

EU summit steps up attack on refugees and foreigners

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5 July 2002

At their recent summit meeting in Seville, held June 21 and 22, the fifteen governmental leaders of the European Union (EU) countries decided on drastic measures to further limit the flow of immigration into Europe.

Countries of origin and transit lands deemed to be not adequately controlling their borders and thus “not cooperating with the EU satisfactorily” will in future face bitter consequences. It was agreed that joint action will be undertaken to secure the EU’s external borders before the end of the year, and a joint European border police force will be rapidly established. Close cooperation in the training of border guards and provision of technical equipment is already the practice in the most important countries of the European Union.

In the future, so-called “third countries” lying between the countries of entry and the destination of migrants will be obliged to take back refugees illegally entering the EU. This is a ploy aimed at forcing these countries to insulate their own borders against “transit refugees”. It was further agreed that the Union’s resolutions concerning asylum are to be enforced more speedily than has so far been the case.

Prior to the summit Spain’s prime minister, José Maria Aznar, whose conservative government held the EU presidency for the past six months, and Silvio Berlusconi, Aznar’s Italian counterpart, presented a “plan for action against illegal immigration.” Apart from upgrading the weaponry of EU border guards, this plan envisaged cutting development aid to “uncooperative countries of origin and transit”.

During a tour of the European capitals, Aznar received considerable support. At a meeting in Paris on May 28, French President Jacques Chirac and German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder demanded “sharper controls over EU external borders.” At a meeting in Rome four days later, the EU interior ministers decided on recommendations to gradually establish a European police force and discussed using the new European satellite programme, Galileo, for the “observation of waves of migration.”

British Prime Minister Tony Blair was one of the most vocal supporters of Aznar’s xenophobic plans. Despite opposition from Sweden and other countries at the summit negotiations in Seville, he expressly defended his government’s policy of making future development aid dependent on the readiness of recipient states to take back rejected asylum seekers. In this respect, he specifically named Somalia, Sri Lanka and Turkey.

Blair made no secret of the fact that this campaign against “illegal immigration” was a reaction to the recent election successes of extreme right-wing parties.

Discontent fuelled by the pro-business policies of social democratic

governments has given a boost to right-wing demagogues in several European countries. Jean-Marie Le Pen outpolled the incumbent Socialist Party Prime Minister Lionel Jospin in the French presidential election, and the *Liste Pim Fortuyn* party won a large vote in Holland. Only five of the former 13 social democratic governments in Europe are still in power.

The remaining social democratic governments are reacting to this development by adopting the policies of the right and stirring up racist feelings against foreigners and refugees. According to the German magazine *Der Spiegel*, the British prime minister launched a “major verbal attack against foreigners” a few weeks ago. Blair claimed that the “triumphal march of right-wing extremism” could be stopped only by adopting drastic measures against “illegal” refugees in the whole of Europe.

The *Guardian* newspaper quoted from a confidential government document, indicating that a general mobilisation against illegal immigration is being planned. British navy warships are to track down and intercept refugee boats in the eastern Mediterranean, while the British air force will be commissioned to transport rejected asylum seekers back to their home countries on a massive scale.

The same attitude characterises the Social Democratic-Green Party coalition government in Berlin. For years, Social Democratic Interior Minister Otto Schily has been blocking every attempt to introduce even the slightest form of liberalisation into European refugee law. He rejected the recommendations of the EU commission for the reunion of families and the standardisation of the asylum legal process with the words: “That will deprive us of room for manoeuvre when it comes to our own immigration policy.”

At a recent conference of the European interior ministers in Luxemburg, Schily called for a tough stance towards the “third countries.” He said, “Whoever fails to observe his international obligations should realise that certain consequences are bound to follow.”

Schily’s claim that the fight against illegal immigration improves the conditions for legal immigration—“The less illegal immigration we have, the greater the possibility we have for legal immigration”—is utterly cynical. The truth is precisely the opposite. The sharp increase in illegal immigration results above all from the fact that the opportunities for legal immigration have been systematically curtailed. Apart from specialists, sought for their value to the economy, it is nowadays virtually impossible for immigrants to enter Europe legally.

In the course of the debates in Seville on sanctions against transit countries unwilling to thoroughly enforce EU requirements, German Chancellor Schröder remained conspicuously silent, while behind the scenes he supported the stance of Aznar, Berlusconi and Blair.

The word “sanctions” was avoided in the final declaration of the Seville summit, and the reduction of development aid was threatened only indirectly. The European government heads were rather more elegant in expressing their determination to insulate Europe against immigrants, declaring: “Inadequate cooperation on the part of a country could be detrimental to the development of relations between the country concerned and the European Union.”

The idea that the swelling wave of refugees from starving African countries or the socially devastated regions of eastern Europe and Russia can be halted by ringing western Europe with armed border guards is both barbaric and illusory.

In reality, the European ruling class is confronted with a problem for which it has no answer. According to the estimates of Europol, the European police authority in The Hague, at least half a million people—in addition to 400,000 asylum seekers—try to enter EU countries illegally each year. The number is 13 times greater than in 1993, and it continues to swell.

Der Spiegel quoted an official from Germany’s Interior Ministry who said the real number could be “twice or even 10 times” higher than this. No one really knows how many are secretly penetrating the borders.

“Twilight communities” have already come into existence all over Europe. In Paris, Amsterdam, Berlin and Vienna there are already districts inhabited by three times the number of people officially registered. Social tensions are mounting at a tremendous rate.

Chancellor Schröder and a section of the liberal press continually speak in the following vein: “Of course, we sympathise with the difficult situation refugees find themselves in. Social misery in numerous countries is driving an increasing number of people to look elsewhere for a better existence. But the problem cannot be solved by having all, or even a large proportion, of the most poverty stricken come to Europe. Our social system would collapse.”

This argument is both cynical and mendacious. Within Europe, the crisis of the social system is not the consequence of a burdensome surplus of immigrants, but rather of policies that—to further the interests of big business—systematically reduce the taxation of large firms and the rich, while cutting state expenditures on social services. To this point a large proportion of asylum seekers and refugees have not been allowed to have regular jobs or earn their own living.

At the same time, the misery driving people to flee their home countries is a direct result of the plundering of the poor countries by European and American capital. The roots of this misery reach back to the colonial policies of previous centuries—policies continued today under the auspices of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

In a World Bank report from 2000, the total debt of the underdeveloped countries was calculated to be \$US2.5 trillion. The report shows that these countries pay nine times as much in debt repayments to the big international banks as they receive in development aid.

When Mozambique was struck by a flood disaster in 1999, over a million people lost their homes. Nevertheless, the country paid \$US70 million in debt repayments to Western banks. While diseases like cholera and malaria were spreading, only 1.1 percent of the gross domestic product was spent on the health system. After an IMF “redevelopment programme” imposed 10 years ago, expenditure on health in that country has actually been reduced by 75 percent.

In the whole of Africa, where, on average, only every second child goes to school, the governments transferred four times as much capital

to international banks and creditors as they spent on education and health. According to a World Bank report, poverty in Africa increased by 50 percent between 1994 and 2000. On account of structural adjustment programmes implemented in the 1980s, income per head in the 1990s receded to the level that existed prior to the end of colonial rule.

The various “shock therapies” of the IMF and the World Bank have had similar effects in eastern Europe and Russia. In the last decade, economic activity in the regions of the former Soviet Union has shrunk by more than half. A United Nations report, prepared in 1999, estimated that the number of people living in poverty, i.e., on 4 US dollars or less per day, in the countries of eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union had risen from 13.6 million in 1989 to 147 million.

Consequently, a genuine struggle against increasing impoverishment, which is the source of the vast waves of refugees, requires a socialist perspective directed against capitalism. The European working class must place itself unconditionally on the side of the refugees and asylum seekers and together fight against the hegemony and dictates of the European and international banks and business concerns, as well as their governments. As part of this struggle, it must defend the right of people to live and work in the country of their choice, and demand the elimination of all legal barriers to immigration and all forms of discrimination against immigrants.

The brutal measures, today directed externally against refugees and asylum seekers, will soon be instituted internally against the unemployed, social welfare recipients and the majority of the population in European countries. This development was also clearly visible at the Seville summit.

One day before the meeting of the government heads, a nationwide general strike paralysed public life in Spain. In each of the major cities of Madrid and Barcelona, a half a million people demonstrated against mass sackings and the Aznar government’s anti-social labour laws. Special units of the police attacked pickets and demonstrators with water cannon and truncheons. According to accounts from the CNT trade union, several hundred people were injured, some of them severely. The government wanted at all costs to prevent the strike linking up with the following day’s protest, organised by opponents of globalisation.

In Seville, the class character of the European Union was strikingly apparent: an association of the major European banks and business concerns, enforcing in ruthless manner their own interests and privileges against both refugees and the working people of Europe.



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