

Fortress Europe's rising death toll

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The death toll from the October 3 boat sinking off the coast of the southern Italian island of Lampedusa is expected to exceed 350.

More than 300 migrants travelling from North Africa are now confirmed dead, with many more bodies yet to be recovered in the vicinity of the shipwreck, which lies about one kilometre from the shoreline. Once taken from the sea the bodies are being placed in a hangar, the only space large enough to contain so many coffins.

Responsibility for this immense social tragedy rests with the governments of the European Union and their policy of "Fortress Europe."

As the death toll and public anger began to mount, Italy's government and various representatives of the European Union (EU) struck a hypocritical pose of sympathy for the victims. Most nauseating of all were the comments of the Italian Prime Minister Enrico Letta who announced: "The hundreds who lost their lives off Lampedusa yesterday are Italian citizens as of today."

As for the survivors of the tragedy, many of whom have lost family and friends, they still face deportation once the authorities see fit to act. The 155 traumatised people are being held on Lampedusa under heavy guard in an overcrowded hovel, classed as "clandestine immigrants." Under laws passed in 2002, they can expect not only deportation, but also fines of up to €5,000.

The hypocrisy of the Italian government continued with Wednesday's announcement that a state funeral would be held for the dead migrants.

If such pronouncements were meant as deliberate satire of the reactionary policies of the EU, they could not be more Swiftian. For a migrant to secure a legal status granting him what are basic democratic rights, he should first die off the coast of Europe in terrible circumstances.

Since the disaster, the call from the Italian

government and the EU is not for the restrictions on migrants entering Europe to be loosened, but tightened.

In December, a new "European border surveillance system" named EUROSUR, devised by the European Commission, is expected to come into operation. One of its main imperatives is to "reduce the number of irregular migrants entering the EU undetected." It is "designed to support the Member States in their efforts to reduce the number of irregular migrants entering the European Union by improving their situational awareness at their external borders and increasing the reaction capability of their information and border control authorities."

The crackdown against refugees and asylum seekers continues apace across the continent. Even as the Lampedusa dead are being recovered, Syrian refugees in Calais, France were on hunger strike to protest their inhumane treatment by the authorities. The group of 65 men, women, and children who are fleeing the Syrian civil war, protested on a gangway at a French ferry terminal, surrounded by 50 French riot police.

One hunger striker said, "We are treated like dogs in France," and that the group had requested asylum in Britain. For its part the British government has refused to allow them entry, stating that it will examine the Syrians' requests on a "case by case basis" and only those who already had family in the UK would be considered.

This brutalization of people whose lives have been torn asunder by years of civil war underscores another fundamental aspect of the refugee crisis.

Hundreds of thousands of people have been driven from their homelands in North Africa and the Middle East as a direct result of the criminal actions of the United States and the main European powers. Wars waged in Libya, Somalia, Syria and elsewhere have devastated a region already pillaged by global banks and corporations.

In Syria, as a result of the nearly three year US and European-backed proxy war, over 1.5 million people have already been turned into refugees. Of more than 30,000 migrants that have sailed to Italy this year, 7,500 were Syrians fleeing civil war, 7,500 were Eritreans escaping a brutal regime, and 3,000 were fleeing violence in Somalia.

The lives of tens of millions of people have been ruined. Those seeking refuge are then demonised and vilified as “economic migrants”, as if seeking escape from such suffering is illegitimate!

This hellish situation is the responsibility of every capitalist political party in Europe. Whether they are labelled as social-democratic, liberal, Conservative or Christian Democrat, all espouse anti-immigration sentiments and policies. The purpose of such propaganda is to scapegoat immigrants and asylum seekers, attributing to them responsibility for the impact of austerity measures that are destroying jobs, wages and essential social services and ruining the lives of millions across the continent.

This xenophobic rhetoric is then translated into the feral grunt of fascist groups such as Greece’s Golden Dawn.

Responsibility for this terrible situation is also shared by myriad pseudo-left tendencies. While professing opposition to attacks on immigrants, parties such as the Left Party in Germany, the New Anti-capitalist Party in France and Syriza in Greece are all defenders of the European Union, of European capitalism and cheerleaders for European militarism.

All have facilitated wars of intervention in Libya and Syria, either by proclaiming imperialist proxy forces as “revolutionaries,” or by echoing the “humanitarian” rhetoric now routinely employed to legitimise the predatory aims of the major powers.

Many workers and youth across Europe feel great sympathy towards those who have perished off Lampedusa. However, it is certain that these deaths will not be the last. Over the last 20 years up to 25,000 people have died attempting to enter Europe. As many of the land borders are now sealed off, the only option left to those seeking a better life is by a perilous boat journey across the Mediterranean.

To put this into perspective, last year just 100,000 asylum seekers and refugees were allowed entry into the EU, an entity with a population totalling over 500

million.

The demonization and scapegoating of immigrants must be stopped. The basic standpoint of the working class in Europe and internationally must be the unconditional defence of immigrants and asylum seekers from vicious and systematic persecution.

But more still is required. The central task facing workers is the overthrow and destruction of capitalism and the entire nation state system. Only this can end the horrors inflicted daily on the peoples of the world.

This requires the development of a revolutionary movement of the working class, dedicated to the ending of the Europe of razor-wire borders, growing social inequality and immiseration. Faced with a future of imperialist war, poverty, and mass unemployment, the only progressive way forward is the creation the United Socialist States of Europe as part of a world socialist federation.



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