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Netherlands

# The Socialistische Partij: A Dutch phenomenon?

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**At the European elections in June 2004 the Socialistische Partij (SP, Socialist Party) gained 332,326 votes in the Netherlands, or 7% of the total votes cast and two seats in the European Parliament. At the European elections of 1999, with 178,666 votes (5.1% of votes cast) it had one deputy elected. It is a remarkable success for a party which is situated to the left of social democracy and the Greens.**

The SP made its initial breakthrough at the parliamentary elections of 1994, electing its first two deputies. Today it claims 43,000 members, nine national deputies, hundreds of municipal councillors and even, since the last local elections, some deputy mayors. Of Maoist origin, the SP has chosen to build a more open and pluralist party of the socialist left. It has succeeded in occupying the political space which was freed up when the Communist Party, the Pacifist Socialist Party and the PPR (Progressive Christians) merged to form Groen Links (Green Left). Today it is a party which has all kinds of traditions and political references inside it: ex-Maoists, former Communists, former pacifist socialists and disappointed social democrats, activists in the social movements and revolutionary socialists. This plurality has allowed the party to develop over the last ten years, not only to grow on the electoral front but also to become, more than Groen Links, the political reference point for militants in the social movements and critical trades unionists.

The public image of the SP is essentially that of a left party which struggles in a consistent fashion for the interests of wage earners and the unemployed against the kingdoms of the professional politicians. It is this image that has guaranteed its success in recent years during the most serious political crisis that Holland has known since the Second World War. The "Fortuyn Revolution" [\[1\]](#) was not only an explosion of xenophobia, but also the demonstration of a massive aversion towards the political establishment as a whole. While Fortuyn broke through electorally on the right, the SP has profited from the crisis on the left.

## International relations

Although it is part of the European Parliament's GUE/NLG (United European Left-Nordic Greens) group, the SP remains fundamentally a Dutch phenomenon. This is also one of its weakest points. Up until the first European Social Forum, the SP was indifferent to the global justice movement. This is, of course, linked to the slow development of this movement in Holland. But it also embodies characteristics of the SP. As a party: it feels itself to be a fish in the water in the struggle for immediate interests, against the demolition of the welfare state and public services. But the idea that this struggle has some relation to the neoliberal offensive on a world scale and that struggles limited to a national scale have little chance of being victorious is not particularly current inside the party. That explains also the inclination of many leaders of the party, in particular its president Jan Marijnissen, to glide easily from criticism of the EU and its draft Constitution towards defence of national control and the national Parliament.

On the question of immigration, the SP also has quite a crude past. In the 1980s the party published a brochure, entitled "Immigrant and Capital", which claimed that Turkish and Moroccan workers had undermined the wages and social rights of Dutch workers by accepting inferior conditions! The SP thus supported the rapid return of these workers to their countries. In practice this viewpoint was abandoned during the 1990s. Now the SP is actively involved in the struggle for the rights of asylum seekers and immigrants without papers. And immigrant workers are increasingly numerous in the party. But the SP's parliamentary group has nonetheless voted in favour of the laws seeking to keep out workers coming from the new EU member countries (in particular the Poles).

## Socialist alternative?

The main references of the SP have been formulated in the programme "Preserving the Human" adopted in 1999. This programme gives a good impression of the SP's character as a social-democratic party which is also militant and on the left. Such a characterization leads to contradictory aspirations among its militants. If some of them have the ambition of constructing a new social-democratic workers' party, which would take the place of the declining PvdA, others dream of a genuinely socialist party based on a programme of structural transformation and social struggle.

These different ambitions do not at the moment provoke great divergences or the birth of internal currents. There are several reasons for this. First the huge growth of the party - which has gone in two years from 20,000 to 43,000 members - assures the legitimacy of its leadership. But what is still more important is the backward character of the social struggle in Holland. Since coming to power in 2002, the Balkenende government - a coalition of Christian Democracy (CDA) and the two liberal parties (the big VVD and the small D66) - has led an unprecedented offensive against the vestiges of the welfare state, social rights, wages, pensions and the multicultural society. In the face of this offensive, the trade union movement has limited itself over these two years to signing agreements with the government, to "avoid the worst". The SP is thus, with sectors of the Groen Links, among the few who are attempting to form an active left opposition. This struggle against the right leads to the closure of ranks within the party. Moreover, inside the social-liberal PvdA there are some who envisage openly the possibility of inviting the SP to participate in a future government or to support one. Unlike Groen Links, the SP is not yet classed as "not to be associated with".

But despite all its weaknesses, it is now - with the small extra parliamentary radical left - the best point of departure to build a socialist alternative in the future. In this optic a greater engagement of this party in the movement for global justice and its cooperation with the European anti-capitalist left are essential. But the most important immediate task for the Dutch left is to use the electoral success of the SP to strengthen social resistance.

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[1] From the name of Pim Fortuyn, a populist politician whose party - the Pim Fortuyn List (LPF) - became the second biggest parliamentary party during the parliamentary elections of 2002. Fortuyn was assassinated a little before the elections 2002 and his party splintered afterwards (it lost two thirds of its votes in the 2003 parliamentary elections and only obtained 2.6% and no deputy at the European elections of 2004). See [IV 341, June 2002](#).