

Macron, Steinmeier visit Rome to prepare new EU repression of refugees

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French President Emmanuel Macron on Wednesday and German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier on Thursday traveled to Rome to discuss refugee policy and the Libyan war. Both presidents met Italian President Sergio Mattarella and Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte.

The visits had the character of a political outreach of the European Union's (EU) traditional Berlin-Paris axis to Italy's new government. The fall of Conte's previous coalition government between his Five-Star Movement (M5S) and the neo-fascist Lega of former Interior Minister Matteo Salvini, and its replacement two weeks ago by a M5S-Democratic Party (PD) coalition, improved the climate of relations between Berlin, Paris and Rome. Macron and Steinmeier tried to smooth over violent diplomatic conflicts that erupted, particularly between Paris and Rome, over Libya.

The agreements made in Rome show, however, that the removal of the neo-fascists from the Italian government has not produced any shift towards a less militaristic and anti-refugee policy. Rather, the three largest euro zone powers are trying to reach a settlement to divide up the spoils from the plundering of Libya and a common agreement on a policy of intensifying repression of refugees across Europe.

On Wednesday night, Macron and Conte declared that they had come to an agreement in principle for an "automatic mechanism" to distribute refugees among the different EU countries. Currently, the Dublin Accords force refugees to request asylum in the EU state where they first arrive, so that southern and eastern European states like Italy or Greece process a large number of asylum requests from refugees fleeing imperialist wars in the Middle East or North Africa. Other EU states have refused to welcome any refugees at all.

Conte and Macron's plan is not, however, to let refugees travel to countries of their choice, but rather to use the EU's machinery to process and expel them more quickly from Europe. The centerpiece of their proposal was a demand for a "more effective" method to expel refugees to whom the EU refuses asylum. Under conditions where many EU countries are expelling even Afghan refugees back to their war-torn country, this is a blank check for mass expulsions of refugees across Europe.

Paris and Rome, Macron said, will now defend "a common position so that all the (EU) countries will participate in one or another form" in housing refugees "or be punished financially." He added, "The European Union did not show enough solidarity with states of first arrival, especially Italy. And France is ready to shift its position on this issue and reconsider the Dublin Accords. And I want us to work together to find a stronger, fairer solution."

Conte and Macron pledged to jointly defend this proposal for a new refugee policy at a planned meeting of EU interior ministers scheduled for Monday in Malta.

Conte insisted that Italy "will not let people traffickers decide who comes onto our territory" but that, in contrast with Salvini's previous attempts to simply prevent any boat carrying refugees from the Mediterranean from reaching Italy, it was necessary to "manage the problem" more skillfully.

With this visit, the Macron government was signaling that it has no significant differences on refugee policy with the previous Conte-Salvini government. It primarily considered Salvini's methods too ham-handed and likely to provoke popular opposition. His refusals to allow refugee boats into Italy prompted mass protests in Italian cities, and legal confrontations

with ship captains who ignored his orders and landed refugees in Italy in defiance of the ban.

The other major subject of Macron's visit was the bitter conflict between Paris and Rome over Libya, amid the bloody civil war unleashed in that country by the 2011 NATO war.

While French oil firm Total and Italy's ENI vie for control over Libya's vast oil wealth, Paris and Rome have also armed and backed rival factions in the bloody fighting in Libya. While France and Egyptian dictator Abdel Fattah al-Sisi have backed military strongman Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army, Italy and Turkey have backed the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) led by Fayeze el-Serraj in Tripoli.

Macron called for compromise on Libya, and Conte endorsed Macron's earlier call at the G7 conference in Biarritz for a conference gathering all parties "with an interest" in the war in Libya. Conte said, "The objective is to stabilize Libya. It is fundamental to work with France. With President Macron we will speak of strategic issues like Libya, and it is fundamental to work together ... We need to create favorable conditions for an inter-Libyan conference."

Italian Foreign Minister Luigi di Maio may meet with his French counterpart, Jean-Yves Le Drian, in a separate mini-summit during next week's UN General Assembly meetings in New York.

Steinmeier's visit to Rome yesterday confirmed the outline of the agenda Berlin and Paris are drawing up with the new Italian government. Before traveling to Rome, he told the *Corriere della Sera*: "With the formation of the new government, Italy has changed camps within Europe. The time has come."

In Rome, Steinmeier also stressed the major EU powers' close collaboration on policing refugees. "On the issue of migration, Italy and Germany want to collaborate far more profoundly," he said after meeting Mattarella, adding: "It is important that Italy should not be left alone to face this issue, and I believe that Europe should take the initiative to relieve it: we must find a European solution that lessens Italy's burden."

Steinmeier also indicated that Berlin would take action on Libya. "The migrant question is closely linked to Libya, where the situation requires a new European effort if we want to halt the erosion of the state. Italy and Germany, together with France can

launch and prepare such an initiative," he told the *Corriere della Sera* before leaving for Rome. Steinmeier also announced that the German government is proposing an international summit on Libya this October, in Berlin.

The plans outlined by Steinmeier, Macron and Conte are a warning to workers across Europe and internationally. The removal of one or another fascist politician like Salvini does not halt the drive of the capitalist powers towards xenophobic nationalism, repression and imperialist war. Pro-EU politicians issued various denunciations of Salvini, whose government Macron referred to as "leprosy." However, these criticisms were fundamentally false and hypocritical, insofar as pro-EU politicians share essentially the same anti-immigrant, militarist agenda.

The EU's drive towards imperialist plunder and fascist-authoritarian rule is rooted in far deeper processes than the agendas of individual politicians. Beset by growing social and political protest, and tens of millions of refugees created by three decades of imperialist war in the Middle East and Africa following the Stalinist restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union, the European bourgeoisie is determined to whip up nationalism and create a police-state regime to divide and repress the working class. It can only be fought on the basis of the international mobilization of the working class on a socialist program.

Macron, who last year denounced Salvini's government for targeting refugees, has announced plans to slash medical aid and cash benefits for refugees applying for asylum, in order to compete with neo-fascist candidates in the 2022 French presidential elections on an anti-immigrant basis.



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