

A Dutch United Left: Greens and Labour for a Just Transition

Article by Mareike Moraal

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Following the unexpected fall of the Rutte government, the Labour party and the Greens decided to run together for the snap election on 22 November. Far from an opportunistic union, the alliance is the result of groundwork laid at grassroots level and a common progressive vision for the future.

An exciting development is on its way in the progressive movement. Increasingly, labour and climate are joining forces to work towards a just green transition. So far, the clearest example of this has been in the US, with the formation of a coalition for a Green New Deal and the following passage of the Inflation Reduction Act. On the other side of the Atlantic, this cooperation has mainly taken place at the grassroots level, outside of formal political institutions. For example, Fridays for Future and the trade union Verdi organized strikes together for better public transport in Germany. Now, however, this cooperation is formalising and entering the political mainstream in Europe too: in the Netherlands, the Labour Party PvdA and the GroenLinks (GreenLeft) will enter the upcoming elections together, as a united left bloc.

Members of both parties overwhelmingly voted in favour of cooperation, and polls show the united left catapulted to new heights. After years of uncontested rule by right-wing liberal VVD, a left-wing prime ministership finally seems within reach. Reason enough for progressives to take a closer look at what's happening in the Netherlands: why now, and what lessons can we draw from this development?

The current close cooperation between the PvdA and the GroenLinks certainly was not a given, and up until a few years ago, it seemed far away and improbable. The last time they'd worked closely together was in 1973, when they entered an alliance and formed a left coalition government. Since the seventies, the Dutch left has become increasingly fragmented – currently, it counts ten parties – and the labour party has rather looked to the centre and the right to form coalition governments. None of the parties left of the labour party have made it into the government since.

Only in the last few years has the cooperation between the labour and the green movement picked up again: both in civil society, between environmental organizations and social justice movements, and through increasing alliance-building between GroenLinks and PvdA. The disastrous 2017 (for PvdA) and 2021 (for GroenLinks) elections lent further impetus and urgency to uniting the Dutch Left. As Frank van de Wolde, one of the founders of the organisation RoodGroen, which works on coalition-building between the two parties, puts it: “Things had to change after the 2021 election. And there was a unique opportunity to bundle our political power as equals.”

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Fast-forward to July 7, 2023: Rutte's coalition government, consisting of Rutte's right-wing liberal (in the classic, free market sense) VVD, centre-right Christian CDA, left-wing Christian CU, and just-left-of centre D66, falls. The coalition had weathered crisis after crisis, but a conflict over immigration policy proved too much. The VVD, fearing competition from populist extreme right parties, has moved to increasingly restrictive immigration policies over the years. When they proposed to severely limit family reunification, D66 and particularly CU felt they could no longer support the coalition government's direction, and the Rutte administration tendered its resignation – suddenly, and quite unexpectedly given its previously demonstrated resilience. New parliamentary elections were called for 22 November.

Though Rutte's coalition government thus fell quite unexpectedly, PvdA and GroenLinks immediately leaped at the opportunity of new elections. The extensive preparation and groundwork laid by the two parties and civil society organisations such as RoodGroen (RedGreen, the colours of the two parties), had paid off: the parties had already formulated a common vision for a United Left together, and conversations with civil society representatives and party members had already been taking place for years. This meant that the referenda about formal cooperation and choosing a common lead candidate could be rolled out in mere weeks following the fall of the Rutte administration. The result: while not a full-on merger (though this is being discussed), the PvdA and GroenLinks will enter the November elections together, with one party platform, one electoral list, and one candidate for the prime ministership.

The idea: forming a strong progressive bloc to offer a clear, left-wing, progressive vision of the future, focusing on a green and just transition, breaking with the trend of VVD-led centre-right, free-market focused coalition governments, and counteracting the increasing populist threat from the far right.

The building blocks of success

This process of coalition-building has of course taken place in a Dutch context. An increasingly fragmented and polarised political party landscape (currently, the parliament counts 18 different parties and 3 independent members), in which the traditional big-tent parties in the middle (such as left-of-centre PvdA) continue to lose ground, and a dominant conservative-liberal VVD (the largest party and holder of the prime ministership since 2010) mean that the urgency for cooperation on the left is particularly high. This, of course, is not to say that the Dutch case does not still hold some valuable insights for coalition-building elsewhere. Three elements, in particular, stand out: a bottom-up process, a compelling vision for the future, and preparing to strategically meet the moment.

The cooperation between the two parties didn't materialize in a day. Rather, it was built over years of conversation, (dis)agreement and careful exploration at all levels of the parties: from the grassroots to the party leadership. Exemplary of this bottom-up, consensus-driven process is the leading role of RoodGroen, an organization founded in 2021 by members of the PvdA, GroenLinks, and independent sympathisers to build mass support for and move towards more cooperation between the two parties. Every next step of cooperation between the parties had to be approved by its members in party conferences (in which about 90% voted in favour), and was preceded by months of listening sessions throughout the country, exchange with experts and civil society representatives, and slow but steady relationship- and trust building. In tandem with the organisational process of coalition-building, the two parties' think tanks wrote a common vision for the future with broad input from experts, civil society representatives, and members.

The increasing rapprochement between the Labour and Green parties happened in tandem with a broader coalition-forming process in Dutch civil society. Trade union FNV started a climate network with

environmental organizations and social and climate justice movements, and a broad coalition of progressive, left-wing activists formed a common movement around solidarity, democracy, and justice ahead of the November elections. This development has lent further legitimacy and logic to the formation of a United Left in the political sphere, too.

This long, consensus-driven process has resulted in a comprehensive, compelling, and genuine progressive vision for the future. A common manifesto published by the parties' two think tanks, "Taking the future into our hands together" demonstrates that this coalition goes beyond a marriage of convenience to win the upcoming elections, instead focusing on the decades ahead and asking the fundamental question of what kind of society we want.

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Published alongside accessible YouTube explainers and an in-depth podcast series (and continuously inviting feedback from the public and experts), the manifesto builds a common ideological foundation for the united Left's campaign and cooperation beyond. Its cornerstones: first, a shift towards a wellbeing economy focused on broadly shared human and planetary wellbeing rather than economic growth; secondly, working towards a transition that is truly just, meaning broad participation, that burdens and benefits are shared progressively, and truly green, meaning that it goes beyond CO2 emission reductions towards clean air, water, biodiversity, and respecting planetary boundaries.

Essentially, the fight for a green planet and a fairer, more just society is seen as one and the same fight against a system that exploits people and the planet. The parties' common vision thus goes further than green growth, job creation, and carbon emission reduction (the main goal of the American labour-climate coalition behind the), towards a fundamental re-evaluation of the relationship between citizen, market, and government, and a corresponding rebuilding of society.

Tim 'S Jongers, director of the labour party's think tank, reflected regarding the conceptualization and writing process that it above all showed how closely aligned the two parties' values are: "put a PvdA and a GroenLinkser together in a room, and within half an hour of conversation, they'd find that they agree with each other on, well, really, everything of consequence". Similarly, Frank van de Wolde noted that "although there are some minor differences in taste and style, in terms of values, ideology, and vision, there's more difference within than between the parties. We fight for the same ideals, and as such competing for voters makes absolutely no sense".

Meeting the moment

The years spent discussing, building relationships and trust, and constructing a common vision meant that when Rutte's government fell and new elections were announced, the two parties were ready to roll out their cooperation referendum, choose a lead candidate, and start campaigning in a matter of weeks. This mirrors the meeting-the-moment strategy used by coalition-building initiatives in the US, such as the labour-climate BlueGreen Alliance (BGA). BGA's former advisor Mike Williams stated the key to their success as "talk, fight, and prepare relationships and the coalition in private, so when the moment comes, publicly, you're ready".

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At a time where the Rutte government's multiple scandals and in-party fighting as well as the omnipresent phenomenon of polarisation have left voters' trust in government and politicians at a low, this broad, bottom-up process and the resulting vision for the future offer a compelling alternative, both to the status quo under Rutte's VVD and to populists' easy answers. The PvdA's and GroenLinks' current party leaders' willingness to step aside and make space for a new face of the united Left, putting the coalition's interests over their own, further supports the broad feeling among voters that this is politics done differently. In Dutch politics, where the largest party virtually always obtains the prime ministership, voters tend to vote strategically for the party in their ideological spectrum with the highest chance of winning.

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Frans Timmermans, a long-time member of the PvdA and well-known for pushing the European Green Deal as European Commissioner for Climate Action, is the lead candidate for the united Left. Campaigning for the November elections for the parliament (Tweede Kamer) will now start in earnest. If the United Left wins and can form a majority coalition government, the prime ministership will be Timmermans', and nominees of the united Left will likewise fill key minister posts. The stronger the parties on the left end of the spectrum emerge from the elections, the more progressive the coalition government can be. As Frank van de Wolde puts it: "The stronger the progressive bloc, the more we can force action not only on climate change, but also on the justice issues at its core, distributing burdens and benefits fairly, and about environmental issues beyond CO2: clean water, animal welfare, biodiversity, and planetary boundaries".

We'll have to see what 22 November brings. Regardless, a process has started that inspires and mobilises beyond the elections. Together, the parties have brought to life a left-wing vision and overarching narrative for the future that goes beyond day-to-day politics. A broad coalition of left-wing think tanks, experts, and civil society representatives is currently revising this long-term vision based on party member input, and will likely publish it by the end of 2023. And, just as important: relationship- and trust-building continues between members of the two parties, as well as more broadly between civil society organisations organising for labour, the environment, and social, economic, and environmental justice. These are crucial building blocks for a long-term coalition for a truly just, truly green transition.

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