

Defend migrants and refugees! Oppose British imperialism!

David O'Sullivan
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The following is a statement by David O'Sullivan, Socialist Equality Party candidate for the London Holborn & St. Pancras constituency.

The horrific deaths of at least 1,500 refugees from North Africa and the Middle East were the result of a deliberate and callous policy, promoted by Britain and the European Union (EU), to let migrants and their families drown.

This tragedy was cold-blooded premeditated murder.

The large number of desperate and impoverished people risking their lives to seek refuge in Europe is itself the result of Britain and the major powers' support for criminal wars for the control of resources in the Middle East and Africa, which have set in motion waves of carnage and devastation.

Now, this latest tragedy is to be used to sanction further military operations against Libya—and any other countries from which migrants' boats set sail—in a new scramble for Africa.

According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), Sunday's migrant boat tragedy in which at least 800 people died was “the deadliest incident in the Mediterranean we have ever recorded.”

Volker Turk, the director of international protection at the UN refugee agency, said, “If you look at the numbers last year, over 50 percent of the people who crossed the Mediterranean were people in need of international protection. Mostly Syrians, Eritreans, some Somalis.”

Britain has participated in the “humanitarian wars” for “democracy” and “human rights” alongside its Washington and European allies in the Balkans, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen, which have destroyed entire societies, killed hundreds of thousands of people, and left chaos and unending communal strife

in their wake. The staggering increase in the number of migrants to Europe from North Africa and the Middle East via the Mediterranean began after the 2011 US-NATO war that toppled Libya's Muammar Gaddafi and ended with his lynching by the Al Qaeda-linked Islamist proxy forces sponsored by the US, Britain and France.

The Conservative/Liberal Democrat government—in charge of the fourth most powerful navy on the planet and the largest in the EU—played a key role last year in the EU's decision to end its Mare Nostrum Operation that saved 150,000 lives, arguing that it was important not to rescue migrants to “telegraph a message” deterring migrants. Foreign Office Minister Lady Anelay said the government believed such rescue missions created “an unintended ‘pull factor’, encouraging more migrants to attempt the dangerous sea crossing.”

Instead, they would be allowed to drown.

That is exactly what has happened. The EU dropped the Mare Nostrum programme in favour of Operation Triton, managed by Frontex, the EU's border agency. Britain's contribution was to send four immigration officers in 2015.

The government has now pledged support for a European-wide naval deployment in Libyan waters, supposedly against people smugglers. Meeting on Monday, EU countries approved an increase in the number of maritime and border patrols in the Mediterranean. The head of the EU's borders agency brazenly stated that saving the lives of migrants “is not our priority.”

The Ministry of Defence is “looking at the options”, including sending the Royal Navy assault ship HMS Bulwark to take part in the operation likely to include air strikes on migrants' boats and ships.

In 2014, the number of applications for asylum in the UK was 24,914, excluding dependants. Last year, nearly 60 percent of applications were refused outright. The government has agreed to accept a mere 143 Syrian refugees, under conditions where at least one third of the Syrian population has been displaced.

The Conservatives have promised to cut immigration, bar migrants from claiming benefits such as tax credits and housing benefit for four years, and reduce any entitlement to social housing. Those from within the EU will also have their benefit entitlements curtailed and will no longer be able to send child benefit to their children overseas. The Tories have also promised to re-negotiate EU migrants' rights of "free movement" with Brussels.

Labour Party leader Ed Miliband has made a pathetic attempt to make political capital over the tragic events in the Mediterranean—one made all the more disgusting by the fact that he and his party are just as responsible as the Tories for these deaths.

Milliband voted for war against Libya, so he has suggested that the problem is a failure of "post-conflict planning". Cameron's error was not to wage a brutal and unprovoked war of conquest, according to Miliband, but to "assume that Libya's political culture and institutions could be left to evolve and transform on their own." The only way this statement can be interpreted is that Miliband believes that Libya should have been placed under military occupation. He may yet get his wish.

Labour is as keen to establish its anti-immigrant credentials as it is to stake a claim to colonial military policy. Its manifesto promises "controls on immigration," with tighter policing of Britain's borders and the right to benefits, and an insistence that migrants in "public services in public-facing roles" be able to speak English.

All this makes a mockery of Labour's pledge last January to take in more Syrian refugees.

The claim is often made that the UK Independence Party (UKIP) is setting the agenda on immigration issues. This turns the truth on its head. Rather, claims that UKIP speaks for the "silent majority" are used to justify an anti-immigrant agenda that would proceed along exactly the same lines if UKIP did not exist. Indeed, there is not a single establishment party that does not support immigration controls.

The Green Party's sole contribution to the debate is to call for Britain to support a search-and-rescue operation. It says nothing about Britain's role in creating the wars and economic devastation that have given risen to this human tide of misery.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on working people to defend asylum seekers from the brutal plans of the UK and other major powers, and to demand these unfortunates be given every assistance to resettle here. But more than this, workers must understand that an end to such horrors means waging a political struggle against imperialist militarism and the systematic expropriation of the wealth of the planet by the corporate and financial elite. Everywhere, entire populations have been exploited and reduced to penury, while those countries that possess valuable resources have been targeted for military assaults.

The Socialist Equality Party opposes the ruling class's policies of austerity and war because the two evils are inextricably linked. At the centre of our election campaign is the struggle not to reform but to overthrow the capitalist system and build a workers' government pledged to socialist policies as part of a continent-wide struggle for the United Socialist States of Europe and a World Socialist Federation.

On May 3, the International Committee of the Fourth International, which represents the movement founded by Leon Trotsky in 1938 and publishes the *World Socialist Web Site*, is holding an international online May Day rally. Workers, students, young people and all those interested in this perspective should make plans to attend one of the meetings in London or Glasgow or listen in online.

For more information visit:
<http://socialequality.org.uk/>



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