EU response to refugee crisis: Deterrence by Drowning

In April, the world's media once again carried harrowing pictures of mass drownings in the Mediterranean. Only 28 people were rescued from a boat carrying over 900 that capsized 130 miles off the Libyan coast. The dead included 200 women and children who were locked into the hold. Immediately, Europe's politicians and church leaders expressed their shock and swore that something must be done.

Exactly what was to be done was decided by the EU leaders when they met in Brussels on 23 April. Far from reversing their current policy, Operation Triton, which has consigned thousands to a terrible death, they decided to strengthen it. Instead of adopting a search and rescue policy, they agreed to triple spending on Triton's mission of frontier protection against migrants.

In addition, they suggested seeking a military mandate to seize and destroy people-smugglers' boats, powers to trace and seize their funds, and sending teams to Italy and Greece in order to speed up the return of failed asylum applicants.

In short, despite the terrible scenes off Lampedusa, Malta, Sicily and Rhodes, the rulers of civilized Europe are determined to pursue their Fortress Europe policy. They will also continue their anti-terrorist bombing sprees in Africa and the Middle East, a principal factor in forcing millions to flee their homelands.

A tragedy repeated

The German news magazine Der Spiegel has pointed to a striking parallel between this response to the deaths on April 19 and a similar disaster near Lampedusa on October 3, 2013. Then, more than 500 people drowned in what Pope Francis called 'Europe's shame'. A summit of EU heads of government in Brussels promised 'decisive measures to avoid a repeat of the catastrophe'.

Indeed, a "Mediterranean Taskforce", under Cecilia Malmström, EU Commissioner for Home Affairs, proposed a series of reforms to the member states. It reached the obvious conclusion that the main reason people risk their lives on the perilous crossing to Europe is that there are few, if any, legal channels for seeking asylum or work in the EU. Although most arrivals are sent back, at least they have a chance to present a case if they reach a member state.

The Malmström Commission concluded that member states should issue visas in the countries from which migrants set out, creating a humanitarian path of entry into the Union. That, however, was the last thing the EU governments were willing to consider and the report was quietly buried.

On October 18, 2013, in the complete absence of any EU action, Italy launched Operation Mare Nostrum ("Our Sea") whose declared objective was search and rescue, that is, to prevent refugees from drowning.
For around a year, the Italian navy and coast guard patrolled 43,000-square-kilometres with deep-sea vessels, helicopters and reconnaissance aircraft. The numbers rescued increased dramatically to some 150,000 refugees in one year.

A cause for rejoicing and congratulation one might have thought? Not for the gutter press and the politicians who dance to its tune. The ruthless inhumanity of the majority of the EU's leaders was summed up by the British Foreign Office Minister, Lady Anelay. She was against Mare Nostrum's ?planned search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean? because they provided a ?pull factor?. As if the possibility of being saved from drowning was encouraging refugees to risk everything.

Her colleague, Home Secretary Theresa May, also ignored the ?push factor? of imperialist policy in the Middle East and explained that an end to Mare Nostrum ships would be an effective deterrent for would-be migrants. So, it has come to this; ensuring deaths at sea has become an instrument of policy, Deterrence by Drowning!

After a year, Italy, which is undergoing the austerity ?medicine? prescribed by the European Central Bank and the EU Commission, was unable to continue paying the €9m per month cost of Mare Nostrum whilst paying off its debts to the bankers and bondholders.

Not a euro came from the richer EU states. On the contrary, they took the opportunity to scrap Mare Nostrum altogether. They replaced it with ?Operation Triton?, EU-funded but with only a third of the budget and far fewer vessels. More importantly, its mandate was to patrol the EU?s maritime borders far from the North African coast. In short, it was a frontier guard to stop migrants rather than an operation to save them.

The inevitable outcome was predicted by all the experts and genuine humanitarian agencies involved; since the beginning of 2015, at least 1,700 people have died making the journey, 50 times more than in the same period last year.

Whose Responsibility?
The conflicts in Africa and the Middle East, prolonged, even where they were not started outright, by the Nato powers, have created the largest refugee disaster since the Second World War. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees estimates 3.9 million have fled from Syria alone.

Justin Forsyth of Save The Children, has commented: ?The scale of what is happening in the Mediterranean isn?t an accident, it?s a direct result of our policy. How many more innocent children and their families must die before our leaders act??

There can be no doubt that it is the leaders of the European Union who are directly responsible for the Mediterranean tragedy. They have supported, if not initiated, the ?humanitarian interventions? in countries like Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Somalia, South Sudan, Chad and Libya. The real purpose of such interventions was to secure the ?right? of the former European colonial powers to exploit the natural resources and labour of these countries. The results are the humanitarian disasters that have driven hundreds of thousands to seek refuge in Europe.

As for those stigmatised as merely ?economic migrants?, the responsibility for their plight lies with the economic system and those who profit from and defend it. The neoliberal policies imposed by the IMF have robbed workers and small farmers, destroyed their lands and denied them an income on which they could survive and prosper. The vast wealth stolen from the working class and peasantry of Africa and the Middle East is a major source of Europe?s continued prosperity.

To support the policy of ?Fortress Europe?, the victims of Europe?s imperialist foreign policy are presented
as people to be feared and kept out. This fear is fomented by repeated calls in the press for tightening racist immigration laws that deny those fleeing war, oppression and miserable poverty their basic human right of asylum and the right to work. Papers like the Sun in Britain and Bild in Germany do this on a daily basis. A columnist in the Sun recently referred to refugees as "feral humans? and "cockroaches?, language that directly echoes that of the Nazis.

Meanwhile, the more "reasonable? politicians, some calling themselves Labour or Social Democrat, claim immigration must be restricted in order to preserve the social welfare and employment of European workers. This is rank hypocrisy; the same politicians are supporting the austerity programmes that are the real threat to workers' jobs and living standards. This propaganda means people accept the need for anti-immigrant policies, not because they are convinced racists but because they believe their countries have no obligation, or really are unable, to provide work, shelter and a decent life for all. Socialists have to swim against this tide of racism, whether of the "respectable? or the shameless variety.

Tear down the Fortress walls

Rescuing those in peril on the seas is an elementary human duty and all those who abandon it, and talk of drowning people as a conscious deterrent policy, deserve to be branded with infamy. Nonetheless, such murderous policies are not just an expression of the moral bankruptcy of political leaders, they are dictated by the logic of the system which they uphold.

We need to take urgent action to address both the immediate symptoms of the crisis and the underlying causes. The working class must reject the divisive propaganda of the ruling class and fight for measures which defend the common interests of workers of all lands, interests which are irreconcilably opposed to those of the minority class of exploiters.

We need to open the borders of the EU to all who seek asylum or work within it. We need to withdraw all EU, US and Nato military bases from the Middle East and Africa. We need to tear down the walls and transform Fortress Europe into a Europe that is a refuge for all those fleeing oppression and exploitation.

However, providing refuge will not solve the root causes of the problem. We also need to fight for the provision of massive economic aid or, rather, compensation, without strings, for the peoples that imperialism has exploited for centuries. Our aim must be to help the workers and farmers of these countries to attain the standards of life that Europeans take for granted.

While we can limit the excesses of capitalist exploitation and should fight for genuine humanitarian assistance, the ravages of capitalism cannot be overcome by using capitalism's own methods. The only way to achieve a permanent end to the exploitation of Africa and the Middle East is to overthrow the political and economic system that allows the imperialist powers to carry out that exploitation.

In Europe, that means advancing the struggle for a new Europe, a Europe of sanctuary, social solidarity and socialist revolution, and to create, not only there but across the world, a society where all production, education and culture is produced in the interests of the many, not the few.

Source URL: https://fifthinternational.org/content/eu-response-refugee-crisis-deterrence-drowning