

France blocks train carrying Tunisian refugees from Italy

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Last Sunday French border police blocked rail traffic between France and Italy on the line linking Vintimiglia on the Italian side and Menton station 10 kilometres away on the French side, to prevent Tunisian migrants from entering France. Ten trains were blocked from crossing this busy border.

Besides demonstrating the French government's contempt for Tunisians fleeing social upheaval in their country, this action calls into question the Schengen agreement for free movement within the European Union. It has sparked bitter recriminations from Italy. *Der Spiegel* commented that this spelled "the temporary end of a borderless Europe."

Some 26,000 migrants, almost exclusively from Tunisia, escaping the country amid the mass upheavals which swept dictator Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali from power, have been entering Italy and therefore the EU since February. After Ben Ali's fall, enforcement of Tunisia's agreement to block emigration to Europe has been suspended.

Faced with the refusal of other EU countries to accept a portion of these migrants, the government of Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi has issued some 22,000 six-month temporary residence permits to Tunisian migrants. These allow them to move anywhere in the Schengen area, that is virtually all of Europe except Ireland and the UK.

Since France is home to over a million people who originate from Tunisia, a former French colony, it is a favoured destination for Tunisian migrants, who are French-speaking. Many have family, friends and community ties there.

France's attempts to seal its border with Italy against Tunisians have been ongoing since March. (See: "France re-establishes border controls with Italy amid dispute over African migrants").

On Sunday, a group of Tunisian refugees went to Ventimiglia station to catch the 1.17 pm train to France, backed by 200 Italian and French human rights activists and armed with Italian residence permits. However, they were told that the service had been suspended since midday by order of the Alpes-Maritimes police authority. They staged a sit-down protest on the tracks.

Italy made a formal protest to Paris for "the interruption of international traffic." *Le Nouvel Observateur* reports that Paris laid the blame on the activists and refugees: "traffic between Vintimiglia and Menton was restored in the middle of the afternoon. According to the French ministry of the interior, it was suspended on the orders of the police authority of the Alpes-Maritime [regional authorities in France]."

Italian Foreign Affairs minister Franco Frattini insisted that, while he understood worries about the activists, the residence permits "are valid and recognised by France," adding: "Europe is going nowhere if we build walls between countries."

The Italian press spoke of a "slap in the face" for Italy, and the right-wing separatist Northern League called for a boycott of French products.

Eric Ciotti the president of the Alpes-Maritime council for the ruling UMP (Union for a Popular Movement) claimed: "The Schengen area does not include the free circulation of clandestine immigrants and it is out of the question to be able to cross the frontiers of the European

Union, without passports or valid residence documents.”

On April 18 *Le Monde* reported that, attempting to calm the dispute, [French interior minister] Claude Guéant “stressed that Rome’s decision to grant temporary residence ‘was opposed by many EU countries...But we have accepted that measure. On the other hand, there are conditions’.” Migrants must be able to prove that they have sufficient financial resources, without which “we take these people back to Italy, which is the first country entered.”

On April 7 Guéant issued a circular stating that an immigrant who wishes to cross the French border must “hold a valid travel document recognised by France” and a “valid residence document,” “show proof of having sufficient resources—that is, €31 per day if the person has accommodations, and €62 otherwise. Immigrants “may not constitute...a threat to public order” and “may not have entered French territory more than three months previously”. It is quite likely that the vast majority will be unable to meet this requirement.

Italy has accused France of violating the Schengen treaty. Italian Interior Minister Roberto Maroni said, “Tunisians to whom we are granting the residency permits will have the right to travel. France cannot prevent this, unless they leave the Schengen accords or suspend the treaty.”

Der Spiegel reports that Berlusconi threatened to abandon a common EU immigration policy: “He said that either Europe ought to be something real and concrete, but that if it wasn’t, perhaps it would be better for each country to return to using its own methods for dealing with the refugees.”

Initially EU Interior Affairs commissioner Cecilia Malmström criticised Sarkozy’s decision, saying that under the EU’s Schengen agreement, “you are not allowed to do checks at the border” unless “there is a serious threat to public security, and for the moment that is not the case.” However, several European countries raised official complaints with the European Commission, calling Italy’s conduct “scandalous”—according to a diplomat cited by *Le Nouvel Observateur*.

Malström then revised her position. The BBC reports: “At a news conference on Monday afternoon, Ms Malmstroem said she had received a letter from France

explaining the ‘temporary’ disruption was the result of ‘public order reasons...It may be that this is not covered by the Schengen border code rules. But it would seem that they had the right to do this,’ she said. EU spokesman Michele Cercone also said the residence permits were not visas, and France was under no obligation to admit people having neither EU visas nor EU passports.”

This underscores the utter bankruptcy of the political machinery of bourgeois Europe, which is unable and unwilling to enforce its own treaties against the right-wing policies pursued by powerful nation states.

Malström’s volte-face resembles that of EU commissioner for Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship Viviane Reding on the mass expulsion from France of Roma in the summer of 2010. She accused the French government of “discrimination on the basis of ethnic origin or race” and of calling into question “the common values and laws of our European Union”. She described the French policy as a “disgrace” and threatened to haul Sarkozy through the European courts.

However, she had to back down almost immediately, under pressure from European governments.

Austrian Interior Minister Maria Fekter attacked Italy’s decision to grant visas, as did German Interior Minister Hans-Peter Friedrich who said “Italy has to live up to its responsibility.” He added that Rome’s plan to issue travel visas violated “the spirit of Schengen.” He announced Berlin’s plan to increase scrutiny, particularly in southern Germany.

Germany’s federal police is even looking into how quickly it would be able to reintroduce regular border controls, even though only about 300 North Africans entered Germany in the first quarter of this year.

The Swiss Lega party, which obtained 30 percent of the vote in recent local government elections, has proposed building a wall on its border with Italy to keep immigrants out, “like between Israel and Palestine.”



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