

# First we take Amsterdam, then we take The Hague

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*Ah you loved me as a loser, but now you're worried that I  
just might win  
You know the way to stop me, but you don't have the  
discipline  
How many nights I prayed for this, to let my work begin  
First we take Manhattan, then we take Berlin*

Leonard Cohen, 'First we take Manhattan'

The university movement in the Netherlands has just won its first victory; a victory for democracy and academic freedom against the commercialization of higher education.

On April 1st, representatives of staff and students from the occupied Maagdenhuis at the University of Amsterdam (UvA) came to an agreement with the University's Executive Board (CvB) concerning the formation of two independent committees, one to investigate UvA's finances and another to investigate possibilities for decentralization and democratization. In an unprecedented development, the committees will have the authority to make binding recommendations that promise to transform life at the University. No one could have predicted this a few weeks ago. Our victory vindicates the choice to step up the pressure by engaging in grassroots extra-institutional activism – including an occupation and other disruptive tactics – to force the attention of those who have been willfully deaf to the discontent and frustration that has

accumulated in the lecture hall for decades. The coming weeks will see intense debate on the shaping of those committees, as well as on the future of the protest movement that has made the (still) occupied Maagdenhuis into a bustling cultural venue – a symbol of what the university *could* be: a space of collaborative learning open to everyone – hosting events from avant-garde electronic music concerts to talks by intellectuals like David Graeber, Gloria Wekker, Jacques Rancière, and Wolfgang Streeck.

Even though the mood is festive on central Amsterdam's Spui – the Maagdenhuis' address, now prankishly renamed Red Square in allusion to the symbol of the red square introduced during the 2012 Quebec student protests – the structural maladies afflicting Dutch higher education are not receding. Indeed, the preliminary victory for the protest movement at the UvA is a *j'accuse* against these maladies as a whole, that is, against the neoliberal pathology that caused them. This pathology has to do with chronic underfunding in light of increasing student numbers, creeping micromanagement of research and teaching, and growing authoritarianism from university management – all made possible, indeed foisted on universities, by national and EU policies. Our Winter Palace is therefore not in Amsterdam, but in The Hague, the seat of government in the Netherlands.

The Dutch minister for Education, Jet Bussemaker, has so far been good at playing UvA's staff and students against the Executive Board. There is an element of self-reproach to that, given that Bussemaker was a member of UvA's Executive Board until 2012. Moreover, as minister, Bussemaker appoints the members of the university's Supervisory Board that is supposed to control and advise the Executive Board. She is therefore at least partly responsible for the unfolding crisis. No matter: the Executive Board has now returned the compliment by pointing to the Dutch government as the

ultimate culprit for the bureaucratic commercialization of the university. Indeed, a constant sticking point in the forthcoming negotiations is likely to be the content of Dutch law pertaining to university administration. And this is where the plot thickens: short of changing a set of 1997 laws (the auspiciously labeled *Modernisering Universitaire Bestuursorganisatie*), staff and students cannot get full democracy at their place of work—at least not without transgressing the spirit of these laws.

It follows that, while the Amsterdam committees start their work, the movement for university self-government must increasingly look towards The Hague. The Maagdenhuis occupiers cannot win this wider fight alone: fighting a single university bureaucracy is one thing, fighting the Ministry of Education – until recently a driving force behind the neoliberalization of Dutch society – is another. Thankfully UvA is not alone. Students and staff from other Dutch universities already stand behind it and started developing their own protest platforms, addressing problems from within their own academic communities that significantly overlap with the agenda of the movement in Amsterdam. This is the movement for a New University (named after the student component of UvA's movement), which spread like a fire throughout the Netherlands in February.

The New University has a life of its own, well beyond the Amsterdam occupation and the concerns of each member institution's local remit. Like the global movement of university occupations and protests that has sprung up in recent weeks, the different cells of the New University have supported each other in a spirit of solidarity. The New University is therefore the natural vehicle for taking the fight beyond Amsterdam. In order to be successful, this struggle will have to proceed according the same dual approach that has informed the protest movement in Amsterdam: build up – keep up – pressure outside established

institutions and procedures and *at the same time* maintain secure and organized control over procedures and committees, such that the movement does not simply disintegrate and evaporate over time. It is now time to take the struggle to another level: and then we take The Hague.