

Thousands demonstrate in Germany against far-right attacks on refugee rescue ships

Our reporters
7 August 2018

In over 30 cities in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, thousands of people took to the streets on Saturday to demonstrate in favor of welcoming refugees to Europe and against the criminalization of emergency rescue workers at sea and the shutting of Europe's borders. The numerous local protests were called by the "Sealift—Create safe harbors" alliance.

Over recent weeks, protests have taken place in dozens of cities that have been much larger than the organizers anticipated. Some 10,000 people took to the streets in Berlin in early July, while protests and minutes of silence were held in Frankfurt and other cities to commemorate drowned refugees.

In spite of the extreme heat, many people responded this past weekend across the country to calls for demonstrations, which were often spread via Facebook. Seven hundred people gathered in Dortmund, while there were 500 in Kiel and 400 in Braunschweig. Around 500 people turned out in Mainz, even though it was the second demonstration within three weeks. Further protests are planned in other cities into September.

Meanwhile, the European governments are intensifying their crackdown on refugees seeking to reach Europe by crossing the Mediterranean. In a flagrant violation of international law, an Italian merchant ship returned more than 100 people to Libya on July 30. It is now known that only one in four of the refugees who leave Libya reach Italy. Some 71 percent are brought back to Libya. The remainder are considered missing, with most drowning at sea.

At one of the largest demonstrations, in Leipzig, reporters for the WSWS spoke with participants about the situation facing refugees and the sharp shift to the right within the ruling class. According to the organizers, some 2,000 people gathered in the city, the

majority being young people and families.

Aziz, who fled the Middle East, said he felt it was important to be at the protest because there are large numbers of people who have spent the summer and winter in Greece, Turkey, Serbia and Hungary at the border. They have nowhere to live and are stuck. Some of them live in the forest, he said. They urgently require help. "I am very happy to see this support for refugees from so many Germans," he added.

Aziz is originally from Syria and fled to Europe through Turkey. He assisted a group of refugees who spoke only Arabic and were lost due to their inability to communicate.

Asked whether the attacks on refugees were an international problem, Aziz responded, "This issue has no borders!" This is not a local problem, he explained, but something that concerns people around the world. "The refugees are just normal people. They have ordinary lives, go to work, go shopping, and have families," he said.

He said the military interventions in the Middle East and North Africa were responsible for the refugee crisis. They gave rise to political conflicts and wars. Anyone studying the history of his region, Aziz continued, would see that every five years a new war begins. These wars are supported by international arms companies that provide munitions. To deal with these conflicts, Aziz stated, the major countries, which are in any case interested only in oil and gas reserves, would have to keep out.

Aziz rejected the German government's claim that there are "safe countries of origin." In his opinion, it is wrong to send refugees back to war zones. "It's absolutely unacceptable that refugees are distinguished according to where they come from, or what their political or economic situation is."

The WSWs also spoke to Nolte Bauer, a crew member with Mission LifeLine. He explained how the project was initiated in 2015.

“The LifeLine developed out of the Dresden-Balkan Convoy, which operated on the Balkan route when it still existed,” he said. The group’s response to the closure of the Balkan route was to purchase a ship and become active in rescuing refugees at sea.

He reported on the terrible situation confronting refugees, “They come from a country, Libya, where they are detained by people smugglers. Entire families are blackmailed to give up their money.” An acquaintance reported that he had been covered in oil and photographed by a gang so as to threaten his family that he would be burnt alive. “This is also enforced by beatings, knives and weapons,” Bauer said. Some people get lost and drift at sea for several days, while others try several times to make the crossing, only to be recaptured.

The situation for refugees is now deteriorating sharply. Following the closure of the Balkan route, the EU also closed the Aegean Sea to refugees by reaching an agreement with Turkey. The route from Libya to Italy is also practically closed, reported Nolte. He said he expected that the route would now shift to Morocco and Spain, which would be even more dangerous due to the tides coming in from the Atlantic and the higher waves they create.

Emergency rescue at sea is part of international law, which states that each ship is responsible for rescuing people from a vessel in an emergency. The crew of the LifeLine has always operated within the law and is now being unilaterally blocked by Italy, Nolte said.

This shift to the right is “not a new phenomenon,” he added. “Europe and the entire first world” has long exploited Africa. It is “only logical” that the subsidized markets put African workers under pressure, prevent them from earning money, and force them to look elsewhere for work. It is hardly surprising that there are so many refugees given such economic and trading practices, and given the incitement of and support for new wars, he said.

Asked about the international character of the attacks on refugees, Nolte said that the weak are always played off against the weakest by the powerful. “Thus far, the EU has always portrayed itself as a Nobel Peace Prize winner, and criticized the wall to be built on the border

with Mexico.” But then you look at the Balkans and see barbed wire and walls. Domestically, they’re doing the same thing. “They just criticize things from a distance and are only concerned with maintaining their image.”

He said his crew were aware that their sea rescue efforts do not resolve the fundamental problem. Conditions have to be created where people no longer feel the need to get into boats and risk such a dangerous crossing, he said. Everyone now has to influence politics and participate in these demonstrations.



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