

Far-right Dutch government bans protests, implements massive social cuts

A reader from the Netherlands
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The WSWS received the following letter from a reader in the Netherlands.

I am a worker at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU). This is my first-hand report and interpretation of some of the events surrounding the banned protest that was planned for November 14 in Utrecht, Netherlands, against massive higher education cuts announced by the far-right government.

The demonstration planned for November 14 was organized by several unions (FNV and AOb) and WOInActie (a “national movement of university staff and students”) to protest recently announced higher education cuts of ~1 billion euro over a five-year period by the current far-right government.

One day before the protest, which was expected to draw many thousands of university workers and students from around the country, the protest organizers announced that they were forced to cancel the demonstration because the mayor of Utrecht, Sharon Dijksma, “could not guarantee the safety of members.” The pretence for this is that there was information that pro-Palestinian groups would “hijack” (the English translation of the mayor’s suggestive choice of words) the protests, and that those groups “do not shun violence.”

It was framed in such a way as to make it seem like the university protesters were in danger from violent pro-Palestinian protesters. This is an absurd conjecture and served two roles: shutting down the mass protest in Utrecht and further demonizing pro-Palestinian protesters as violent and destructive. It is an attempt to create a fissure between the linked struggles against the erosion of working conditions and education domestically and imperialism abroad. In truth, the struggles are related and the participants in solidarity.

The unions capitulated to the mayor’s calls, cancelling the protest and sparing the mayor the political fallout of having officially banned the protest. As an alternative

action, the unions live-streamed the speeches planned for Utrecht from a panel in The Hague.

There were local actions organized at various universities across the Netherlands. The unions played some role in this, but individuals from various academic departments also took charge in mobilizing workers at the VU. During the live streaming of the speeches at the VU, there was a gathering of several hundred employees and students in the university’s main building for some local speeches, a large applause, and a photograph.

Despite being a feeble alternative to the originally planned mass protest, the gathering was heavily guarded by security. Security guards were screening people as they walked into the congregation area to see if anyone was displaying “Palestinian-related” clothing or banners.

A PhD student I was with was stopped for wearing a keffiyeh and a medical mask. I was stopped with them because I was carrying home-made signs connecting the domestic austerity policies and impending university layoffs with militarism, colonialism, and genocide, even without any explicit references to Palestine. The security guards did not even read the signs. We were obviously deemed outside agitators simply because of the student wearing a keffiyeh and a medical mask. The student was turned back because they would not remove their mask. My employee ID was taken and photographed. I was allowed to enter after leaving my signs outside the gathering area.

The WSWS has reported several times on the recent events in Amsterdam, which have been ludicrously spun by politicians across Europe and media outlets. I hope that the WSWS can bring some attention to some of the ongoing workers struggles in the Netherlands.

There are impending mass layoffs at universities across the country. The magnitude of the recently announced budget cuts is roughly equivalent to one of the 14 public research universities in the country being eliminated

entirely. In fact, we at the VU were facing an austerity budget even before the election of the current far-right government.

The board of the Faculty of Sciences announced last year that we were facing a severe budget deficit, and that “difficult choices” (a favourite euphemism of administrators) would need to be made. After a façade process giving individual departments the “task” of presenting plans to reduce their deficits, it was announced that the Earth Sciences department would be the first to be “reorganized” (the official euphemism for layoffs in the Netherlands). Many other “reorganizations” will inevitably follow.

For some additional context: prior to the recent additional educational budget cuts, the 5-year deficit (from 2023 to 2028) at the VU was projected to be ~60 million euro. Under the rough assumption that each of the 14 public research universities in the Netherlands had the same projected deficit, this would amount to ~840 million euro over 5 years (~170 million EUR per year). In comparison, military spending in the Netherlands has increased by over 70% from ~14 billion euro in 2021 to 24 billion euro in 2025.

According to a 2024 white paper published by the Ministry of Defence, not only is this drastic expansion aimed at preparing for war against the “usual threats” (Russia, China, Iran), but it also includes significant expansion of the military police. To quote the white paper:

The two squadrons of the Royal Netherlands Marechaussee for military police tasks, which are already being established, will be further strengthened. The squadrons will be organised identically to make them interchangeable. The units will be able to perform military policing tasks at the highest end of the spectrum of force, which means that they will be crucial in terms of preparation and deployment during large-scale conflicts. The units can also investigate potential war crimes in the area of operations. This contributes to the NATO priority target aimed at strengthening land operations.

Given the severe crackdown on protests recently, it is clear that “the tasks at the highest end of the spectrum of force” will be used domestically against civilians in the

Netherlands.

The ballooning military spending is only one facet of the misuse of (in that case destruction of along with human life) value created by workers in society. The basis is an economy driven by profit.

The GDP of the Netherlands is approximately 1.16 trillion euro. According to “Statistics Netherlands” (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek), the total remuneration of workers in the Netherlands in 2023 was 478 billion euro, while the gross corporate profit excluding financial institutions was 358 billion euro. With the generous assumptions that this profit was taxed at the full maximum corporate profit tax rate in the Netherlands (~26 percent) and that the tax revenue was used for constructive social purposes, this corresponds to a net profit of 265 billion euro, or ~23 percent of GDP.

The anticipated annual university deficit for the entire country (based on the above assumption that each university has a similar deficit) including the additional five-year 1-billion-euro cuts—which will likely result in thousands of layoffs and further severe erosion of the higher education system—amounts to ~0.03 percent of GDP. Compare this to military spending of ~2.1 percent of GDP or to net corporate profits of ~23 percent of GDP.

The premise that there are not enough economic resources to support higher education and that massive cuts are inevitable is absurd. There are vast resources and productive forces in society. The fundamental issue is that the capitalist economy is based on the privatization of wealth created by workers in society in the hands of a tiny fraction of the population. This inherently unstable system requires reinforcement by brute force (militarism abroad and domestically) and discipline of workers through the threat of unemployment. The alternative is a socialist society with an economy that is democratically and rationally planned to fulfil human need and preserve our environment for future generations.



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