

“Voyage of the Damned:” Hundreds of refugees stranded in the Mediterranean

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This year marks the 80th anniversary of the infamous voyage of the German cruise liner the MS *St. Louis* from Hamburg to the Americas with 937 passengers aboard, nearly all of them German-Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi persecution.

Even though the Cuban government had sold them visas, when they entered Havana’s harbor on May 27, 1939, the authorities stopped the refugees from disembarking. After waiting for a week in the vain hope that Cuban officials would reverse their decision, the *St. Louis* sailed to the coast of Florida hoping that the United States would offer refuge. However, the Democratic administration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt also turned away the refugees. Attempts to enter Canada and the Dominican Republic were similarly rebuffed.

Left with no option but to return to Europe, the *St. Louis* docked at the Belgian port of Antwerp on June 17. Within less than a year, Belgium would be occupied by the German Wehrmacht. By the end of the Second World War, 256 of the *St. Louis* passengers would be murdered in the Holocaust.

Chronicled in the book *Voyage of the Damned* as well as a film by the same name, the fate of the *St. Louis* was a symbol and harbinger of the unprecedented barbarism, including Hitler’s “Final Solution,” that would engulf humanity in the course of a global war that claimed the lives of some 85 million people.

It was undoubtedly the tragic and criminal saga of the *St. Louis* that Leon Trotsky, the great Russian revolutionary and founder of the Fourth International, had in mind when he wrote in a May 1940 manifesto on “The Imperialist War and the Proletarian World Revolution”:

The world of decaying capitalism is overcrowded. The question of admitting a hundred extra refugees becomes a major problem for such a world power as the United States. In an era of aviation, telegraph, telephone, radio, and television, travel from country

to country is paralyzed by passports and visas. The period of the wasting away of foreign trade and the decline of domestic trade is at the same time the period of the monstrous intensification of chauvinism and especially of anti-Semitism. ... 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.

These words retain all of their burning actuality under conditions in which “Voyages of the Damned” are being repeated on a daily basis in the central Mediterranean, a watery grave for tens of thousands of migrants and refugees, some 14,000 of them over the last three years alone.

The plight of two rescue vessels stranded off the coast of Europe, the *Ocean Viking* and the *Open Arms*, recalls nothing so much as the *St. Louis*, with the continent’s governments refusing to admit the more than 500 refugees aboard the ships.

The migrants, most of them from Africa, were rescued off the coast of Libya from which they had fled, some them literally plucked out of the water. The 151 passengers—including 31 minors—of the *Open Arms*, a vessel operated by a Spanish rescue group, have been at sea for nearly two weeks off the coast of Italy. They have been denied entry by Interior Minister Matteo Salvini, who has imposed fines of up to €1 million along with imprisonment for captains entering Italian waters with refugees, together with the confiscation of their ships.

Salvini, who is in the midst of a campaign to form a new, openly fascist government in Italy, has railed against the rescue ships, touting his policy of “absolute prohibition” against their landing and seeking to use the plight of the stranded refugees to whip up anti-immigrant chauvinism in advance of an election.

The *Ocean Viking*, which has 356 refugees rescued at sea—nearly a third of them minors—crammed into a space

meant for 200, has been denied refueling in Malta as well as entry to Italy. The passengers are enduring conditions of suffocating heat and humidity and facing the threat of huge sea swells forecast for Wednesday.

The fascistic rants of Salvini are only the most blatant expression of a policy that has been put in place throughout Europe to bar the entry of refugees. A minister of the social democratic government of acting Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez in Spain rejected an appeal from the captain of the Open Arms to admit the 31 minors aboard the ship as refugees, asserting that the captain had no “juridical standing” or parental authority to make such a request. He further charged that those aboard the Open Arms rescuing refugees were “compromising the reputation of Spain.”

The immigration minister of Norway, whose flag is flown by the Ocean Viking, said that the refugees should be “transported back to Africa” in order to avoid any “extension of the refugee route.”

The European Commission, which issued a call to European Union (EU) member states to coordinate a solution to the plight of the stranded refugees and show solidarity, reported that not a single government had responded. Every European government, with Germany and France in the lead, has collaborated in erecting a “Fortress Europe” with barbed wire and machine guns defending the EU’s borders and a ruthless campaign to end the rescue missions in the Mediterranean.

A key part of this vicious anti-refugee campaign has been contracted out to Libyan militias, which have been recruited and trained as a coast guard dedicated to hunting down refugees trying to reach Europe. They run concentration camps in Libya where those fleeing for their lives from other parts of Africa and the Middle East are subjected to torture, rape, summary execution and being sold into slavery. A civil war that has devastated the country since the 2011 US-NATO war destroyed its government and infrastructure has further placed migrants’ lives at risk. The bombing of a detention center last month killed some 50 refugees.

The campaign against refugees in Europe is mirrored across the Atlantic, where the Trump administration has added to its mass incarceration of children, its turning away of refugees on the Mexican border and its round-up of undocumented workers in factory raids, the imposition of new regulations aimed at barring legal immigration by those without financial resources. Immigrants already in the US are to be targeted for deportation for the “crime” of using social services such as food stamps, Medicaid and housing subsidies.

Asked by a reporter Tuesday whether the poem of Emma Lazarus inscribed at the base of the Statue of Liberty, “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to

breathe free...” still applied, Ken Cuccinelli, Trump’s acting director of US Citizenship and Immigration Services, responded with his own amended version: “Give me your tired and your poor, who can stand on their own two feet and who will not become a public charge.” While hardly poetry, the meaning is clear enough: working class immigrants and refugees need not apply.

The war against refugees and the scapegoating of immigrants for deteriorating living standards, unemployment and the destruction of social services under capitalism is a global phenomenon. It is employed by governments and ruling oligarchies the world over as a means of dividing the working class and cultivating neo-fascist elements that can be used to counter the growing wave of social struggles and strikes by the working class in country after country.

These policies are rooted not merely in the criminal and twisted mind of a Donald Trump or the fascistic ideology of a Matteo Salvini, but rather in the crisis of the capitalist system and the irreconcilable contradiction between the global integration of production and the capitalist nation-state system. The sealing of borders with razor wire barricades, the building of concentration camps for refugees and the whipping up of xenophobic and fascist forces echo the darkest days of the 1930s, just as the ships stranded in the Mediterranean recall the fate of the St. Louis.

The turn toward these methods is a sign not of strength, but of weakness and deepening crisis, as capitalist governments in the US, Europe and internationally face mounting opposition from working people that threatens revolutionary social and political explosions.

There are powerful sentiments of solidarity and support for refugees and immigrants within the working class that must be mobilized and armed with a socialist and internationalist program, including the right of all workers to live and work in whatever country they choose with full citizenship rights.



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