

Photographer Alessandro Penso, chronicler of “Fortress Europe,” speaks on the plight of migrant youth

Paul Mitchell
9 February 2013

Photographer Alessandro Penso has won the prestigious Terry O'Neill award for his powerful series of images, “Adolescence Denied,” about the plight of teenage migrant youth in Greece hoping to jump on lorries and find a future elsewhere in Europe. His work met the judges’ criteria for “dynamic and arresting images which portray a compelling narrative.”

The photographer recently spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about his work.

Penso explained, “I followed the teenagers who had escaped from war zones, from Afghanistan, North Africa and the Sudan. What shocked me most was seeing these teenagers living alone in disused areas of Greece, risking their lives. What also shocked me was the change in the European Union, which in the last century seemed to offer a better future.”

“Adolescence Denied” includes an image taken in the Greek city of Corinth of the deliberate running down of a teenager by a car driven by racists. Mostafa El Mouzdahir, a 20-year-old from Morocco, sustained multiple injuries.

“I went to see him in hospital,” Penso told the WSW. “With him, he had a police form which asked him to leave the country within 15 days because he was there illegally. In the first six months of 2012, there were 600 cases of attacks against migrants.”

Equally poignant is Penso’s image of migrant workers outside the perimeter fence at night at the Greek port of Patras, as they seek to stow away on the numerous cargo ships and end up elsewhere in Europe.

Penso said he first became aware of the plight of migrant workers as a young person after seeing TV pictures of refugees fleeing the collapsing Stalinist regime in Albania in 1991. The Italian government

detained them in a sports stadium without adequate food, water, or sanitation for weeks before deporting them back to Albania.

“I think I became interested in this topic in 1991 when I saw the ship Vlora on television. It arrived in Italy with 20,000 people on board,” he said. “I was too young to understand what was going on, but those people’s expressions and the questions that arose in me at that time continue to move me.”

For the past three years, Penso has used income from his commercial work to pursue a personal project documenting the effects on migrant workers of the Fortress Europe policy. Begun in earnest in 2008, the European Union, in alliance with the governments of transit countries, began erecting militarised barriers on its borders and instituted police-state measures internally to bar residence to workers from impoverished countries, which have been subject to the ravages of the great powers and their corporate elites as well as the national ruling classes.

An increasingly militarised European Border Control Agency called FRONTEX was set up with a surveillance system to monitor migrants’ movements via satellites and aerial drones as well as a rapid reaction fleet of ships to stop “boat people”, many of whom perished attempting the crossing from North Africa.

A major destination for the boat people was the Mediterranean island of Malta, which Penso documented in a series of photographs of the struggle for survival in the detention centres of Marsa and Hal Far, entitled “Big Prison” in 2009.

Penso described how, after making the precarious journey from North Africa, the migrant workers were

arrested and subject to numerous interrogations. Only a few individuals from Mogadishu were allowed refugee status with the majority not allowed to work, integrate into the local community or move elsewhere in the EU.

In 2010, Penso turned his attention to the terrible conditions migrant workers face once they reach mainland Europe. His series of photographs, “Migrant Workers Journey,” resulted from his disbelief in the official reasons behind a “riot” of African workers in the southern Italian town of Rosarno. Italy’s interior minister had attributed the violence to “too much tolerance” of illegal immigration.

For a year, Penso followed the workers (see video) as they picked fruit and vegetables during the harvest season in Basilicata before moving to overcrowded apartments in Naples for the rest of the year.

“During the season, which lasts six or even seven months every year,” he explained, “they move for miles from East to West and from Southern to Northern Italy in a sort of pilgrimage: An army of nameless people dedicating their lives to the harvest cycle.” Penso’s enigmatic image of Yousuf Bande from Burkina Faso reveals the real human being behind these “nameless people”.

“These illegal migrant workers survive in empty houses without electricity or water and in extreme poverty. Home is often a derelict building without power or running water.

“As many as 25 people can be crammed into a derelict house, often without sanitation. They don’t have any rights, any form of assistance, any voice, or any other chance to find work. And they can work up to 12 hours per day for only 25 euros [US\$34]. They are often referred to as the new slaves, at the mercy of ‘corporals’, mostly Italians, appointed to control not only their jobs but also their lives.”

In autumn of 2012, Penso went to Greece for the first time and “found the country destroyed by the crisis.”

He travelled to the border with Turkey, which accounts for 80 percent of the flow of migrant workers attempting to enter the European Union now that other routes have been shut down. In December 2012, Greece finished construction of 26 floating barriers along the Evros River, which forms the majority of the border, and a razor-wire-topped, 4-metre-high fence along a 12-kilometre stretch that goes across land patrolled by Greek and FRONTEX border guards.

recorded workers’ Penso strikes in also Greece Italy and in Spain during the November 14, 2012 general strike.

He explained, “I saw the people have great fear of the future. They have lost trust in the state. What was striking was the aggression of the police. However, I think it is very dangerous to think that every party is the same and that nothing will change. I think the situation is like a bomb. I feel it will blow up. It will be difficult but something better must come.”

The Terry O’Neill judges concluded that Penso’s series “captures [migrants’] lives in limbo when they are left stranded looking for both safety and a future. We hope his work will help inform future generations of the depth of the crisis.”

We hope they will inform today’s generation, and contribute to the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of a socialist society.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact