

Italy: Arrest of Riace mayor sparks protests

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The arrest of Domenico Lucano, the mayor of Riace, a small town in the Calabria region of Italy dubbed “hospitality town,” sparked pro-immigrant protests across Italy this past weekend.

It is estimated that nearly 6,000 people demonstrated in Riace against Lucano’s arrest by the Italian tax police on charges of faking marriages of migrant workers and abusing public funds. Protests also took place in Milan and Rome. Many supporters took to Twitter to denounce his arrest and the “fascist” anti-immigrant policies of the coalition government.

According to authorities, in a wiretapped conversation Lucano and his partner Tesfahun Lemlem admitted to arranging the marriage of a Nigerian woman to avoid her deportation. Lucano also allegedly fraudulently awarded rubbish collection contracts to companies that support immigrant workers, which angered the local Mafia.

In 1998, Lucano welcomed the first immigrants and asylum seekers to Riace—a boatload of Kurdish immigrants that washed up on its shores—to save the town from total economic collapse and save the immigrants from deportation. Since then, the town’s population has grown to 1,500, including 400 immigrants from 20 countries. Migrants are given housing and jobs repairing roads and houses, baking bread, reopening cafes, or setting up shops for local crafts. His policies have attracted international attention and the ire of the Italian authorities.

Lucano’s arrest occurs in the wake of a European Union (EU) immigration summit accord in Brussels this past June where the Italian coalition government of the Five Star Movement (M5S) and the League (Lega) insisted on provisions for EU funding for refugee prison camps in Turkey and North Africa. They called as well for building closed detention camps in Europe for those seeking asylum and the construction of more such camps, named “regional disembarkation

platforms,” along shipping lanes for migrant vessels.

The EU accord also agrees to block refugee 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. Italy is a first destination country for thousands of immigrants, and the Italian government is working to prevent migrants from seeking asylum when they reach the Italian border.

In recent years, the government has enacted laws to criminalize immigration. In 2002, then Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and his coalition partners, Gianfranco Fini of the neo-fascist National Alliance and Umberto Bossi of the far-right Northern League (predecessor of Lega), launched a joint attack on poor immigrants, passing the “Bossi-Fini Law,” which introduced criminal sanctions for persons caught illegally entering the country or who return after being expelled.

Under the law, an immigrant who is stopped without a residence permit is expelled immediately. Immigrants are also subject to arrest and detention of six to 12 months, followed by immediate deportation, if caught attempting to re-enter Italy before the expiry of a re-entry ban. A second offence is punishable by up to four years imprisonment. The law also increases the time limit for seclusion in detention centers whilst waiting for extradition. This was extended from 30 days to 60 days and asylum seekers are placed in detention while awaiting asylum review, in contravention of Article 5 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which states, “Everyone has the right to liberty and security of person.”

Subsequent administrations, including center-left, have never acted to repeal this draconian measure.

While the bourgeois media have expressed a degree of sympathy for Lucano as well as their concern about

Italy's moves toward an authoritarian state, they speak for the same center- and pseudo-left forces that paved the way for the current government's immigrant policies.

M5S, with its fake anti-establishment posture, is revealing its true colors. For all their criticism against Berlusconi and the Italian Democratic Party (PD), they are moving to the right of both and have no problem implementing and further elaborating the legal framework adopted by the PD against immigrant workers.

In fact, M5S is honoring their manifesto, which vows to do away with "the business" linked to illegal immigration and promises to boost border security by hiring 10,000 police officers and building new prisons.

An October 7 post on the blog of M5S is headlined, "Riace was not a model, the era of the immigration business is over." The blog post, written by M5S undersecretary Carlo Sibilia, confirms the withdrawal of funds for the Calabrian city: "'We have decided to reduce speculation on hospitality to zero. There are no coverages for Riace, and our government has set itself the goal of eliminating rainy day funding in terms of migration policies.' These are my statements made during the visit in Calabria on August 6. Today, after the arrest of the mayor of Riace as part of the Xenia operation carried out by the Guardia di Finanza [Italian finance police], they are more understandable."

M5S offers nothing progressive in their policies, including the proposed "Citizenship Wage," which, even if enacted, comes with so many restrictions it will be rendered meaningless. They seek to agitate public opinion against immigrants and migrant workers to divert attention away from election promises and the real issues facing Italian society—poverty wages, crumbling infrastructure and the like.

There is widespread concern among Italians about immigration, but there is also mass sympathy for the plight of immigrants and an understanding that the significant increase in immigration is due to the unending wars and economic destruction abroad.

The current government is thoroughly right-wing. If this is what the Italian state is doing to a member of the political elite, workers should be warned that the true goal of this administration is draconian attacks on immigrants and workers alike. The only way forward for Italian workers and youth is the development of a

socialist and internationalist movement in opposition to the government and the financial elite who control the levers of power in Italy.



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