

Marching through March

What we demonstrated for, why, and what to do now

by Meike Eijsberg

Everyone who logged into their Facebook at the end of February or beginning of March has probably seen them: event invites to all kinds of big demonstrations and strikes taking place in the Netherlands in the month of March. As more and more of your friends clicked 'going', you started to wonder: "Cool! But why?" In this little overview of the 3 biggest marches, four students tell you what they demonstrated for, why, and what we can do now.

The Women's March, 9th of March

What?

The annual Women's March took place in Amsterdam, the day after International Women's Day.

The march, unlike the name suggests, was one for all: every gender, every sexuality, race, class, etc. It emphasised the need to raise your voice for everyone, especially those who are unheard.

"Unapologetically feminist, anti-racist, and inclusive," was the motto of this passionate crowd.

Ellen Vas and Fiona Wiggers were a part of it. Ellen decided to attend the march by herself, proudly. The vibe was ultimately positive. "I wouldn't say it was a demonstration," she says. "It was rather a get-together to make you feel like you're not alone in this!"

They certainly weren't. According to the Women's March Netherlands, around 15,000 people showed up, all supporting the cause and one another. Fiona, holding up a banner that said "Women hold up half the sky," recalls a particular memory of a small toddler waving at everyone from her balcony. She received support through hundreds of waves in return. "She must have felt like a queen," Fiona said.

Why?

Living in Netherlands, a country that has consistently ranked high in gender equality, sometimes gives the impression that we're doing just fine. Although everything might seem near-perfect in the official reports, inequalities are still visible in society. This was exactly Fiona's reason for going: "I want to stress that having equal rights on paper doesn't mean you have equal opportunities and are taken equally seriously. There's still a lot of changes to be made."

The Women's March was important for Ellen too because she learnt a lot about gender inequality during her studies. Participating in the march was simply the next step. "I think it helps women to see that they're not alone and that they're worthy of getting every opportunity they deserve and feel fit for."

What can we do now?

According to the European Commission, who published the annual report on the 8th of March in honours of Women's Day, social and gender equality in the EU are increasing, but not fast enough. Some member states are even experiencing a decrease.

The fight for gender equality is clearly far from

being over and we all ought to do our part to help the process. Fiona had a quite the lovely idea. She wants to see what she can do at UCU to change half of the academic buildings on campus into female names. "I don't believe 7 buildings named after men are very inspirational for/or representative of a 70% female campus."

The Climate March, 10th of March

What?

The Climate March was a one of a kind. Never before had so many people gathered on the streets of Amsterdam to demonstrate in the name of the environment. Although it was raining cats and dogs, a record number of 40,000 showed up, proudly flashing colourful signs indicating their sense of urgency. Cold, wet and miserable, they screamed and chanted "red het klimaat, straks is het te laat," as they stumbled on.

The fact that the weather was so unfortunate may have strengthened the message. Some students definitely seemed to think so. "I think it was wonderful that so many people decided that this was something worth showing up for, despite the blistering cold and pouring rain," says Jamie March.

Why?

It's no secret that the Dutch government is behind on its quest for new and improved climate policies. The Netherlands is currently last on the EU list in sustainable energy production together with Malta and Cyprus. The political imperative of the matter is lacking, and this could have serious consequences for younger generations in the future.

Although awareness has been increasing the last few years, we are not quite there yet. "It's important to push forward this movement now and show the government and big companies what their population and clients' priorities are," Fiona explains.

What can we do now?

Time seems to be running out, but there remains hope. Jamie had a simple solution: "Vote!" A straightforward, but nevertheless correct response. The provincial elections might be over already, but the EU Parliament elections are coming up. Every vote counts, so if you want to make sure the EU will tackle climate issues in the future, then vote for a party who you think has the means to achieve this end.

In the meantime, there are lots of other activities to join. The organisation of the Climate March set up a special website which it constantly updates with new things to do. Have a look yourself, via bit.ly/mars-terugblik (get a Dutch friend to translate it).

The Education Strike, 15th of March

What?

Although technically not a march, but rather a stationary demonstration, the education strike that took place in the Hague was also a unique one. For the first time ever, students and staff from primary, secondary and higher education

all assembled for a nation-wide strike.

Marco Minoni was one of many that was there on the fresh Friday morning. "The government keeps cutting funds year-after-year," he explained. "They said they would reinvest it, which they are doing, but way less money than what they took away."

Money is indeed a crucial matter. The Algemene Onderwijsbond (AOB) therefore demanded a total of 4 billion euros for all sectors combined.

Why?

Why so much money? Because, time and time again, students and staff are victims of the annual budget-cuts and lack of educational investments. The government fails to accommodate for the constant inflow of students. There is a shortage of teachers, meaning some kids only have class 4 out of 5 days, simply because no one is there. Staff (and students) that are there, are experiencing the disastrous consequences. They must still produce the same output, which results in an increased workload.

Clearly enough reasons. But why strike? According to Marco, "It shows how many people are affected by policy and changes." He adds that, "In this case the aim was also to cause a bit of instability...The parents had to take care of the children because nobody was there at school. This creates awareness of the problem."

What can we do now?

As it the case for all other causes, spreading the word always helps. Additionally, showing up for future demonstrations or strikes is never not appreciated. "I am definitely going to other ones...There was one in December, I also attended that one." Marco said enthusiastically.

Meanwhile, show support to your teachers! UCU may be in a somewhat privileged place where teacher-student dialogue (about this topic) is flourishing, but it doesn't hurt to mention it. Marco certainly seems to think so: "[At the strike,] we were 4-5 students, and 2-3 teachers, and we stayed afterwards to hang out. That was really cool, because we should all support this together!"

Are there more opportunities?

For those with a heart for social justice, a need for urgency or those who simply get an adrenaline rush out of prancing around with a banner, there are always other chances. NOS once reported that an estimated average of 34 demonstrations, varying in scale and goal, take place in the country every week.

The next few you can mark in your calendar are: 20 April 2019: March against animal testing, organised by Animal Rights
1 May 2019: March for Labour Day, organised by FNV.

So grab a piece of cardboard, come up with an eye-catching slogan, and march on!



