

May Day 2016: The refugee crisis and the age of perpetual war

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7 May 2016

The following speech was delivered by Julie Hyland, assistant national secretary of the Socialist Equality Party (UK), to the International May Day Online Rally held on May 1, 2016.

There is a terrible symmetry to the fact that my remarks are made only days after it was confirmed that up to 500 refugees drowned in the Mediterranean, when the boat carrying them from North Africa to Italy capsized on the high seas in the middle of the night.

Last year's May Day event was held shortly after the world had learned with horror that 800 migrants, packed onto a small fishing vessel, had drowned attempting a similar route when their boat sank just off the Italian island of Lampedusa.

Whereas the Lampedusa tragedy provoked immense shock and sympathy worldwide, news of the latest deaths was barely reported and was even denied for days.

The blackout was deliberate. The Lampedusa drownings shone a light on the human consequences of what we have described as the age of perpetual war.

All the humanitarian pretensions evoked to justify imperialist intervention into Libya, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere were revealed as lies. Far from protecting the populations of these countries, as was claimed, they have become collateral damage in the ongoing and escalating efforts by the imperialist powers to redivide the world and its resources between them.

The result is that there are more refugees in the world today than at any point in history. Some 60 million people and rising have been forcibly displaced. One in every 122 people on the planet is now effectively a refugee, more than half of them aged 18 and below. The vast majority are trapped in massive refugee camps in Jordan and Turkey in horrendous conditions.

That is why, in the 12 months since the Lampedusa drownings, every effort has been made to stifle and isolate sympathy for the plight of refugees and migrants.

This has taken several forms. The ruling elite and their apologists in the media have manufactured incidents—such as the supposed Cologne sex attacks on New Years Eve—to encourage the most right-wing and fascistic elements.

Then we have been treated to the spectacle of Frau Merkel, recast as the patron saint of refugees and “open borders.” But her preferred method of solving the so-called migrant problem has turned out to be every bit as draconian as her nominal opponents. This can be seen, most notably, in the European Union's dirty deal with the Turkish authorities for the mass deportation of migrants from Europe.

Of course, anti-immigrant measures are by no means a solely European phenomena. In America, Republican Presidential candidate Donald Trump threatens to bar Muslims from entering the US and has declared his intention to build a wall on the US/Mexican border.

But what Trump provocatively demands, the European bourgeoisie is realising. Some 1,200 km (750 miles) of anti-immigrant fencing is currently under construction in Europe, a distance equivalent to almost half of America's border with Mexico. The right to freedom of movement, at least for workers and their families, is increasingly meaningless as national borders are resurrected and fortified.

The right to asylum no longer exists in Europe, as the EU deports refugees en masse back to the war zones from which they are trying to escape. Nothing remains of the EU's supposed “civilising mission” and the liberal values proclaimed in the aftermath of the Second World War.

Instead, Europe once again resembles the 1930s: The victims of war and persecution forced into makeshift camps without adequate food or sanitation; trains disgorge fleeing migrants to one or another border where they are met with batons, rubber bullets and tear gas; registration numbers stamped on the forearms of those detained and imprisoned; boats blocked, barged or left to sink.

The nets of fishermen in the Mediterranean continue to deliver up the bodies of children with grisly regularity. At just one hurriedly built plot at a cemetery near Izmir, Turkey, the remains of some 400 refugees are interned, mostly anonymous. Sixty percent are women and children. The notes on their graves invariably repeat the same tragic details—born in Syria, drowned in the Mediterranean, buried in Turkey.

Yet only last week, Britain's parliament vetoed a resolution to enable just 3,000 lone children, currently trapped in refugee camps or on the streets of Europe, into the UK. It did so after Europe's leaders had met with President Obama to draw up plans for a renewed military intervention in Libya, which will include mass internment camps for the victims of their violence.

How is such a monumental regression possible in a continent that knows only too well the horrors of nationalism, xenophobia and war?

Here the pseudo-left play the most critical political role. For decades, these organisations professed their anti-racism. Now Professor Slavo Žižek, the darling of postmodernist irrationalism, demands the militarization of Europe's borders, insisting that "Europe should abandon this liberal dream that we can simply have different cultures coexisting."

Žižek is only one example of what the WSWS has described as the transformation of pseudo-left ideologues into open right-wingers. This putrid political layer, which represents the interests of more affluent sections of the middle classes, is directed ever more openly against the working class.

Žižek's proscriptions are being put into effect by his political counterparts in Greece in the Syriza government, to whom the EU has subcontracted the forcible and violent deportation of refugees to Turkey.

Likewise in Spain, Podemos signed off on the EU's deportation deal with Turkey. Without its support, the EU-Turkey deal, which required the approval of all EU member states, could not have been activated.

And so the mass deportations now underway, which have been condemned by human rights organisations as a violation of international law, are the direct responsibility—practically and politically—of the pseudo-left coalitions in Greece and Spain.

In Germany, in Thuringia, Left Party state premier Bodo Ramelow is directing the deportations of refugees, mainly from the Balkans. Some 460 people have been deported so far this year, many subject to raids in the middle of the night.

And in the UK, a consensus is rapidly emerging between Corbyn's Labour Party and its pseudo-left backers that freedom of movement must be curtailed.

These organisations are fully complicit in the crimes against humanity now taking place in Europe.

The fate of migrants and refugees is an appalling manifestation of the barbarism and irrationality of the capitalist profit system. Their defence is the fundamental touchstone of the socialist movement. It can be carried out only through the development of revolutionary opposition to imperialist war and militarism, based on the working class. This is the task to which the Fourth International is dedicated this May Day. I appeal to you to join in this vital struggle.



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