

The refugee crisis and the polarization of Europe

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Idomeni, Lesbos, Calais ... every day one sees pictures that for decades one could not have imagined in Europe: refugees, including families with small children, living in improvised tents and burrows, drowning in rain and mud, lacking medication and food. And again and again: closed borders, barbed wire and heavily armed police who attack desperate refugees with tear gas and batons.

Large sections of the population look on these brutal scenes with horror and disgust, but the official political debate on the refugee crisis takes place within a narrow spectrum ranging from the right to the ultra-right. In politics and in the media, the only voices allowed are those arguing for unrestrained nationalism and the sealing-off of Europe's internal borders, or those who, in the name of a "European solution," support the militarization of the EU's external borders and a dirty deal with the Turkish government.

Compassion for refugees, hospitality, aid, the right to protection and asylum are all banished from the official discourse, which concentrates exclusively on the most efficient way to deter, criminalise and get rid of refugees. The large majority of the European population who, according to every poll conducted, sympathises with refugees and the untold numbers who have donated their savings and their free time to help them go unrepresented in newspaper columns and on talk shows.

In the German federal states holding elections on Sunday, the Greens, the Social Democrats and, indirectly, the Left Party are promoting the policies of Angela Merkel, who advocates hermetically sealing off the EU's external borders. The only opposition comes from the right wing of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the extreme right-wing Alternative for Germany (AfD), which want to close off the German

borders.

The arguments in Germany resemble those in Great Britain, where voters in the Brexit referendum on whether Britain should leave the European Union, are faced with two equally right-wing alternatives: to support the reactionary institutions of the European Union or endorse a British "independence" that removes all obstacles to the intensified exploitation of the working class and more ruthlessly chokes off immigration into the country.

The restriction of the public debate to right-wing positions, adhered to by the entire media and all established parties, serves a political purpose: to prevent the defence of and support for refugees from joining up with the fight against the capitalist system, which has nothing to offer to wide layers of the population but social misery, repression and war. Those incensed by the racist agitation and arson attacks of the ultra-right are to be directed into the political channels of a government policy that is just as reactionary and which has provided fertile ground for the growth of the extreme right.

The brutal mistreatment of refugees is the culmination of a rightward turn in European politics that has developed over a period of years. The actions taken against refugees are the sharpest expression of this shift to the right so far, but not its cause. The real cause is the deepening crisis of international capitalism and the accompanying sharp social polarization. As was the case in the 1930s, the ruling elites react to this crisis by stirring up nationalism and xenophobia, building up the state apparatus and pursuing their international economic and political interests through the means of war.

In 2008, when the criminal machinations of speculators brought the world financial system to the

brink of collapse, the governments of Europe, like those throughout the world, pumped trillions in public funds into failing banks to rescue the fortunes of the rich. When, as a consequence, some weaker European countries almost collapsed under their debts, threatening the stability of the Euro, the EU and the German government insisted that the working class bear the cost. They made an example of Greece, forcing its population into bitter poverty.

In 2014, Germany and the EU supported the right-wing coup in Kiev and provoked a confrontation with Russia which has continued to intensify. This coincided with the escalation of the war in Syria. After the US and its European allies destroyed first Afghanistan and then Iraq and Libya, the Syrian conflict has now developed into a war involving great and regional powers, threatening to plunge the world into a third world war.

The victims of these wars who attempt to escape certain death by fleeing to Europe are treated worse than animals. One sees what the ruling elites of Europe are capable of. What began with austerity dictates in Greece and other countries finds its continuation in the inhumane treatment of refugees, and is a signal of what workers and youth can expect in the future. Historical experience shows that agitation against foreigners and members of different religions (then it was Jews, today Muslims) serves as the prelude to the oppression of the entire working class.

Under these conditions, the defence of refugees, opposition to war and militarism and the fight against capitalism are inseparable. Only an independent movement of the working class, basing itself on an international socialist program, can prevent Europe's regression into nationalism, barbarism and war.

This requires not only opposition to the extreme right, but also, and above all, a relentless political fight against the influence of pseudo-left tendencies that lull workers and youth with left phrases to secure and support the social assaults, the build-up of the state, and the war policies of the ruling elite.

The experience with Syriza in Greece has shown what such parties are capable of. The Tsipras government was brought to power at the beginning of 2015 because it promised an end to the brutal austerity measures of the EU. Since that time, Syriza has drastically sharpened austerity policies and taken on the

role of the border police and prison guards for the EU.

The Left Party in Germany, Podemos in Spain and numerous other parties that promoted Syriza and support it to this day play no other role. They do not speak for the working class, but for affluent layers of the middle class who do not want to overthrow capitalism, but rather seek to preserve it at any cost.

There is massive opposition in Europe to the devastating effects of austerity measures, to the attacks on refugees and democratic rights and against militarism and war. But this opposition lacks a perspective and a political leadership. The International Committee of the Fourth International and its sections fight for the unification of the European working class based on a socialist program, for the United Socialist States of Europe.



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