

Planet without a visa

Jeremy Dewar, Workers Power Britain Thu, 13/08/2015 - 08:20

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There are more refugees in the world today than ever before. This year's Global Trends Report, published by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), puts the figure at 59.5 million people at the end of 2014, a record 11 million up on the 2013 figure and over a third more than the numbers recorded as recently as 2003.

The UNHCR counts all those who have had to forcibly leave their home and region: 19.5 million refugees who have fled abroad, 1.8 million asylum seekers who have not yet received refugee status and 38.2 million internally displaced people who have not yet crossed a border. Over half of them are children under 18 years of age.

The largest number of refugees come from Syria. The report estimates that 'almost one out of every four refugees is Syrian, with 95 percent located in surrounding countries,' making Turkey, which has taken in about 1 million Syrians the country with the largest number of displaced people in the world, and Lebanon, with over 400,000, the country with the highest percentage of refugees (23.2 per cent).

What the figures do not reveal is the colossal number of migrants, legal or illegal, or the breakdown of these workers by age, gender, country of origin or destination. However, the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN-DESA) estimated in September 2013 that 232 million people were living abroad - another record number.¹

As could be expected, most come from the global south in Africa, Asia and Latin America, especially Mexico. Perhaps unexpectedly, as many people migrate to other under-developed countries as to more traditional destinations, like the US, which hosts the largest number of migrants, and the European Union. Also contrary to some myths, almost half of them are women. Three-quarters of all migrants are of working age.

Acknowledging that it is impossible by their very nature to accurately assess the real number of 'illegal' or clandestine migrant workers (though it is fair to assume that their number is higher than figures released by governments) and that there may be some (relatively small) overlap between asylum seekers and migrant workers, it can be estimated that around 4 per cent of the world's population lives and works outside of their country of origin, a fact the international labour and trade union movement cannot ignore.

In this survey, we will look at the plight of these migrants and refugees and the various 'push' factors driving them abroad, and the response of the major imperialist powers, especially the EU, to the current crisis. We will finish by re-establishing the communist position with regard to migrant labour and what needs to be done now.

Push and pull

When a 20 metre long vessel capsized in the Mediterranean on 19 April this year, the world's media

momentarily focused on a fate that threatens the hundreds of thousands of desperate workers who attempt to cross the sea into the EU. An estimated 800 drowned trying to reach the Italian island of Lampedusa. Just 24 were rescued.²

In the first half of 2015, at least 1,865 migrants have drowned in the Mediterranean, a 30-fold increase on the figure for the same period in 2014. Yet the number of migrants attempting the perilous crossing remains stubbornly similar at around 250,000 to 300,000 a year who arrive in crammed fishing boats on the coast of Italy and Greece, mainly from Libya.

The increase in the death toll has nothing to do with choppy waters and everything to do with the European Union's change of policy. Up until November 2014, the EU supported Italy's Mare Nostrum search-and-rescue operation, a humanitarian mission aimed at saving the lives of stranded or sinking migrant ships. The UK was in the forefront of EU member states withdrawing its support for Mare Nostrum and calling for its demise.

Foreign Office Minister Joyce Anelay disgracefully told the House of Lords last year: "We do not support planned search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean? We believe that they create an unintended "pull factor," encouraging more migrants to attempt the dangerous sea crossing and thereby leading to more tragic and unnecessary deaths."

Instead, Lady Anelay proposed, "the most effective way to prevent refugees and migrants attempting this dangerous crossing is to focus our attention on countries of origin and transit, as well as taking steps to fight the people smugglers who wilfully put lives at risk by packing migrants into unseaworthy boats?"

This particularly callous piece of cant has tragically since been unmasked. But before we examine the EU's new policy, let's briefly examine the "push" factors at work. The UN estimates there were 866,000 asylum claims in 2014, 625,000 of which were made in the EU. This represents a 45 per cent increase on the previous year. The largest single bloc came from war-torn Syria, where 3.4 million people are displaced, half of them residing in refugee camps in neighbouring countries. Faced with the murderous onslaught of Assad's regime on one side and the likes of Islamic State on the other if they made the hazardous journey "home" (if such a home still exists), and a jobless subsistence on meagre rations and rampant disease for the foreseeable future if they remain put, is it any wonder that a good proportion would prefer to take their chances crossing into the EU?

Other countries producing a high number of asylum seekers in the current spike in the figures paint a similar picture of desperation, even if that picture is less commonly seen on television screens in the West. Africa in particular has witnessed an eruption in wars and conflicts in the past few years, with a predictable rise in refugee numbers: Democratic Republic of the Congo (over 4 million displaced), South Sudan (over 2.4 million), Somalia (2.3 million), the Central African Republic (1.49 million), Nigeria (1.38 million), Côte d'Ivoire (121,000), Libya (371,000), Mali (427,000) and Burundi (335,000).

Of course, many of the refugees who make the journey north to Europe are denied asylum and described as migrants solely because this suits the selfish interests of the imperialist powers, despite bearing no relation to the truth.

Take the example of Eritrea, the country, after Syria, exporting the greatest number of refugees to Europe. Eritrea gained independence from Ethiopia in 1993 after a 30 year civil war, followed by another seven years of warfare over border disputes. It has had only one ruler, President Isaias Afwerki, who outlaws all opposition and unconstitutionally clings to power.

In June 2015, the UN issued a 500 page report, based on 550 interviews and 160 written testimonies, which Gerry Simpson of Human Rights Watch says tells a story of "extrajudicial killings, widespread torture and arbitrary detention in inhuman conditions, forced disappearances, and forcing men and women

into decades of abusive military service for slave-like wages. The UN says some of these abuses may amount to crimes against humanity?.

Hanna Simon, Eritrea's ambassador to France, said, in relation to the UN report, "Let me tell you, all those [300,000 Eritrean] 'refugees' are economic migrants."³ While the West is no great supporter of Afwerki's regime, which it considers harbours and exports Islamist armed groups like al-Shabaab, it readily laps up this excuse not to offer asylum wherever possible.

To the upsurge of African refugees and migrants, we must also add Afghanis and Pakistanis from the smouldering warzone created by the US-led invasion and its overspill, and a quarter of a million Ukrainians fleeing the destruction caused by Kiev's onslaught against the people of Lugansk and Donetsk – though most of these have headed east to Russia, not west.

The passage from Afghanistan into the EU is no less strenuous and dangerous for being by land. Migrants and refugees walk enormously long distances, with the occasional bus, lorry or ferry journey, often through forests and over mountains because these routes are less policed. From Serbia, they, along with others from Syria and elsewhere, attempt to enter Hungary. But now Hungary is building a 110 mile long, 4 metre high fence to try to block the route.⁴ Like David Cameron's response to the recent crisis in Calais, it seems the leaders in Fortress Europe, having made so much of the tearing down of the Berlin Wall in 1989, are desperate to re-erect these obstacles to the free movement of labour.

In Asia, no doubt taking their cue from the EU's new policy in the Mediterranean, Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia responded to boats carrying 25,000 racially oppressed Rohingya Muslims from Burma and Bangladeshis by air-dropping food and sending them back to sea, despite reports of starvation, throwing people overboard (it remains unclear whether they were dead or alive) and in-fighting.⁵ This is tantamount to a genocidal policy, where the lives of desperate migrants, many young children, were callously destroyed. Many of those who do survive are captured and sold into slavery on board Thai fishing boats.

What is clear in all this is that socialists should make no distinction between "asylum seekers" and "economic migrants". The false separation of the two categories relies solely on the interests of the capitalist states who want to wash their hands of responsibility for these workers. In reality, it is the world division of labour and the imperialist system that drives wars and conflicts, as well as bleeding dry the vast majority of humanity through debt bondage, unfair trade and finance capital.

It is no coincidence, therefore, that the upsurge in migrant and refugee figures in the past five to ten years has also seen the world descend into a new period of intense inter-imperialist rivalry, US-UK led wars in south west Asia and the Middle East and an historic crisis of the capitalist system, from which the economy has not recovered and during which the rich, robber nations sought to deepen and extend their exploitation of the global south.

EU's 10-point plan

The EU's replacement policy for Mare Nostrum is summed up in a 10-point plan, drawn up by the EU Commissioners in April 2015 and since finalised. It can be summed up as: from search-and-rescue to search-and-destroy.⁶

The new forces patrolling the Mediterranean are called Triton and Poseidon; they are explicitly based on the EU's anti-piracy operation off the coast of Somalia, called Atalanta. They will enjoy "more financial resources", greater assets and a wider scope of operation. Their task includes making a "systematic effort to capture and destroy vessels used by the smugglers".

The naval vessels offered by member states to service these new forces have correspondingly changed in nature. Britain has sent Royal Navy flagship HMS Bulwark, an assault ship, and Germany a troop carrier.

Frontex, the EU body coordinating the effort to shore up Fortress Europe, certainly sees its new powers no longer having to negotiate its way past 28 member states in a quasi-military light. A journalist from Der Spiegel quotes Frontex officials casually talking in their control room of 'defending Europe against an enemy'.

The treatment of the people 'rescued' has also changed.⁷ They are now fingerprinted on arrival, as if they were common criminals, so the EU can process them for the 'rapid return of 'irregular' migrants'. EU countries are sending processing teams to Italy and Greece to help speed up the deportation process. Out of an initial 150,000 asylum seekers processed in the programme, the EU agreed only to take 5,000. Naturally, the idea that refugees can continue to process their claims from their country of origin is a cruel deception.

The EU has also arrogated to itself powers to operate in the countries surrounding Libya and in sub-Saharan African states. Here, they will gather information about traffickers and try to stop migrants even getting to Libya. The fact that the EU has the approval of neither the UN nor either of the rival Libyan governments has not deterred it. International law is, after all, enforced (or ignored) by the rich and powerful.⁸

The redistribution of (mostly Syrian) refugees from Italy and Greece to other EU countries has been largely a cosmetic exercise: just 40,000 out of the 250,000 who have arrived. And even this has led to wrangles and name-calling and inevitably the British government refusing to accept a single one of them. Cameron's response exposes the dilemma facing a number of EU leaders; they fear being seen as being 'soft' on immigration because of a backlash by the racist, populist right, even though they have themselves stoked such negative views about immigrants in order to deflect blame for crumbling welfare services and unemployment onto immigration.

Immigrants welcome here

Lenin's view of immigration or migrant labour was that it was an overwhelmingly progressive phenomenon. In his 1899 work, *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*, Lenin polemicised against the Narodniks, who opposed (internal) migration on the basis that it was neither beneficial for the migrants themselves nor for the development of the fighting spirit of the masses. While this work predates the imperialist epoch and therefore deals only with internal migration, its conclusions are only reinforced by their application to the imperialist system of global capitalism and international migration.

Lenin tackles the argument that migration does not yield considerable economic advantages for the worker: 'Purely economic advantage accrues to the workers from 'peregrination' [i.e. migration] in that they go to places where wages are higher, where their position as seekers of employment is a more advantageous one.'

The idea that the EU can send officials to sub-Saharan countries in a bid to stop the flow of migration through peaceful argument is entirely bogus. Potential migrants know by anecdote, by experience and by knowledge gained from a variety of objective sources that their chances of earning considerably more in wages in EU countries, even if their wages are set at below official minimum levels and even if their skills are not officially recognised, are great. Qualified engineers, teachers and doctors therefore can and do migrate, even if they start out working as unskilled labourers.

Add to this the grotesque levels of unemployment in the majority of the countries of origin and the

advantages are enormous. To stand against migration, therefore, is to act like Canute standing against the tide. Where there's a will (to migrate) there's a way. If you start by pandering to the racists and accepting the need to limit immigration, as most reformists and some of their centrist imitators, like the CWI, do, then you end up supporting repressive measures against fellow workers, who are merely exercising their right, or rather their compulsion, to seek employment.

Most bourgeois economists also accept that immigration is a boon for the host economy. The Economist wrote a mock Open Letter to the citizens of Bulgaria and Romania on the eve of their right to emigrate to the UK, saying:

“Politicians claim [migrants] are a burden on public services already stretched thin by austerity. Nonsense: being young and able-bodied, they don't use them much. And because they contribute more to the Treasury in taxes than they take out in benefits and services – about 35 per cent more, according to a plausible estimate – they save our schools and hospitals from deeper cuts. They don't depress wages much, and mostly among other immigrant workers. They make our economy bigger, lowering our debt-to-GDP ratio.”⁹

Lenin concludes with an argument about the positive impact migration has on workers' consciousness: “Peregrinations” mean creating mobility of the population. Unless the population becomes mobile, it cannot develop, and it would be naïve to imagine that a village school can teach people what they can learn from an independent acquaintance with the different relations and orders of things in the South and in the North, in agriculture and in industry, in the capital and in the backwoods.”¹⁰

This is surely an objective truth that cannot be denied. Middle class students are encouraged to work abroad in their “gap year” in order to learn more about the world and themselves. Even adverts for the British Army emphasise the advantage of working abroad and “seeing the world” (albeit, in this case, as part of an occupying imperialist army!) in their attempt to seduce working class recruits. Why should this advantage only be afforded to middle class students and army recruits from Britain?

Since the majority of migrants return to their country of origin, this heightened political consciousness and global outlook also benefits the class struggle back home. Conversely, the benefits to the working class of the host country of working alongside and interacting with workers from those parts of the world which imperialism has enslaved can only increase the sense of internationalism and solidarity.

Socialists need to use the current crisis surrounding immigration and refugees to fight against all measures that restrict or deny the free movement of labour. Abolish Frontex and dismantle Triton and Poseidon; abolish all immigration controls and detention centres; grant full citizenship rights, including the right to vote to all who seek to come and work in the EU.

The labour movements of the EU should not only place these demands on their governments and mass social democratic, socialist and labour parties, but also take action – including strike action and mass demonstrations – to enforce them, boycotting all work which involves the incarceration and forcible removal of migrants. They should fight for equal rights and pay for migrant workers and their recruitment into the ranks of the trade unions and working class parties – which means abolishing the membership criterion of the British Labour Party that demands members are on the electoral roll.

Where possible, socialists should also seek to do special work among migrant workers and refugees. This is not because there is anything in the experience of migrants that automatically confers on them a higher level of consciousness or a place in the vanguard of the class, but because their position in society means they have the most to gain and the least to lose from the fight for socialism, and once they have been won

to the cause, they can take their place in the front ranks of the revolutionary class.

A mass revolutionary party would produce special material in the languages of the major migrant communities and seek to make ties, through them, with the masses in the oppressed countries they come from. These are the type of parties and International that the League for the Fifth International is fighting to create.

Notes

- 1 <http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/news/population/number-of-international-migrants-rises.html> [1]
- 2 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-32371348> [2]
- 3 <http://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2015-06-14/local-news/Eritrean-amb...> [3]
- 4 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/22/migrants-hungary-border-fen...> [4]
- 5 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/20/hundreds-more-migrants-resc...> [5]
- 6 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/15/asian-migrant-crisis-grows-...> [6]
- 7 <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/04/20/us-europe-migrants-factbox-idU...> [7]
- 8 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/23/eu-to-create-new-quarantine...> [8]
- 9 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/22/eu-announces-naval-operatio...> [9]
- 10 <http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21591865-open-letter-citizens-bulg...> [10]
- 11 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1899/dcr8iii/iii8x.htm> [11]

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Links:

- [1] <http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/news/population/>
- [2] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-32371348>
- [3] <http://www.independent.com.mt/articles/2015-06-14/local-news/Eritrean-ambassador-insists-her-compatriots-claims-of-persecution-are-an-invention-6736137241>
- [4] <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/22/migrants-hungary-border-fence-wall-serbia>
- [5] <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/20/hundreds-more-migrants-rescued-off-indonesia-as-pope-calls-for-help>
- [6] <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/15/asian-migrant-crisis-grows-as-700-more-boat-people-rescued-off-indonesia>
- [7] <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/04/20/us-europe-migrants-factbox-idUSKBN0NB22J20150420>
- [8] <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/23/eu-to-create-new-quarantine-system-for-mediterranean-migrants>
- [9] <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/22/eu-announces-naval-operation-to-monitor-libyan-people-smugglers>
- [10] <http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21591865-open-letter-citizens-bulgaria-and-romania-youre-welcome>
- [11] <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1899/>