

Where Will the Green-Labour Alliance in the Netherlands Lead?

Article by Simon Otjes

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After years of setbacks and right-wing government, the GreenLeft and the Labour Party are deepening their cooperation ahead of March provincial elections. United around a common vision based on social and environmental justice, can the alliance bring progressive change to the Netherlands?

Two years ago, the Dutch Left was in tatters. After four years of centre-right government, the traditional parties of the Left – GreenLeft, Labour and Socialists – obtained an even worse result than they had at the already disastrous elections of 2017. The defeat was particularly striking considering that the government, led by the pro-market Liberal Party, had a poor track record in dealing with environmental issues and was forced to step down in 2021 after a years-long injustice in dealing with the worst off.

Now two years later, the Left has regained a measure of self-confidence and electoral potential through far-reaching cooperation between the GreenLeft and the social-democratic Labour Party. Why is cooperation now possible? How does cooperation in the Netherlands compare to progressive alliances in other countries? What does it hold for the future?

Progressive cooperation in the Netherlands

The debate about progressive cooperation in the Netherlands goes back to the 1960s when one of the predecessor parties of the GreenLeft entered into a pact with the Labour Party, which in 1973 led to the formation of the Den Uyl cabinet. This cabinet has today gained mythical status as the most left-wing government in Dutch history. In the decades following, the Labour Party always looked to the parties of the centre and right when it came to coalition formation. No parties left of the Labour Party have been in government since 1977. At the local level, the two parties of Labour and the GreenLeft cooperate in municipal executives and run common lists in small and rural municipalities.

Historically, the left-wing parties have held a minority position in the Netherlands. In the 2021 elections, the left side of the political spectrum became very fragmented. Currently, there are 10 parties in parliament that one could place on the Left: in addition to the GreenLeft and Labour, there are the just-left-of-centre D66, the left-wing populist Socialist Party, the deep-green Party for the Animals, the Christian-social Christian Union, the pan-European Volt, the party for bicultural citizens DENK, the pensioners' party GOUD, and the intersectional-feminist BIJ1. Historically, the Left broadly defined was no larger than it is today but much less divided.

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The Labour Party's traditional aversion to progressive cooperation began to change after the party's 2017 pasokification (it dropped from 38 seats to 9 seats) and in particular its inability in 2021 to regain seats despite the centre-right government's failure to solve the environmental and social issues it had created. In 2021, the GreenLeft also lost 6 of its 14 seats.

To deal with their weakened position, the GreenLeft and the Labour Party negotiated as a bloc in the 2021 coalition talks. The duo ended up in opposition but continue to work together. The two parties often speak for each other in parliamentary debates, hold common parliamentary group meetings and make joint plans.

Towards a common Senate group

In the summer of 2022, the two parties committed to the formation of a common parliamentary party group in the Senate (which will be indirectly elected, mostly by the Provincial Councils in 2023). The two parties will have their own lists of candidates, but they were presented in a common meeting. The aim is to become the largest Senate group. It would be the first time that a left-wing force is the largest bloc in the Senate since 1987.

There have only been a few polls ahead of the Senate elections. On average, they suggest that the Liberal Party is slightly ahead of the combined forces of the GreenLeft and the Labour Party. The Liberal Party thus far has embraced the new cooperation as their preferred enemy. It allows them to talk about economic issues, tax cuts and austerity – more comfortable territory than the environmental and migration issues which risk riling their coalition partners. If a GreenLeft / Labour Party parliamentary party group emerges as the largest in the Senate, it would hold a strong position without which the current government would struggle to reach a majority. It would give the GreenLeft / Labour Party combination a powerful hand in future coalition negotiations.

While the talks about cooperation were initiated by the leaderships of the two parties, the move was backed by clear majorities in both the Labour Party's general assembly and the GreenLeft's referendum on the issue. In both parties, a group called RedGreen organises members that favour deeper cooperation, including a merger. It is signed by 7500 citizens. In January 2023, RedGreen launched an initiative where members of one party joined the other party. Their list of dual members now includes former leaders of both parties, the top candidates for the Senate, former ministers and current members of local executives in big cities. For the provincial elections in the conservative southwestern province of Zeeland, the Labour Party and GreenLeft are running on a common list. In the current campaign, the party leaders are hosting common town hall meetings.

Similarities and differences

Cooperation is not just about joining forces to strengthen the Left. The think tanks of the two parties have written a [common vision for the future](#). The document focused on ensuring that the transition to a sustainable economy happens in a just way and ensuring that every citizen is [economically secure](#). To this end, the two parties want to bring privatised sectors such as childcare, healthcare, transport and energy under public control. They want to redistribute income and wealth between the rich and the poor and give employees greater control over their work. The parties do not just want to fight climate change and biodiversity loss but do it in such a way that addresses economic inequalities both nationally and internationally.

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The vision offers a fundamental break from the policies pursued by the Dutch government for the past 40 years. Overzealous benefit fraud prosecution caused the welfare scandal that led to the previous centre-right government stepping down. Government policies have long prioritised economic growth over environmental protection, leading to biodiversity problems that centre-right governments have been unable to address. It also offers a radical break with neoliberal thinking that the Labour Party had embraced in the previous decades and the GreenLeft dabbled in through the late 2000s and early 2010s. The manifesto does not show any sign that environmental and social goals are muddled. If anything with the focus on climate justice, the think tanks recognise that solidarity and sustainability are intertwined. With the focus on bringing more economic sectors under public control, it would not be wrong to characterise it as eco-socialist.

