

Dozens drown in Mediterranean as Europe cracks down on immigrants

Eric London
4 June 2018

Dozens of African refugees died in three separate boat disasters across the Mediterranean Sea yesterday. It was the deadliest day for immigrants since October. As the weather warms, hundreds of thousands are preparing to cross into a European continent dominated by right-wing governments intent on blocking their entry and deporting those refugees already present.

Off the coast of Tunisia, rescue divers recovered the drowned bodies of 46 African immigrants destined for the Italian island of Lampedusa.

“There were around 180 of us on board the boat,” which was 30 feet long, one survivor told a Tunisian radio station. The boat “sank because of a leak,” the immigrant said, describing a scene of panic and horror as the boat and its passengers were slowly lowered into the sea.

Another survivor told the press from a hospital bed, “I survived by clinging to wood for nine hours.” Tunisian government officials report that 70 immigrants have been rescued, meaning roughly 65 remain unaccounted for.

At the other end of the Mediterranean, another boat capsized yesterday morning off the coast of Demre, Turkey, leaving nine dead, including six children. Survivors said there were 14 or 15 people on board.

Spanish officials also announced they had rescued 240 immigrants Sunday from 11 boats. Forty-one of the immigrants were rescued at the last minute from a sinking boat. At least one was confirmed dead.

So far in 2018, 660 immigrants have died crossing the Mediterranean, or 2.8 percent of the total who have attempted to cross.

The death toll is the product of policies carried out by European governments to block rescue efforts and deter future crossings. Beginning in 2014, the European Union implemented a policy of keeping coast guard

ships far from areas with frequent shipwrecks. Internal EU documents reveal policymakers arguing that more deaths would equate to lower refugee totals.

In 2017, Italian prosecutors ordered police to impound a rescue boat staffed by a German non-profit to prevent the boat from conducting missions to save drowning immigrants.

According to the *Intercept*, officials used undercover police and wiretaps in a fraudulent effort to “prove” that the volunteers were secretly conspiring with human smugglers. As a result of such persecution, the *Intercept* reported, “One year ago, there were close to a dozen humanitarian organizations operating rescue ships between Libya and Italy. Now there are just a few left.”

Those immigrants who survive the perilous journey face harassment, neglect and deportation by the most xenophobic governments Europe has seen since the Second World War.

In Italy, incoming Interior Minister and member of the far-right Lega party Matteo Salvini made a provocative visit to Sicily yesterday and told a crowd, “Enough of Sicily being the refugee camp of Europe. I will not stand by and do nothing while there are landings after landings. We need deportation centers.”

Salvini spoke at another demonstration on Saturday, threatening immigrants: “Get ready to pack your bags.” Lega and its governing coalition partner Five Star Movement (M5S) have pledged to deport 500,000 immigrants, a move which would require putting large sections of the country under martial law. Luigi Di Maio, the leader of M5S, has previously called rescue boat organizations “taxis of the sea.”

The fascistic threats against immigrants by Lega and M5S have provoked a growing atmosphere of violence against refugees. In Vibo Valentia in the southern

province of Calabria, an Italian man murdered a 29-year-old Malian refugee within hours of Salvini's speech yesterday. Police then reportedly issued a statement claiming the refugee was stealing material from a construction site.

In Germany, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Social Democratic Party (SPD) reached a grand coalition agreement that largely adopted the anti-immigrant platform of the neo-fascist Alternative for Germany (AfD). AfD parliamentarian Alice Weidel delivered a xenophobic rant in the Bundestag last month denouncing "Muslim migrants" as "burqas, knife-men and other good for nothings."

In France, the government of Emanuel Macron used riot police to clear a migrant camp in Paris last week, forcibly moving over 1,000 people and crushing their tents. The French government recently passed an asylum law that criminalizes border crossings, limits the right to asylum, and speeds up the deportation process.

In Spain, *El País* recently reported that many immigrants are forced onto the streets upon arriving to the country and that some are forced to live on nothing but crackers for days on end. Hungary's far-right Prime Minister Viktor Orban said in April that Europe is an "immigrant zone" and that mass migration means "our worst nightmares can come true. The west falls as it fails to see Europe being overrun."

When European Union interior ministers gather Tuesday in Luxembourg to discuss immigration control, they will agree to even harsher crackdowns on immigrants that pave the way for mass deportations across the continent.

This comes in the face of widespread support for immigrants among the European working class. According to a Eurobarometer poll published in April, 57 percent of Europeans feel comfortable with the immigrant population and welcome them as neighbors, friends and co-workers. Just a third of the population says they are at least somewhat uncomfortable interacting with immigrants. In Spain, the United Kingdom, France and Germany, support for immigrants among the population was massive.

The anti-immigrant wave in Europe has drawn support from far-right elements around President Donald Trump, including his former fascist advisor Steven Bannon, who appeared on CNN Friday from

Italy. Bannon praised the incoming Italian government's anti-immigrant policies, falsely portraying it as pro-working class: "The working guy has been stiffed the entire time and that is the revolt that led to Donald Trump and that's what's we've really seen here in Italy."

Workers have no interest in supporting the anti-immigrant policies of their ruling classes. The brutal policies targeting immigrants will be aimed at the working class as the class struggle intensifies. The ruling class's efforts to whip-up anti-immigrant sentiment are aimed at dulling popular opposition to war and policies of social counterrevolution. In each country—and especially in France, Germany and Italy—the ruling class is using xenophobia as a mechanism to pit workers against each other and divert attention away from attacks on pensions and social programs.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact