

Italian government turns away ship with 629 refugees aboard

Marianne Arens
12 June 2018

The Italian Interior Minister Matteo Salvini, from the far-right Lega, declared “Victory!” in a tweet late Monday after Spain offered to take a ship packed with 600 refugees, which Italy’s new right-wing government had blocked from landing in southern Italy.

The refugees were aboard the *Aquarius*, a ship operated by SOS Méditerranée and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). They are migrants who were picked up from unsafe rafts in six separate operations Saturday by Italian navy ships patrolling the waters off of Libya.

Among those crammed onto the vessel were 123 unaccompanied minors, 11 other children and seven pregnant women. Some of them are reportedly sick or suffering from injuries inflicted in beatings and torture carried out by human smugglers in Libya.

The new right-wing government, which consists of the Lega and the Five Star Movement, has decided to make an example of these refugees, at the risk of their lives, in order to implement its anti-immigrant policy. The campaign platform of the coalition called for the speedy deportation of half a million migrants.

“Saving lives at sea is a duty, but transforming Italy into an enormous refugee camp is not,” Salvini declared demagogically on Facebook. “Italy is done bowing its head and obeying. This time there’s someone saying no.”

On Monday afternoon, the new Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez (PSOE) was the only European leader to promise that his government would allow the *Aquarius* to land and the refugees to disembark, “to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe.”

It is by no means clear, however, that the *Aquarius* can make the journey to the Spanish coast overloaded as it is with refugees. In a tweet late Monday, MSF said, “Spain’s offer of safe port Valencia is 1,300 kilometres away—further 3 day journey with *Aquarius*

already over maximum capacity. Health and safety of people rescued onboard including sick and injured people, pregnant women and children must come first.”

Salvini had sent an official note to the Maltese government in Valletta on Sunday urging it to take in the ship. At the same time, he categorically barred all Italian ports from allowing the *Aquarius* to dock.

Malta then also refused to accept the *Aquarius*. Maltese Prime Minister Joseph Muscat, a social democrat, pointed out that the maritime rescue of these refugees had involved several merchant ships and three patrol boats belonging to the Italian Coast Guard. As a result, Malta was “neither involved nor responsible for coordinating the rescue.”

Significantly, Salvini’s note banning the *Aquarius* was also signed by Danilo Toninelli, who is the new Minister of Infrastructure and Transport and a member of the Five Star Movement (M5S). Luigi Di Maio, M5S leader and second deputy prime minister, had expressly supported Salvini in a television interview a few hours earlier, claiming that the “phenomenon of migrants” had become uncontrollable in Italy.

The situation of the people aboard the *Aquarius* had become increasingly unbearable, after two days of sailing between Messina and Malta without being able to find a safe haven. TV journalist Anelise Borges, reporting from the *Aquarius*, said there were supplies for two to three days, but they could run out.

“The situation is precarious,” Borges said, “because the rescue vessel is overcrowded.” The ship is usually designed for 550 people. “Most people have had to stay outside on deck and are completely exposed to the weather. We’re talking about people who have already spent 20 to 30 hours at sea before being rescued.”

The plight of the *Aquarius* recalls the legendary 1939 “Voyage of the damned,” in which the German ocean

liner, the St. Louis, set sail for Cuba with 937 German Jews seeking to escape Nazi terror. Refused permission to land not only in Cuba, but the United States and Canada as well, the ship was forced to return Europe, disembarking its passengers in Antwerp, Belgium, which, within a year was occupied by the Nazis. It is estimated that a least one-quarter of the passengers were murdered in the Holocaust.

In most cases, the refugees aboard the Aquarius have endured a hellish journey of months or even years before managing to leave Libya. Many migrants are picked up by the Libyan Coast Guard and dragged back to the infamous Libyan torture camps. Just a few days ago, 15 people were killed in a mass break-out in Libya.

The refusal of a safe haven for the Aquarius in Italy, as well as the close collaboration of the European Union (EU) with the Libyan Coast Guard, shows the true face of EU refugee policy. The new Italian government is just pursuing this policy more nakedly and ruthlessly.

The EU is waging a shadow war against migrants, which has already claimed tens of thousands of lives in the mass grave of the Mediterranean Sea. The international migration organization IOM has documented 785 drowned refugees this year alone.

The German government also supports this EU war against refugees and immigrants. Chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) has spoken out in favour of the rapid development of the notorious AnKER centres. Speaking on the Anne Will talk show, she said on Sunday that asylum procedures would have to be accelerated in future “so that rejected asylum seekers can leave the country quickly.”

The CDU’s coalition partner, the Social Democratic Party (SPD), shares the tough attitude against refugees. In a *Spiegel online* interview, SPD leader Andrea Nahles said on Sunday that the “safe countries of origin” policy included “people being deported as well. We have to deal with that. We cannot give the impression that people can easily stay in Germany if their application for asylum has been rejected.” She threatened that “many decisions” would be made on the subject in the near future.

The Italian government has set a deadly precedent by refusing to allow the Aquarius to dock and has given the signal to turn back NGO ships. After the Aquarius

was turned away, other ships, including the Seawatch, rescued nearly 800 people from the Mediterranean on Sunday. Last weekend alone, over 1,420 people have been rescued, whose fate and survival are now directly threatened.

While offering to allow the Aquarius to dock at Valencia, the new PSOE government of Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez will pursue a no less anti-immigrant policy than the rest of the capitalist governments of Europe. It was under the PSOE in 2005 that Spain originally erected a border fence around Melilla and Ceuta, the Spanish enclaves in Morocco, to stop refugees from reaching Spanish territory. The three-meter-high fences were topped with razor-wire, monitored by police, with CCTV watch posts and motion sensors. The fences were subsequently increased to six meters, and satellites and drones were introduced.

Even if the refugees on the Aquarius were to reach Spain, there is no reason to hope that they will find asylum there. The Spanish state is notorious for brutal collective deportations and was condemned for this by the European Court of Human Rights only last October.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact