

Growing opposition to Italian government's xenophobic campaign

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On January 24, some 650 African refugees broke out of their guarded refugee camp on the Italian island of Lampedusa. Crying "freedom!" and "help us!" they ran through the center of the island's main city to protest against the deplorable conditions they have to endure in their camp as they await deportation.

In front of the city hall the refugees were greeted with applause by inhabitants who have carried out a series of protests against the militarization of the island by the right-wing government led by Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. The former fishing island, which is situated halfway between Sicily and North Africa, is vigorously resisting attempts by the government to turn it into a huge prison camp.

One resident told German television, "We are not against providing shelter for the refugees, but we do not want a prison because these poor people also have rights."

The government recently made the decision not to send refugees landing on Lampedusa further on to the Italian mainland. Lampedusa had functioned as a transit station for refugees from North Africa, who were then taken on to Sicily or the mainland. Last year some 30,700 boat refugees landed on the small Mediterranean island.

Since Christmas, the government has pursued a policy whereby African immigrants can leave the island only via deportation back to their country of origin. Italian Interior Minister Roberto Maroni from the rightist Northern League explained, "Anyone who thinks he can illegally travel to Italy is making a big mistake." The government implemented a decree in parliament which makes illegal entry a crime to be punished with deportation and fines up to 10,000 euros.

The Berlusconi government is seeking to strike deals with Tunisia and Libya to cooperate in the repatriation of refugees and is demanding that both countries undertake measures to intercept refugee boats before they enter

Italian territorial waters. Italy is also calling for the support of the European Union, and the EU vice president and commissioner for justice, Jacques Barrot, announced his own plans to make an inspection tour of Lampedusa. The EU has generally expressed its solidarity with the tough measures taken by the Italian government, which dovetail with the EU policy of isolating the continent along the lines of a "Fortress Europe."

Since taking power in May 2008, Berlusconi has led a concerted campaign against immigrants. In Naples last year, a Roma camp was set on fire with the tacit approval of the state.

At the same time, the government has used its xenophobic campaign as an excuse to militarize Italian society. Based on the national state of emergency called in July 2008 on the alleged grounds of a refugee crisis, Defense Secretary Ignazio Benito La Russa ordered the deployment of the army across the country. Now he intends to post army units to patrol up to one hundred cities.

On Lampedusa, a former NATO military base has been converted into a second refugee camp, a so-called "identification and deportation center," which is hermetically sealed by the Italian military and Carabinieri. The local population has expressed its opposition.

"Lampedusa is not Alcatraz," is one of the most frequent slogans to be heard, an allusion to the notorious prison island off the coast of San Francisco.

Parallels have also been drawn with Guantánamo Bay—and for good reason. Lampedusa was a prison island during the fascist dictatorship of Benito Mussolini, who incarcerated more than 3,000 political prisoners there.

Today, hand-drawn banners are draped on city walls with slogans attacking Senator Angela Maraventano (Northern League), Roberto Maroni and the minister responsible for immigration, Mario Morcone. One slogan reads "Morcone, you slimy provocateur—we are the

people!"

The conditions in the hopelessly overcrowded identification center are intolerable. Planned originally for 750 persons, the camp now accommodates up to 2,000. Some of them are forced to sleep in the open under tarpaulins.

Over three years ago, in October 2005, Fabrizio Gatti, a reporter for the news magazine *Espresso*, wrote on the deplorable hygienic conditions in the Lampedusa camp. Gatti, who had disguised himself as a refugee in order to penetrate the camp, wrote of toilet areas full excrement and urine, flea-ridden mattresses and brutal wardens.

Those who, through desperation, have undertaken the risky and exhausting boat trip to flee their homelands need all the help they can get. Many of the boats transporting refugees are overcrowded wrecks barely suited for sea travel. Under conditions of bad weather and stormy seas, the lives of the refugees are at risk, and in the past few years there have been dozens of cases of boats sinking and deaths at sea. In addition, vessels containing refugees are harassed by EU and Italian coast guard patrols, which force them to make long and hazardous detours.

According to the relief organization Fortress Europe, 1,500 refugees died in 2008 attempting to enter Europe. Of these, 119 were estimated to have drowned or died of thirst or weakness in the Mediterranean waters to the south of Sicily. An additional 423 persons were listed as missing in the Mediterranean. This total of 642 victims averages out at two people per day dying while trying to enter southern Europe via Italy. In the last twenty years, an estimated 5,000 refugees have died in the channel between Sicily and Tunisia alone.

Immediately after the peaceful return of the refugees to their camp last Saturday, the government began the process of deporting several hundred inmates. A group of North African women responded by beginning a hunger strike against the deportations.

The government is deliberately seeking to use the refugee issue to whip up chauvinist sentiments in the population. In particular, the Italian ruling class is seeking to divert attention from the social consequences of the international economic crisis.

The level of Italian indebtedness is the highest in Europe (106 percent of gross domestic product) and one of the highest in the world. Already last October, the Italian state debt had risen to 1,670 billion euros. In December, Employment Minister Maurizio Sacconi provoked a scandal when he said that state bankruptcy

could not be ruled out as a possible consequence of the finance crisis.

Lampedusa, whose economy depends on tourism, has already suffered economically. Nevertheless, the tactics employed by the government are backfiring, with local residents largely resisting the campaign to scapegoat refugees.

On January 27 the island was hit by a general strike. All businesses and schools were closed, shipping traffic came to a halt and the island's port was paralyzed. Residents marched from the city center to the port and threw a large wreath of flowers into the sea as a symbol of condolence for refugees who had died at sea.

Despite the widespread feelings of solidarity with the refugees and growing anger against the government, no party or organization is putting forward a progressive perspective to resolve the crisis. In fact, representatives of the political opposition and the trade unions seek in their own way to stir up patriotism and regionalism, on occasion going so far as to attack the Italian government from the right.

One example is Italo Tripi, the general secretary of the Sicilian trade union federation CGIL, who took part in the January 27 general strike in Lampedusa. According to Tripi, the problems on Lampedusa could be resolved by moving the detention camps for refugees. He said, "The government must come up with more serious and concrete proposals for immigration and modify the current Bossi-Fini law. They should also consider locating the identification and deportation camps somewhere else."



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