EU backs anti-immigrant deal after Italy threatens to torpedo Brussels summit

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At 4:30 a.m. this morning, negotiators at the European Union (EU) summit in Brussels reached a common position on the migrant crisis, after Italy's far-right government took the extraordinary step of threatening to veto the final EU statement and blow up the summit. The basis of the accord was the EU's adoption of the anti-refugee demands of far-right regimes in Italy, Austria and several Eastern European countries.

The accord reportedly includes EU funding for refugee prison camps in Turkey and North Africa, building closed detention camps in Europe for those seeking asylum, and building more such camps, named "regional disembarkation platforms," along shipping lanes for migrant vessels. The EU will also block refugees' movement between EU countries. Finally, the plan calls for rewriting the so-called Dublin Accords on EU asylum law, which mandate that refugees apply for asylum in the first EU country they reach.

Details of the plan remain unclear: where prison camps would be built and with what funding, how the EU would keep refugees from crossing European borders, and how the Dublin Accords would be rewritten. However, it clearly entails a draconian intensification of police-state measures and attacks on fundamental democratic rights in Europe.

Nonetheless, EU officials all hailed the deal. German Chancellor Angela Merkel endorsed it, adding, "We still have a lot of work to do to bridge the different views."

French President Emmanuel Macron tweeted, "Accord found on migration: a European approach was confirmed, a full agenda agreed (external action, border protection, responsibility for European solidarity). French proposals were adopted."

Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte hailed the EU deal for adopting his government's agenda: "We are satisfied. It was a long negotiation but from today, Italy is no longer alone."

Ominously, Conte indicated that Rome might not agree to build closed detention centers on its soil, insofar as the EU plan entails that refugees in these prison camps could technically ask for asylum. On building such camps, Conte said, "It is a decision that we will take together with the government. We are not at all urged to do so."

Before the summit, EU Council President Donald Tusk had issued an invitation letter boasting that EU policies had reduced migrant inflows by 96 percent from 2015 levels. Beyond continuing to set up detention camps in Libya and across North Africa and working with the Libyan coast guard to stop migrants, Tusk also proposed funding for a crackdown on refugees. His letter called for "creating in the next multiannual EU budget a dedicated financial facility geared towards combatting illegal migration," apparently involving €6 billion.

Amid rising public opposition, Tusk defended moves to build mass prison camps and scrap the right to asylum: "It is the job of every political authority to enforce the law, to protect its territory and the border. That was, after all, the purpose of creating border guards: to guard borders."

Tusk presented the Orwellian argument that the adoption of far right policies against migrants is critical to preserving democratic rule in Europe against the far right: "There are voices in Europe and around the world claiming that our inefficiency in maintaining the external border is an inherent feature of the European Union, or–more broadly–of liberal democracy."

Predictably, Tusk's reactionary anti-immigrant

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agenda and hypocritical invocations of democracy only strengthened advocates of the most violent anti-immigrant measures.

Last night, Conte obtained satisfaction by threatening to veto the draft EU summit statement—itself a reactionary document that accelerates the EU military build-up, condemns the US trade tariffs against EU exports, and backs EU retaliatory tariffs against US exports to Europe. "If this time we do not obtain collaboration from the other European countries," he said, "we could close the summit without approving shared conclusions. … We will not accept agreements on the cheap. Italy has always shown its goodwill."

This outcome vindicates the warnings made by the WSWS prior to the summit on the reactionary role of the EU. It wrote, "Moral appeals to one or another faction of the ruling elite, all of which support the persecution of the refugees, will do nothing … This fascistic offensive can only be opposed via the independent, international mobilization of the working class in struggle on a socialist and anti-war program."

The bitter conflicts raging inside the EU are not over whether to persecute refugees. After extensive reporting by the UN and human rights groups, European ruling circles are well aware that they are pouring billions of euros into prison camps like those in Libya, where refugees face assault, rape, enslavement and murder. Conflicts in European ruling circles are driven by bitter inter-imperialist rivalries over money and strategic advantage.

According to the *Financial Times*, Rome may propose ending a ban on loans to Russia from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), which are currently illegal due to EU sanctions on Russia imposed at the behest of Washington and Berlin.

Italy in particular has close economic and corporate ties with Russia, notably in the energy sector. During talks on forming the Italian government, the far-right Lega party and the Five Star Movement (M5S) both signaled their opposition to the sanctions, with Lega leader Matteo Salvini denouncing them as "insanity directed against a friendly and neighboring market." Russian media reported that French officials might work with Rome to pressure Berlin to lift the EU sanctions.

This drew a sharp warning from Washington. On April 16, US envoy to Ukraine Kurt Volker told the Italian daily La Stampa: "The EU has agreed on the framework and the content of the sanctions: if Italy does not apply them it would have a problem first of all with Brussels. This makes me optimistic, despite the positions taken by the League, because on a practical level Italy cannot take the measures without serious consequences." Volker repeated to *La Stampa*: "Italy cannot touch sanctions against Russia without facing grave consequences."

Some of the bitter financial and strategic disputes swirling in the halls of power in Brussels emerged yesterday in Italian journalist Giuseppe di Vittorio's questions to EU Parliament President Antonio Tajani. Di Vittorio asked, "The six billion euros, will they go to Italy? … Will the French and other people get money, or will things go to Mali, Chad and Sudan? Where is the money going?"

He also asked Tajani about Italian objections to Germany's trade surplus with the rest of Europe, and to French plans to ask other EU powers for bank bailout funds in case of a new financial crash. He said, "The other things are the deficits in some countries and the German surplus. You've talked about a European Monetary Fund. But would Italy agree, because Italy has quite a job at the moment restructuring its debt?"

Tajani gave few specifics in his answer to di Vittorio, and there is little doubt that the debate over how to allocate billions of euros in EU anti-immigrant funding continues to rage in ruling circles.

What is clear, however, is that the struggle to oppose the persecution of refugees and a draconian intensification of police-state and austerity measures cannot be pursued inside the fascistic framework laid out by the EU. It requires an independent political struggle of the European working class against all factions of the ruling elite.

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