The common manifesto does not however touch the issues that divide the two parties, particularly migration. The Labour Party supported the 2016 migration deal with Turkey whereby refugees seeking to reach the European Union were sent back to Turkey and European Union would take in only “real refugees”. The GreenLeft opposed this deal for its inhumane treatment of refugees. It was the key reason that the GreenLeft refused to enter government in 2017. While not insensitive to the needs of refugees, the Labour Party is more likely to accept measures that limit migration. However, the parties have written a common policy paper on fighting the exploitation of migrant labour.

The parties also differ on law and order. The Labour Party is more likely to back measures that are supposed to fight crime at the cost of privacy. In 2018, the Netherlands held a referendum on a bill increasing the digital surveillance powers of intelligence services. A Labour Party minister introduced this bill. The GreenLeft campaigned against it.

On international trade, the GreenLeft opposed the EU’s CETA deal with Canada on the basis that it would lower social and environmental standards. The Labour Party in the Senate voted for the treaty because of the need for international cooperation.

So far, the parties have downplayed their differences. Though prominent conservative Labour Party figures opposed to cooperation have emphasised where they do not agree. Their arguments are based on the idea that the Labour Party should appeal to lower-educated voters that now do not vote or vote for radical right-wing populist parties. These conservative Social Democrats often betray their true colours by speaking out against the climate agenda that their own party endorses.

In the GreenLeft, the opposition comes from more radical green and left-wing elements that see an unbridgeable gap between Labour Party reformism and the utopianism of the GreenLeft. They would prefer closer ties to the Party for the Animals or BIJ1. While historical differences of course exist, this criticism underestimates both the extent to which the GreenLeft in practice seeks to improve social conditions and the environment through small steps as well as the radicalism of the common manifesto.

Progressive alliances around Europe

Social Democrats and Greens work together closely across Europe. In Germany, Die Grünen and the Social Democrats operate autonomously but are natural allies. Both parties can mobilise their own, sizeable electorates. As they currently do at the federal level, they often cooperate. But they also enter government separately, such as in Baden-Württemberg where the Greens work with the Christian Democrats. Similarly, left-wing parties are working together in centrist and centre-left governments in Belgium, Finland and Luxembourg.

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In France, due to the electoral system and the collapse of the centre-left Socialist Party, left-wing parties, including the left-wing populists, Communists, Greens and Social Democrats combined forces in the [2022 parliamentary elections](#) as the New Popular, Ecological and Social Union (NUPES). In Italy, the Democratic Party worked with other parties such as the Greens, social liberals, Socialists and former Five Star members in the [September 2022 elections](#). Both the French and the Italian coalitions were unsuccessful at the ballot box. After the elections, moreover, the different allies formed separate parliamentary party groups.

For the Dutch Senate election, the logic is reversed. Due to the highly proportional electoral system, the Labour Party and the GreenLeft can win seats separately, but to form a powerful bloc the two parties will merge their groups.

Prospects for power

What will happen after the next elections is far from certain. So far, the parties indicate that they want cooperation to continue. Pundits have hedged the success of future cooperation on the results of the provincial elections, but the political leaders of Labour Party and GreenLeft have not.

One possibility is a common list of both GreenLeft and the Labour Party for the next parliamentary election, expected in 2025. The hope is that even more than at the provincial level, the alliance could challenge the Liberal Party to become the largest political force. The Netherlands has not had a change of prime minister for nearly 13 years, making Mark Rutte the longest-standing leader in the European Union other than Viktor Orbán in Hungary. By offering a serious challenge to the Liberal Party for the premiership, together the GreenLeft and Labour could unite left-wing voters and perhaps mobilise voters beyond the core left-wing constituency who want a change.

To a large extent, such success remains a sailor's dream. Whether such a joint venture would be successful depends on the choice of leader, the election manifesto and, of course, the actions of other parties.

The upcoming elections will form a major, though incomplete, test of progressive cooperation. The wager is that a clear and realistic alternative to 13 years of Liberal dominance could bring together voters today divided between a whole range of progressive parties. By running both separately but together in the indirect elections for the Senate, the GreenLeft and Labour Party cannot replicate the impact of a common list at a general election.

Pundits see the cooperation as a prelude to a possible merger. The party leaders are not talking about that as of yet. Currently, they are focused on electoral coordination and parliamentary cooperation between separate political parties. While a common list for the upcoming elections seems like the Left's best bet to gain momentum ahead of 2025, it is not necessarily evident that a merger is a promising long-term strategy. At the end of the day, the parties' electorates (seniors and younger people) are not the same and the parties also emphasise distinct priorities (social justice and ecology). The start-up culture of the GreenLeft and the institutions of the Labour Party with its almost 80 years of history are also very different.

A potential GreenLeft / Labour Party list may well be able to Hoover up votes from the Social Liberals and smaller left-wing parties. But should they enter government in 2025 and replace the poetry of campaigning with the prose of governing, it could easily reverse. In a scenario in which the GreenLeft and the Labour Party end up in power alongside centre-right parties, which in the Netherlands has always been the case, the smaller, more radical parties could soon regain any lost ground.



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