

The global war on refugees

Will Morrow
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A series of events in the past two weeks have prompted mass outrage at the systematic mistreatment and brutalization of refugees by capitalist governments all over the world.

Hundreds of thousands of people have expressed their opposition to Saturday's arrest of Carola Rackete, the 31-year-old German sea captain of the refugee rescue ship *Sea Watch 3*, by the Italian government and its fascistic interior minister, Matteo Salvini. Rackete's supposed "crime" was to rescue 52 African refugees, including pregnant women and children, stranded in the Mediterranean Sea on June 12, and provide their safe transfer to the Italian territory of Lampedusa.

For over two weeks, the *Sea Watch* had sailed through the Mediterranean in search of a port in the European Union (EU) to land. No EU government, including France, Germany and Spain, would accept the few dozen refugees—leaving the crew with no choice but to land at Lampedusa, in defiance of the Italian government's illegal ban on all maritime arrivals of asylum seekers.

The ordering of Rackete's release by Italian judges last night was a response to the immense outpouring of popular support for her in the working class. As of yesterday, a fund set up by a German comedian to support *Sea Watch's* legal fees had raised more than 800,000 euros, and another on Facebook over 400,000 euros, from more than 25,000 donors. Over 330,000 people signed a petition calling for Rackete's immediate freedom.

The Italian ruling, however, is in no way a retreat from the crackdown aimed at all those trying to save refugees. Rackete is to be expelled from Italy and remains under legal threat. Italy has charged Pia Klemp, the captain of the *Juventa* ship that saved 14,000 people, and who was arrested in 2017, for "aiding and abetting illegal immigration." She faces 20 years in prison.

With disgusting hypocrisy, European officials, including German Social Democratic President Frank-Walter Steinmeier and French Interior Minister Christophe Castaner, have mildly criticized Salvini and shed crocodile tears for the refugees. But everyone knows that it is the EU, with France and Germany at the forefront, that has erected "Fortress Europe" with barbed wire and machine guns, ended rescue missions in the Mediterranean, and turned Europe's southern sea into a vast cemetery. Salvini only states most bluntly and crudely the policy of the entire EU.

In 2015, the EU announced "Operation Triton" while training Libyan militias as a coast guard to catch refugees fleeing to Europe and return them to concentration camps in Libya, where there is documented evidence of torture, rape, killings and the selling of refugees into slavery. While the EU ended its rescue operations, crew and ship captains from humanitarian NGOs have been persecuted and had their sailing rights stripped.

In the last three years, at least 14,000 people have drowned in the Mediterranean trying to reach Europe. A report published last week by the Spanish pro-refugee organization *Caminando Fronteras* found that at least 1,020 people had drowned in 70 shipwrecks in the Strait of Gibraltar between Morocco and Spain alone from January 2018 to June 2019.

Eighty years after governments internationally turned back Jews fleeing the Nazi regime to a near-certain death in 1930s Europe, the EU is adopting a policy of mass murder to send refugees a message: trying to exercise their legal and democratic right to asylum in Europe will likely lead to death by drowning.

In the United States, the Trump administration has created a network of immigrant concentration camps inside the country and along the US-Mexico border, where conditions are so abusive that Dr. Lucio Sevier, a pediatrician who visited centers housing children in

Texas last week, said they were more akin to “torture facilities.”

Yesterday, Democratic Representative Alexandria Ocasio Cortez reported on a trip to a detention center in Texas in which women were kept in cells without water and told by border guards to drink out of toilets. A day earlier, a secret Facebook group was revealed by *ProPublica* in which fascistic border guards posted violent jokes about immigrants and sexual threats against Cortez before her visit.

The popular revulsion and opposition to Trump’s fascistic immigration policies was expressed in a demonstration by more than 200 American Jews outside an ICE detention center in New Jersey on Sunday, chanting “Never again means now!” Thirty-six were arrested, with one young arrested protester reporting she felt “good” because her grandparents, who fought against the Nazis, “would want me to stand up against concentration camps.”

The global assault on refugees extends far beyond Europe and America. On June 27, US President Trump hailed the anti-immigrant policies of the Australian Liberal/National coalition government and Labor Party opposition. Trump declared “much could be learned” from the bipartisan Australian policy of Operation Sovereign Borders, which utilizes the military to intercept and block all refugees attempting to reach Australia, in violation of international law.

The fact that the attack on refugees is a universal process shows that it is not due to the fascistic personalities of individual politicians, like Trump and Salvini. It is a particularly foul manifestation of a new, historic breakdown of the capitalist nation-state system. Tens of millions of men, women and children are fleeing the social breakdown and mass killings produced by a quarter-century of war in the Middle East and Africa, waged by the United States and its EU imperialist allies.

There are more refugees today than at any time since World War II. A UN report published last week stated that the number of people forcibly displaced around the world has almost doubled from 43.3 million in 2009 to 70.8 million in 2018. Every minute in 2018, 25 people were forced to flee their homes. Just under 1 percent of humanity, one in every 108 people, are refugees.

In 1940, two years before Europe’s fascist regimes launched the “Final Solution” genocide of the Jews, the

great Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky warned: “Today decaying capitalist society is striving to squeeze the Jewish people from all its pores; seventeen million individuals out of the two billion populating the globe, that is, less than 1 percent, can no longer find a place on our planet! Amid the vast expanses of land and the marvels of technology, which has also conquered the skies for man as well as the earth, the bourgeoisie has managed to convert our planet into a foul prison.”

Today, capitalist governments, facing a deepening crisis of the global order and mounting domestic political opposition, are promoting the types of nationalism and xenophobia that characterized the fascist right in the 1930s. The universal adoption of draconian anti-refugee policies is the means by which the extreme right is being rehabilitated by the ruling elites all over the world.

As with anti-Semitism in the 1930s, the authoritarian measures directed against refugees are aimed against the working class as a whole. The concentration camps that are today deployed against refugees can be used tomorrow against workers and political opponents of war and militarism, austerity and social inequality.

The powerful support for refugees in the working class can and must be mobilized. But the only means to prevent a renewed relapse into barbarism and war is to arm the opposition to fascistic attacks on refugees with a conscious socialist and internationalist program. This means rejecting all attempts to scapegoat immigrants for the social crisis produced by capitalism and defending the right of every worker to live wherever he or she wants—with full citizenship rights, including the right to travel and work.

Only the taking of political power by the working class internationally can free society’s resources from the control of a corporate oligarchy and guarantee a high standard of living for every person in the world, free from poverty and oppression.



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