Italy: Captain in court for saving people in distress at sea

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In Italy, the captain and nine crew members of the NGO ship Juventa are under investigation. Pia Klemp, who has rescued about 5,000 people in distress in a total of six missions, faces up to 20 years imprisonment and heavy fines.

Following her biology studies, the 36-year-old captain from Bonn, Germany, had worked for the marine conservation organization Sea Shepherd and participated in missions against illegal whaling. Klemp, who initially started as a simple deckhand, later becoming a petty officer, worked her way up to become captain. From 2015, she has participated in maritime rescue operations on several ships of the non-governmental organizations Youth Rescue and Sea-Watch.

In August 2017, the Juventa, belonging to the Berlin association *Jugend rettet* (Youth Saves) was confiscated in the harbour of the Italian island of Lampedusa. The official Maritime Rescue Center (MRCC) in Rome had piloted it to where several Coast Guard ships with blue lights flashing and armed crew were waiting for them and secured the ship.

Since then, the Sicilian prosecutor in Trapani has initiated a lawsuit against the captain and nine other crew members, who are accused of "aiding illegal immigration, which is punishable by up to 20 years in prison. Specifically, they are accused of having collaborated with people smugglers and returned dinghies to Libya for re-use. The prosecution is relying on fabricated evidence and statements. Italian intelligence agents had bugged the Juventa, intercepted the crew's mobile phones, and placed undercover investigators in their ranks.

Pia Klemp believes that the allegations are easy to refute. The whole thing was nothing more than "fictitious, amateurish nonsense," she told Switzerland's *Basler Zeitung*. "We have only followed international law, especially the law of the sea, where it is the top priority to save people in distress," Klemp said. She did not expect a conviction and was prepared to go "as far as Strasbourg" (the European Court for Human Rights) if necessary. But the trial was already having grave consequences: "Rescue at sea is being criminalized. We are already being paralyzed. And that's why people are dying on the Mediterranean."

The aid organizations SOS Méditerrannée and Doctors Without Borders (MSF) have explicitly warned that many more people could die. The risk of drowning when crossing the Mediterranean today is four times higher than last year. Since then, Italy has consistently blocked its ports for rescuers, with at least 1,151 people having drowned in the central Mediterranean.

Those who manage to be rescued at sea usually have a year-long odyssey through North Africa behind them. In Libya, thousands of refugees are trapped in barbarous internment camps, where they face torture, rape, slavery and even murder. An EU delegation had already officially defined these prisons as "concentration camps."

But this is not stopping the EU states tightening up their laws to prevent refugees from escaping from this hell to Europe. On June 11, at the behest of far-right Interior Minister Matteo Salvini (Lega), the Italian government passed a decree further obstructing rescue at sea. It threatens private rescuers who bring those rescued into Italian territorial waters with fines between 10,000 and 50,000 euros.

News weekly *Der Spiegel* wrote on June 14, "The dreams of Europe's hardliners have come true: rescue at sea is almost halted, the routes across the Mediterranean are more or less closed."

However, it is not only Europe's "hardliners" who are responsible for this, as *Der Spiegel* suggests. It is not just the representatives of the far-right such as Salvini, Sebastian Kurz (Austria) or Horst Seehofer (Germany) who are involved in the decisions, but also the Social Democratic governments in Spain and Malta and the Syriza government in Greece, a close partner of Germany's Left Party.

Since 2015, the EU has withdrawn its own rescue vessels from the Mediterranean and financed violent militias such as the Libyan Coast Guard to act as the doorkeepers of the EU, preventing refugees from reaching Europe. At the same time, more and more people are being displaced by new

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armed conflicts in the Maghreb and Central Africa and are forced to flee.

On June 3, a group of lawyers filed for an injunction against the EU with the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague accusing the EU of crimes against humanity because of its refugee policy. This policy has led to more than 14,000 deaths in the Mediterranean in the last three years. According to the 244-page indictment, the EU and the Italian government specifically have targeted NGOs "with intimidation, defamation, harassment and official criminalization.. This indictment and the *WSWS* report on it reveal that the EU has a deliberate policy of mass murder.

The fate facing the crew of the Juventa is not the only case in which those openly conducting rescue missions are being criminalized and hampered with legal proceedings. The London-based Institute for Race Relations (IRR) research group has recently produced a study about how often EU citizens end up in court for assisting refugees.

One month ago, Lifeline captain Claus-Peter Reisch was fined 10,000 euros in Malta for not having properly registered his ship, which had saved migrants from drowning, according to the court.

Even on land, the authorities are acting increasingly aggressively against people who help migrants, refugees and those without legal papers. Last year alone, the IRR listed 99 cases in which people had already been charged or convicted for even minor acts of assistance. In the previous year, there had been only half as many, namely 45 cases. As the Berlin *Tagesspiegel* comments, the Reisch and Klemp cases are just "the visible tip of a pretty impressive iceberg."

The list included such scandalous cases as the mayor of Riace, who had taken refugees into his community. He was placed under house arrest while the Salvini government deported all immigrants from his village. It also affected six Tunisian fishermen who had rescued shipwrecked people, as well as a Spaniard living in Morocco who had volunteered to monitor the coast to inform sea rescue services of emergencies. A French mountaineer was also prosecuted after helping a Nigerian family on the Italian-French border and bringing the pregnant mother to a hospital.

Those carrying out sea rescues, such as Pia Klemp and Claus-Peter Reisch and many others who use their lives and money to help people who are fleeing, face lawsuits that could destroy their livelihoods. Last but not least, the apprehension of the WikiLeaks founder and courageous journalist Julian Assange from the Ecuadorian embassy and his detention in the maximum-security prison in Belmarsh has literally unleashed and intensified these attacks by state authorities. As the *WSWS* pointed out, it has ushered in "a new stage in the destruction of democratic rights."

However, in its report the London group IRR also points to the increase in solidarity and readiness to help in the population. Opposition to this brutal policy is clearly growing throughout Europe and around the world. This is shown by the willingness to donate and the support that the rescue teams are receiving. A petition on Change.org calling for the immediate release of the Juventa crew has received well over 200,000 signatures so far.

Commenting on the Juventa captain, Peter Scott Smith, the son of well-known World War II veteran Harry Leslie Smith, said in a tweet, "In days gone by, Pia Klemp would have rescued Jews from annihilation. The fact that she could face twenty years imprisonment in 2019 for rescuing refugees in distress condemns the EU for hypocrisy and abetting crimes against humanity for allowing this show trial in Italy."

In May, a foundation in St. Gallen awarded the crew members of Juventa the Grüninger Prize, which is endowed with 50,000 Swiss francs. The name commemorates the Swiss border guard Paul Grüninger, who, during the Nazi period, took Jews to Switzerland and was sacked as a result by the Swiss government.

At the conclusion of her interview with the conservative *Basler Zeitung*, Pia Klemp told the astonished journalists: "I do not want a society where someone has to be a cleaner for 50 years, and instead of a pension, has to apply for welfare, while elsewhere there are bankers who have millions in their accounts, even though they have contributed to the financial crisis. I just do not want this predatory, criminal capitalism."

The lawyers for Pia Klemp and the Juventa crew expect an indictment before autumn.

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