

Lampedusa migrant deaths: The real face of the European Union

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The horrific images of hundreds of drowned refugees off the coast of the Mediterranean island of Lampedusa reveal the real face of the European Union. Twenty-one years after the signing of the Treaty of Maastricht, the project of European unification under capitalism has turned into a nightmare in every respect.

From the outside, the EU resembles a fortress, before whose walls thousands of refugees lose their lives. Inside it resembles a prison, in which poverty, exploitation and oppression are rapidly increasing and the benefits of “unity” are exclusively reserved for the rich and powerful.

The dead of Lampedusa are victims of the European Union (EU) in a double sense.

The imperialist wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, supported by Europe; the fomenting of civil war in Syria; the looting of raw materials and the neocolonial exploitation of the countries of the Middle East and Africa have created conditions under which escape is the only hope of survival for many. Only a small fraction of the millions of refugees from the countries concerned make their way to Europe.

To bar their way, the EU has established the FRONTEX border agency, which has its own fleet of planes, helicopters and boats, uses drones and advanced surveillance technology, and can deploy border guards from various member states at any time. FRONTEX has sealed off Europe’s land borders with massive fences, so that the only way open for refugees is a life-threatening route over the Mediterranean.

The disaster off Lampedusa, where 364 bodies have been recovered so far, and the capsizing of another boat a few days later with the loss of another 50 to 200 lives are the direct result. According to refugee organizations’ estimates, 25,000 people have drowned while attempting to cross the Mediterranean to Europe since 1990.

The ruthlessness with which the EU treats refugees is the sharpest expression of its attacks on the entire working class. The past few years have been marked by relentless austerity diktats that have destroyed the livelihoods of millions. Democratic rights have been systematically dismantled and hollowed out.

Meanwhile, 27 million people are officially unemployed in the 28 member countries of the EU. Some 120 million are poor, 43 million do not get enough to eat, and 18 million depend upon food aid from the EU. The youth are especially hard hit. In Spain, Greece and Croatia about 60 percent of workers under 25 are unemployed.

The army of the unemployed is used to push down wages and working conditions. Even in a “rich” country like Germany, a quarter of all employees face precarious working conditions. Contract workers from Eastern Europe are exploited at hourly pay rates of €2-€3. Some 880,000 people in Europe are virtual slaves who, according to a report by the CRIM European Parliament Committee, are exploited by criminal gangs active in prostitution and other activities.

At the other pole of society, wealth is growing enormously. Despite the recession, stock exchanges have reached record highs and the number of millionaires as well as their wealth and incomes are growing.

Those responsible for this development are the politicians, political parties and trade unions that support the European Union and determine its policies—from the conservatives and social democrats to Germany’s Left Party and other pseudo-left organizations. Some of them are now shedding crocodile tears over the victims of Lampedusa, but they all defend the EU, which is responsible for the catastrophes.

They leave opposition to the EU to far-right parties such as the French National Front, which spreads nationalism and xenophobia, incites backward elements and intimidates the working class.

The 28 EU countries are now home to about 500 million people. The fact that the European Union is hermetically sealed and not able to absorb a few tens of thousands of refugees is an expression of its historical bankruptcy. It brings to mind the period before the outbreak of the Second World War.

At that time, Leon Trotsky remarked: “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.”

For decades, right-wing propagandists exploited the victims of the Berlin Wall, claiming they provided evidence of the alleged failure of socialism. In reality, what existed in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR—East Germany) was not socialism, but a Stalinist dictatorship. But if the same yardstick is applied to the EU, the inescapable conclusion is that it has failed a thousand-fold.

At Lampedusa, more than twice as many people died on a single day than at the Berlin Wall in the 28 years of its existence. According to the Centre for Historical Research, a total of 98 East German refugees died in the attempt to get over or under the Berlin Wall. There were another 30 people from East and West Germany who were accidentally killed or shot although they were not trying to escape, and eight border guards were killed while on duty.

Only the working class, which is everywhere coming into conflict with the ruling class, can show a way out of the impasse of European capitalism. It must conduct an irreconcilable struggle against the European Union and its reactionary institutions, unite across Europe, and fight for workers’ governments that will reorganize society on a socialist basis. Its goal must be the establishment of the United Socialist States of Europe, and the defense of refugees and their rights

must be an integral part of this struggle.

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