Spain’s PSOE-Podemos government builds migrant concentration camps on Canary Islands

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The Podemos-Socialist Party (PSOE) coalition government is erecting prison camps for migrants on the Canary Islands, a Spanish territory 1,000 kilometres off the coast of Morocco.

Last Friday, PSOE Minister for Inclusion, Social Security and Migration José Luis Escrivá announced that the PSOE-Podemos government aims to have built tent camps capable of holding 6,000 migrants on the island chain by the end of 2020. A further 7,000 places will be made available to imprison migrants in more permanent buildings. Thousands of migrants currently being housed in hotels or other makeshift accommodation across the archipelago will be relocated to these internment camps.

These brutal and anti-democratic measures are part of a murderous European Union campaign against refugees. At the EU’s instigation, concentration camps have been erected across Europe, one of the most notorious of which is on the Greek island of Lesbos.

The “left populist” Syriza government built these camps and presided over them during its four years in office. It detained refugees in hellish conditions, sending riot police to attack those who protested their incarceration with tear gas and stun grenades.

Thousands of desperate refugees continue to be interned in these overcrowded and unsanitary camps, which have become death traps with the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. Refugees are indefinitely detained in these facilities, with next to no chance of their asylum applications being heard by European authorities, in flagrant violation of international law. The Lesbos model is now being implemented on the Canary Islands by the PSOE-Podemos government.

Many of the new prison camps being created across the Canary Islands will be set up in former barracks or other sites belonging to the Spanish military. In Gran Canaria, a tent camp to house 650 migrants will be constructed in the Canarias 50 army garrison, with the first migrants expected to be detained there by December. This site will ultimately house another 1,150 people in prefabricated shacks.

A tent camp for a further 300 prisoners will be erected on the grounds of a former school on this island, the Colegio León, while an additional 400 migrants could be incarcerated in the school building itself. The Spanish bank Bankia has also “donated” a 7,000-metre-squared ship to serve as a prison for a further 500 migrants off the coast of Las Palmas, Gran Canaria. Between 200 and 250 migrants were already transferred to a tent camp at the Barranco Seco military site from Arguineguín port last week.

Last Tuesday, Spanish police evicted more than 200 migrants from a temporary camp in this port, leaving them with nowhere to go and no food or other resources. “We have nowhere to go,” one migrant told the Efe press agency, while another added, “We don’t know where we’ll spend the night.” The migrants were eventually transferred to a complex in the town of Maspalomas, 12 kilometres from the port.

A judge reviewing a formal complaint about the treatment of refugees in the Arguineguín camp, Yanira del Carmen González, denounced conditions as “utterly deplorable,” but ruled that no criminal actions be taken.

In Tenerife, the largest of the Canary Islands, a former military barracks called Las Canteras is being repurposed to imprison up to 1,800 migrants in 10 buildings. Another tent camp will be established in a forest known as Las Raíces, a site which is on loan to the Interior Ministry from the Defense Ministry, with a capacity of around 1,500 migrants. Similarly, the El Matorral barracks on Fuerteventura island will serve to intern up to 700

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migrants.

The Interior Ministry is refusing to allow migrants stranded on the Canary Islands to be transferred to the Spanish mainland, despite requests to do so from regional authorities. So far this year, the Interior Ministry has authorised only 1,800 such transfers, around a tenth of the roughly 16,000–18,000 people who have arrived on the islands in 2020. The PSOE-Podemos government hopes to use the threat of indefinite detention in island concentration camps to deter others from making the crossing.

On an official visit to Morocco, PSOE Interior Minister Fernando Grande-Marlaska defended Madrid's refusal to transfer migrants to the mainland, claiming it would provide a pull factor for refugees seeking to travel to Europe. "We have to fight against illegal immigration and avoid establishing irregular entry routes into Europe," he stated.

The Canary Islands have seen a more than 1,000 percent increase in the number of migrants arriving over the last year. Between 1 January and 15 November 2020, at least 16,790 migrants made their way to the islands by sea, according to the Interior Ministry, compared to a total of 1,497 people in the same period of 2019. Other estimates indicate that more than 18,000 migrants have made the journey this year.

As the Mediterranean increasingly becomes a mass graveyard, desperate refugees are forced to look for other ways to flee wars or economic deprivation in their home countries. The EU and its member governments have deliberately ignored migrants' distress calls in the Mediterranean, allowing thousands to drown in its waters each year. Over 1,200 refugees have so far died attempting to cross the sea this year alone.

The route to the Canary Islands is deadly. According to International Organization for Migration estimates, one in 16 refugees does not survive the crossing. The number of unreported deaths is extremely high, since boats repeatedly miss the islands and drift out into the Atlantic.

The PSOE-Podemos government has systematically implemented brutal anti-refugee policies, causing mass deaths. Spain's supposedly "progressive" government is complicit in the actions of its right-wing Greek counterpart—sending police reinforcements to Greece earlier this year to assist the conservative New Democracy government with its savage crackdown on refugees.

Only last month it was revealed that the PSOE-Podemos government is carrying out the barbaric policy of separating migrant children detained in the Canary Islands from their mothers—a brutal practice notoriously employed by America's fascistic president, Donald Trump.

Last week, Spain's Constitutional Court upheld a law passed by the right-wing Popular Party in 2015, allowing for the summary expulsion, or "hot return," of migrants from Spain, without even the semblance of legal process. The only migrants exempted from this summary expulsion policy are minors or those considered vulnerable—the elderly or pregnant women.

According to Escrivá, speaking during a visit to the Canary Islands last Friday, "90 percent" of migrants who arrived on the archipelago in 2020 "can be expelled back to their countries of origin." This is a promise of mass illegal deportations.

While Podemos and the PSOE have both claimed to oppose some or all aspects of this brutal and anti-democratic practice, these summary expulsions have continued apace and actually increased since the PSOE entered government in mid-2018—first with the support of Podemos and then in direct coalition with this party.

In 2017, 607 "hot returns" were carried out of migrants detained at Spain's borders, rising to 658 in 2018. No figures are available for 2019: the PSOE-Podemos government has refused to release them.

These brutal attacks on desperate migrants constitute an indictment of the "left populist" Podemos and other middle-class parties of its ilk, which across Europe impose fascistic anti-refugee policies indistinguishable from those of the far-right. The working class must unconditionally defend all migrants and asylum seekers and their right to live and work in safety wherever they choose. This requires making a conscious break with pseudo-left parties, as part of a struggle against the reactionary policies of the entire EU.

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