

# EU summit ? Agreement at the expense of refugees

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The two-day meeting of the Council of the European Union in Brussels on June 28/29 was totally overshadowed by the issue of migration and the demands of a faction of central European states plus Italy for more draconian measures against them. Three factors encouraged the anti-immigrant political hate campaign. Austria presently holds the EU Presidency, and now has a coalition government of the right wing conservative People's Party, ÖVP, and the more overtly racist Freedom Party, FPÖ. Secondly, Italy, too, has a coalition which includes the equally racist Lega which is threatening to deport 500,000 refugees.

In the run-up to the summit there was a major German governmental crisis. Chancellor Angela Merkel of the Christian Democratic Union, CDU, and the Interior Minister, Horst Seehofer of the Christian Social Union, CSU, were locked in conflict. Merkel characterised the issue as finding a solution to the refugees, consistent with European values and claimed this was an issue involving the very fate of the Union.

Seehofer, on the other hand, issued a blunt ultimatum to Merkel. If she did not find her "European solution" to the problem of "secondary migration" within 14 days, the CSU government in Bavaria would close Germany's southern borders unilaterally. He also threatened his own resignation which might face the CDU-CSU coalition itself with disintegration.

"Secondary migrants" are refugees who have already been registered in another EU country or have applied for asylum there. Seehofer wanted the power to reject these people directly at the Bavarian border. Merkel, in turn, wanted to negotiate multilateral agreements with the EU states. The CDU itself wants increased border controls to limit the influx of refugees and migrants, as well as to increase the number of deportations. But it wants to do this by agreements with those states through and to which the refugees are sent. The CDU's is a pragmatic state racism, disguised in humanitarianism verbiage, whereas Seehofer is shamelessly pandering to irrational chauvinism in the hope of boosting the CSU in elections to the province's parliament due on 14 October.

## Results of the EU Summit

The summit passed resolutions that the Austrian Chancellor, Sebastian Kurz, the Italian Prime Minister, Giuseppe Conte, and his Interior Minister, Matteo Salvini, chairman of the Lega, declared were a "turnaround" in the EU's refugee policy. Many of their demands have indeed been taken on board.

The focus for Italy was and remains overcoming the so-called Dublin III Regulation of 26 June 2013, which stipulates that the first arrival countries are responsible for hosting the refugees. This has been suspended, de facto, as has the "Common European Asylum System", CEAS, created between 1999 and 2005. They have been replaced by a common European fight against the refugees. In practice, the system is not completely new, but it is no longer veiled with deceitful humanitarian phrases.

Today, racists like the FPÖ Austrian Interior Minister, Herbert Kickl, set the pace both ideologically and institutionally. He spoke of the need for "service centres and infrastructure that would allow the authorities to concentrate asylum seekers in one place". The EU will now allow states to create "control centres" within their borders and "disembarkation platforms" in North Africa. In Germany, the camps idea will be rolled out under the innocent title "Ankerzentren" (anchor centres).

These will be quite simply prison camps for refugees, where swift decisions are made on their right to asylum. Deportation authorities, judges and police forces are to be located on the spot so that refugees can be directly transported out of the country if their applications are rejected. Chancellor Merkel wanted to set up these camps, if possible with the help of the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR, in accordance with UN regulations. But even UNHCR, currently partly responsible for the catastrophic situation in the Syrian refugee camps in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, refused cooperation with these "centres", since protection and access to asylum are not guaranteed there.

Pulling up the drawbridge and rearming

Merkel has also negotiated bilateral agreements with Spain and Greece on the repatriation of refugees. Repatriation requests required a complicated bureaucratic procedure under Dublin III. Merkel's success was facilitated by the socialist prime ministers of Spain and Greece, Pedro Sánchez and Alexis Tsipras, who are thus in practice following Horst Seehofer's proposals. However, Merkel has reached no agreement with Italy as yet. Since most refugees arriving there move on to Germany, Rome's cooperation is crucial for a forced "repatriation" scheme. Merkel wanted to leave finding a solution to the ministerial level. There, the overt racists Seehofer and Salvini could fight it out over a "compromise", at the expense of the fugitives.

There was also agreement on further upgrading and increasing the EU border guards, Frontex, a "police force" that has been trying for years to allow as few refugees as possible into Europe and is responsible for tens of thousands of their deaths in the Mediterranean and Aegean. This will now take over the role of "coast guard" off Libya, a barely existing state in which Islamic militias like Islamic State, are waging a bloody civil war with EU-minions like the Misrata government.

This includes not only "coastal protection" but also the control centre for "sea rescue". What the EU states, and Italy in particular, understand by this, we could observe when rescue ships like the "Lifeline", which saved hundreds of fugitives from drowning, were denied access to the European coasts (not only by Italy). The captain of "Lifeline", Claus-Peter Reisch, rightly raised the question in what sort of world we now live, "in which more action is taken against saving people than against their dying". The EU Frontex ships will now "rescue" the refugees and return them to camps in Libya.

These "Centres" and "platforms" are similar to the arrangement under Muammar Gaddafi. At that time, the brutal dictator's state apparatus secured the EU's external borders, for a price, just as Recep Tayyip Erdogan is doing on the Aegean coast today. The EU is talking of a similar arrangement with all the other North African states.

The barbaric nature of EU decisions, the sheer brazenness with which the "deterrence" of refugees is talked about, illustrates the shift to the right and the exponential growth of racism in Europe. Nor is this simply an Eastern or Southern European phenomenon. France and Britain blocked their borders when the main wave of Syrian refugees came in 2015 and were equally resistant to sharing the "burden" with Germany and Sweden.

