was that it forced the government to withdraw the plan. The structural reforms being imposed across southern Europe thus suffered their first defeat – the first, hopefully, of many.

Social struggles are on the rise in other countries in southern Europe as well. In Spain, the Indignados movement initiated a new round of struggles with its call to “Take the Congress” on September 25. The action mobilized tens of thousands and was answered with fierce repression by the authorities. Spaniards are also calling for the removal of the government that has betrayed the electoral programme on which it was elected and embraced the austerity pushed by the Troika.

In Greece, another general strike on September 26, showed that elections there have not calmed nerves and brutal repression has not destroyed the willingness to fight. The Greeks have suffered the worst austerity in Europe and living standards have fallen dramatically in a short space of time. As in other countries, the mobilizations are a response to the anger and despair brought on by the crisis and crushing austerity. This stormy political weather in southern Europe contrasts sharply with the calm situation in the north. The effects of the crisis are now starting to affect the people in northern Europe who are seeing major cuts in social programmes. Still, to many in the north, things seem to be under control and there have not been the large mobilizations that are becoming common in the south. The general opinion in the north is that the crisis in the south is a problem of the southern economies or even the result of some sort of defect in ‘natural character’ of the Mediterranean people. Many are beginning to question whether the EU would be better off without these lagging economies and their shaky political scenes.

In the south, Europe is increasingly seen too as a source of problems. In Spain, as elsewhere, membership in the EU was once associated with progress and welfare. After integrating into the eurozone, many countries experienced high rates of economic growth (much higher than the north) and, with the help of EU funding, improved their infrastructures. The current crisis, however, is the result of contradictions that accumulated during this same period of growth. Things were not as wonderful as they appeared in these economies: growth was not accompanied by a better distribution of wealth, rather inequality increased markedly. Neoliberal reforms resulted in the privatization of public services and a decline in the living conditions for most of the population. Deindustrialisation of the southern economies, more pronounced than in the north, was offset by the development of other sectors, such as tourism and housing construction, which primarily offer precarious and precarious employment. Inflation in the south has also consistently been much higher than in the north. This, combined with deindustrialization, resulted in a dramatic increase in private debt, facilitated by lower real interest rates due to high inflation.

These two ‘solutions’ were blocked with the onset of the financial crisis as northern capital sought refuge in the south and financial institutions began deleveraging and refusing to provide credit. The impact on the population has been devastating and is exacerbated by cuts to social welfare made under previous neoliberal reforms.

The crisis in the south of Europe, therefore, cannot be explained as an inherent weakness in the southern economies or a flaw in the character of their citizens. Reduced ambition could be understood as a consequence of the way in which the eurozone was built and in recognition of the fact that the northern countries have profited from the structural inequalities built into it. The creation of the eurozone in the late 1990s was a term ‘solution’ to the inherent contradictions of capitalist growth, which were temporarily repressed but have now reappeared even more violently.

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Dutch elections: results

Together, PvdA and VVD won a majority of 79 seats in the 150-seat parliament. This is unusual in Dutch politics. Typically coalitions require three or more parties to have a majority. Despite early predictions of large gains the Socialist Party (SP) failed to gain any new seats, remaining at 15. PvdA succeeded in attracting many progressive voters who feared that VVD would again become the largest party. A shift towards right-wing economic policies in the Greens proved unpopular with its supporters, with the party dropping to just one seat. The conservative CDA, once the most powerful party, lost 8 seats falling to an historic low of thirteen. The right-wing, anti-immigrant PVV was the biggest loser, dropping from 24 to 15 seats.

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Sanctions or Collective Punishment?

Iran is under severe sanctions. Washington's latest efforts against Iran were introduced during US-CIA and NATO attacks in the 1980s and have been in effect ever since 2003. The US efforts against Iran's nuclear program and the tension against Iran prove once again that sanctions are nothing but a form of collective punishment against innocent people.

The situation has not improved. Sanctions against Iran are not a newly-discovered remedy but a failure that has been tried before. Sanctions against Iran are not justified by the British government's claim that they were intended to force Iran to abandon its nuclear program. The sanctions were imposed in the first place as a form of warfare perpetrated not against the governing elites but against ordinary people.

The Iranian people have been struggling against their regime for the last 30 years. Sanctions against Iran are a form of warfare against the lives of Iranians living abroad. The sanctions regime has been maintained by a series of measures to renew the residents of Iran, working in universities and research institutions. After protests, some citizens of the country and outside the Netherlands, this policy was revised to permit researchers working in the petroleum, natural gas and petrochemical industries in an attempt to keep "certain knowledge" from being transferred back to Iran. However, the boundaries of this "certain knowledge" is kept loose and researchers working in other technological realms are forced to prove their exemption from the law on a case-by-case basis.

Sanctions are often presented as an alternative to war and an effective means to bring about regime change. Sanctions are not only often a prelude to war but are themselves a form of warfare perpetrated not against the governing elites but against ordinary people.

The reason for this is that the sanctions regime is designed to induce traditional authorities into regime change. The sanctions are designed to force the regime to change, not the people. The regime that they are struggling against.

The regime has also imposed a form of collective punishment against ordinary Iranians living abroad. They have also been subject to arbitrary detention and to "unique" interpretations that have affected Iranians living abroad. The EU state of Georgia, in fact, is not the only country to have imposed sanctions against Iran.

In the end, the sanctions regime has failed. Sanctions are not only a means to bring about regime change, but they have also been a form of warfare against the lives of Iranians living abroad. The sanctions regime has been maintained by a series of measures to renew the residents of Iran, working in universities and research institutions. After protests, some citizens of the country and outside the Netherlands, this policy was revised to permit researchers working in the petroleum, natural gas and petrochemical industries in an attempt to keep "certain knowledge" from being transferred back to Iran. However, the boundaries of this "certain knowledge" is kept loose and researchers working in other technological realms are forced to prove their exemption from the law on a case-by-case basis.

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