The refugee crisis and the inhuman face of European capitalism

Peter Schwarz
28 August 2015

The horrific treatment of refugees seeking shelter in central Europe in recent weeks via the Balkans and Italy shows the brutal and inhuman face of European capitalism. Desperate people, fearing for their lives and fleeing the war-ravaged regions of the Middle East and North Africa, confront a bitter ordeal.

Every day provides new outrages: corpses drifting in the Mediterranean; refugees without sufficient food and water crammed together in intolerable sanitary conditions; families with small children forced to cross hundreds of kilometers on foot; police deploying batons and tear gas against defenseless migrants; and everywhere borders and barriers, secured by barbed wire and security forces to repel the refugees with force.

Just yesterday, two boats with up to 500 migrants capsized off the coast of Libya, with hundreds feared dead. Among those on board the ships were migrants from Syria, Bangladesh and several African countries, according to media reports.

This follows the discovery of the bodies of up to 50 Syrian refugees in a truck on an Austrian highway. They are presumed to have suffocated en route. The parked vehicle was found by a highway worker who noticed liquid from decaying flesh dripping from the truck.

Just a few kilometers away, in tranquil Vienna, the heads of government and foreign ministers of Austria, Germany, Italy and six Western Balkan countries responded to the gruesome discovery by tightening measures against those fleeing to Europe. The external border of the European Union is to be reinforced and refugee routes through the Western Balkans better monitored. They assigned blame for the mass death on “criminal human traffickers”, whose business is flourishing due to the isolationist policies of the European powers.

The refugee crisis renders absurd the claim that the European Union is a haven of peace, prosperity and international understanding. While governments work closely together to transform Europe into a fortress where thousands die at its borders, they engage in fierce competition over which state can most effectively deter refugees or send them to another country as quickly as possible. Meanwhile, concerned political commentators are warning that the erection of new borders and the dispute over refugee quotas could explode the EU.

Britain, which has accepted just 1 percent of the Syrian refugees arriving in Europe, is spending millions to barricade the entry to the Euro tunnel in Calais, where thousands of refugees live in misery and where 12 have already died this year. Immigrants who work without permission face draconian punishments.

Hungary, a transit country on the West Balkan route, has built a 3.5-meter-high fence at the EU’s external border with Serbia and is considering measures to punish illegal border crossing with years in prison.

Germany and Austria, the target countries for many refugees, are seeking to repel them with intolerable conditions in detention centers, accelerated deportation procedures and the slashing of social support. Germany, in particular, in collaboration with France, is exerting pressure on other EU countries to distribute refugees based on a quota system.

This proposal has met fierce resistance, especially in Eastern Europe. Polish President Andrzej Duda has categorically rejected any acceptance of additional refugees. He justifies his position by arguing, among other things, that his country expects a fresh wave of refugees from Ukraine, where the civil war between the Western-backed Poroshenko regime and pro-Russian rebels has intensified.

© World Socialist Web Site

Czech Deputy Prime Minister Andrej Babis, a billionaire entrepreneur, has called for an intervention by NATO to “close the Schengen area to the outside”. He referred to the influx of refugees as the “greatest danger for Europe.”

The response of broad layers of the population to the plight of refugees stands in stark contrast to the reaction of the ruling elites. Especially in Germany, refugees have been met with a flood of aid that has surprised and shocked mainstream political circles.

In Hamburg, several tons of donations were delivered to an exhibition hall that has provided shelter for 1,100 refugees from Syria and Eritrea for the past two weeks. Thousands of local citizens donated clothes, toys, blankets or purchased urgently needed hygienic items. While the authorities harass refugees and justify their actions with the claim that they are “overtaxed”, hundreds of volunteers have built a supply chain that distributes donations throughout Germany and organizes language courses and health care.

The media only sporadically reports on such actions, preferring instead to fill their headlines with the xenophobic demonstrations of neo-Nazi groups, infiltrated by the secret services, and the nighttime deeds of cowardly arsonists. In response to these provocations, the wave of aid and support has only intensified.

The support extended to refugees is not just an expression of basic humanity. Many instinctively understand that the refugees are victims of a social system that threatens their own lives.

There has been no popular support for the imperialist wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria, which have destroyed whole societies and are the root cause of the wave of refugees. And workers throughout Europe have for years experienced falling living standards while a small minority at the top of society has enriched itself enormously.

The refugee crisis is the most dramatic expression of the crisis of a social system that is no longer compatible with the most basic needs of the vast majority of humanity.

In 1940, at the beginning of World War II, the Fourth International declared: “The world of decaying capitalism is overcrowded. The question of admitting a hundred extra refugees becomes a major problem for such a world power as the United States. In an era of aviation, telegraph, telephone, radio, and television, travel from country to country is paralyzed by passports and visas. The period of the wasting away of foreign trade and the decline of domestic trade is at the same time the period of the monstrous intensification of chauvinism and especially of anti-Semitism.”

These words have a burning actuality today. Capitalism, based on the private ownership of the means of production and the subordination of every aspect of economic life to the profit of the financial oligarchy, is incompatible with the needs of a global society comprising 7 billion people who are economically dependent on one another. The nation-state, in which capitalism is rooted, stands in irreconcilable opposition to the world economy based on an international division of labor.

The inhuman treatment of refugees, the erection of ever new, insurmountable barriers, the strengthening of the state apparatus and growing militarism are the response of the ruling elites to the insoluble contradictions of capitalism. The despicable treatment of refugees is the product of a profoundly inhuman social system.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site