Even before the so-called "refugee crisis", the EU accepted the deaths of thousands in the Mediterranean,

and the political elite was only moved to crocodile tears when the drownings off the Greek islands or off Lampedusa, hit the headlines. Today, such news is approvingly broadcast as a deterrent. Only the evil people smugglers are blamed, not the closed frontiers that keep them in business.

While an agreement was struck on the EU's main objective, deportation camps and making the Mediterranean an impassable moat for Fortress Europe, the reception and distribution of successful asylum seekers within the EU continues to be "voluntary".

Under Austria's presidency, the overall results of the summit were a triumph for the European hard right, including rapid progress in the militarisation of external borders, the expansion of "concentration" camps and fast-track deportation for refugees. The "Visegrad" countries; Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, with their arch-reactionary governments, were able to continue their policy of razor wire fences and allowing virtually none to pass.

To a degree the European right-wing governments are united against Merkel and all who support the sharing of the "immigrant burden", in proportion to their population size and resources. But the problem these governments face is that in pursuit of their own "national" interests they come into conflict with one another. The rights in Austria, including right-wing social democrats, see the "compromise" in Brussels as a German victory over Austria's interests. But the biggest collision is between the interests of Vienna and Rome. Certainly no common European policy can grow up on the basis of selfish national interests and right wing populist demagoguery.

Since many of these governments do rather well out of the EU budgets, they shy away from a total break with Merkel or Macron. The "centre" of the EU has thus also gained a little time, but not much more.

Another decision was to set up an investment fund within the EU budget. This refers to the initiative Macron proposed and its modesty is a courtesy to the Federal Government. From its next budget year, the EU will spend 10-15 billion euros for investment in "innovation", for example, the Internet and integration. This amount could also be increased, but that will remain controversial. This new budget item was also considered just "bait" towards integration.

The Bavarian Prime Minister, Markus Söder, even suspected that the Eastern European countries were being bribed to take in more refugees. At the same time, some national conservative representatives spoke out against possible increases in the EU budget, opposing Macron's proposals to strengthen cross border investment, which he sees as benefiting the French economy and its leadership role within the EU.

Brexit, which is approaching in 2019, produced more pronouncements than resolutions. There is currently no substance to be expected from either the UK or the EU on this issue. It only seems clear that Brexit will be conducted on the back of the working class in Britain.

On the question of militarisation and increased armament spending, it was decided to push ahead with joint efforts towards an EU army, EU arms projects and command structures independent of NATO. In particular, the European Defence Fund will be increased. The use of these funds is also contrary to NATO's "objectives" of spending 2 per cent of GDP on joint defence spending, which will lead to further tensions, especially with the US.

A weak Europe caught between the USA and a rising China

In the midst of the increasingly fierce trade war between the USA and China, the EU risks falling further and further behind in the mounting inter-imperialist competition. The Franco-German leadership is divided on key issues such as a common finance and debt policy. Macron's proposals for a common debt policy,

for example, would have a strategic effect on the EU project. This, however, would directly limit the previous advantages of German imperialism, especially the short-term profits of German big business.

In addition, the aggressive orientation of US imperialism under Donald Trump is causing cracks within the EU as well as inside the national ruling classes themselves. While parts of German capital with profitable interests in the huge US market, seek a compromise, it is not only the right-wing populist forces that are turning away from the transatlantic alliance. Again, there is no common orientation but the interests of the different capitalist sectors, as well as conflicting national interests, have come to light. No plan currently seems predominant amongst the rulers of the EU or its major states.

Within the bourgeois camp in Germany, for example, there are divisions between "multilateral" and "unilateral" interests. These penetrate into the CDU and the CSU, the dominant bourgeois parties. While big business needs a politically united EU, which is also able to defend its own economic and geostrategic interests against the US, there is more and more opposition to the EU from the "medium-sized" entrepreneurs. They reject a "Transfer Union" that would move reserves from the continent's north to the south to balance the EU's economy, fearing their profits will be hit hard by it. This also includes civil society groups that support the Alternative for Germany, AfD.

The EU is facing a crucial test. Its internal contradictions are becoming more and more apparent. The EU has the euro, the currency of most Community countries and a huge internal market. But it is not a state; it remains an alliance of a handful of dominant and other small imperialist states, and a number of semi-colonial states. As little as the EU has become a state, so little has a truly pan-European bourgeoisie developed in recent decades. German, French or Italian capital are first and foremost national capitals, and this contradiction threatens to tear the EU apart. The alternative to a European federal bloc led by German and French imperialism would then be its disintegration, and the replacement of joint imperialist projects by no less reactionary national ones.

The European bourgeoisies are incapable of resolving the crisis of the continent. Only the working class is able to unite Europe through a common struggle on a progressive basis. Social democracy or European left-wing parties like Syriza have proven to be a political appendix to the "pro-European" wing of capital; others like Germany's Sarah Wagenknecht, the co-chair of Die Linke (The Left) or Jean-Luc Mélenchon, leader of La France Insoumise (Unsubmissive France) are flirting with a national and, indeed, nationalistic "reformist policies". To them must be added British Labour's Jeremy Corbyn and his ex-Communist Party advisors, who covertly believe Brexit can offer opportunities for a rebirth of British reformist socialism.

Such "left" nationalist strategies are just as bad as uncritical acceptance of the leadership of Macron or Merkel. Breaking up the EU would cause economic chaos and nationalist poisoning of the working people. But a Franco-German imperialist Europe would head straight into trade and then military clashes with the USA and China.

This political crisis and the shift to the right can only be overcome if the working class throughout Europe takes up the fight for its interests and against racist isolation, and thus lays the foundation stone for the United Socialist States of Europe.

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