

Europe-wide demonstrations in defence of migrants and refugees

By Robert Stevens
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Protests took place across Europe Saturday to coincide with United Nations (UN) Anti-Racism Day.

This year, what is known as “International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination” falls on March 21. The day was proclaimed by the United Nations in 1966 to mark the anniversary of the Sharpeville massacre in South Africa in 1960. Marches were held in 10 countries across 45 cities.

Up to 30,000 people demonstrated in London, with protesters assembling in Portland Place before marching to a rally in Parliament Square. Around 3,000 marched in Glasgow, Scotland and 1,000 in Cardiff, Wales.

Up to 15,000 people reportedly marched in Athens, Greece, which only has a population of 11 million. The march was organised by the United Movement Against Racism and the Fascist Threat, which is backed by various pseudo-left groups and sections of the trade union bureaucracy. Many were refugees from the various camps built by the Syriza government. Many of those demonstrating attacked the Fortress Europe policy of the European Union (EU) and demanded the rescinding of the EU deal with Turkey that seals off Europe’s borders to the millions of refugees fleeing war zones in the Middle East and North Africa and facilitates the mass deportation of refugees arriving in Greece.

Protesters demanded the opening of borders across Europe and chanted slogans including “Asylum and housing for refugees” and “No to deportations.” Protests were also held in Greece’s second city, Thessaloniki, and in Patras, Ioannina, Heraklion, Chania, Volos, Xanthi.

Several thousand attended protests in Amsterdam in the Netherlands and the Austrian capital, Vienna. Thousands marched in a number of Danish and Polish towns and cities.

The London protest was significantly larger than those held in other European capitals. It was organised by Stand Up to Racism (SUTR), a coalition that has the backing of

the Trades Union Congress (TUC), a number of national unions and Labour MPs. Yet here, the organisers, including the pseudo-left Socialist Workers Party and Counterfire, ensured that there was scarcely a reference to the reactionary anti-immigration policies of the EU that their co-thinkers in Greece were busily protesting.

To do so would cut across the narrative of the main trade unions that continued EU membership provides a progressive alternative to Brexit and Prime Minister Theresa May’s alliance with Washington.

Instead, announcing the march, SUTR wrote that it was “Taking place in the wake of the election of Donald Trump and as Theresa May makes the moves to trigger Article 50 and the UK’s Brexit from the European Union, a progressive movement is growing to turn back the tide of racism.”

The SWP, for its part, dutifully backpedalled on its previous anti-EU pro-Brexit position and insisted, “To defend freedom of movement, we need unity no matter how people voted.” The unity they speak of preserving is not the unity of the working class, which would mean opposing both the pro-and-anti-Brexit wings of the British bourgeoisie and the labour and trade union bureaucracy, but their own unity with the TUC.

Those speaking offered no perspective to defend immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers. While there was no end of outrage emanating from the platform condemning the reactionary policies of May and Trump, the organisers glorified a UN initiative that has, from its inception in 1966, carefully avoided criticism of any government, including the main European powers.

While calling for the “Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination,” the UN resolution allows signatories to do exactly as they please. It states, “This Convention shall not apply to distinctions, exclusions, restrictions or preferences made by a State Party to this Convention between citizens and non-citizens.”

The resolution adds, “Nothing in this Convention may be interpreted as affecting in any way the legal provisions of States Parties concerning nationality, citizenship or naturalization, provided that such provisions do not discriminate against any particular nationality.”

Speakers, including Trades Union Congress leader Frances O’Grady, were happily able to declare token opposition to the treatment of refugees by May and Trump, which commits them to doing absolutely nothing.

Particular focus was placed instead on a moral appeal to the May government for special treatment for unaccompanied children. The Dubs Amendment—a parliamentary amendment put last year by Labour peer Lord Alfred Dubs aimed at allowing into Britain a few more lone child refugees from the “Jungle” camp at Calais in France—was universally hailed.

The reality is that such was the public outcry at the height of Europe’s refugee crisis at the plight of thousands of children and teenagers living unaccompanied in terrible conditions in the Calais camp, that Lord Dubs proposed an amendment to the Immigration Act 2016. This proposed bringing just 3,000 of the Calais children to Britain. In the end, just a few hundred were allowed in by the May government under the amendment clause, before the scheme was scrapped entirely this year.

Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn did not attend the march, instead sending in a video message in which he once again cited a series of commonplaces. He solemnly declared, “It’s the United Nations Anti-Racism day,” adding it was necessary to “redouble our efforts in fighting racism, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism and all forms of discrimination.”

Corbyn told the audience, “We will not be divided. In place of division, we must all come together to celebrate our diverse communities and shared heritage.” The “Labour Party knows this and it’s at the heart of what we do,” he stated, adding, “This week I met with Alf Dubs and met with young refugees who thanks to his efforts now live safely in Britain.”

Corbyn said the May government had “thwarted Alf’s efforts at every turn.”

The focus of the speakers at the rally, including Corbyn, on the Dubs Amendment also provides a political amnesty for the broader militarist agenda of British imperialism.

One would never have known that Corbyn is the leader of a party which has supported every single war waged by the US and Britain over the past three decades. Or that

Corbyn is fully complicit in allowing this to continue. In November 2015—just two months after being elected Labour leader on a platform that included opposition to war—he capitulated to Labour’s right wing by agreeing to their demands for a “free vote” on military action in Syria. This was specifically aimed at reversing a 2013 vote against the war in parliament. Corbyn’s action gave then-Tory Prime Minister David Cameron the majority he sought—reversing the defeat he suffered two years before—with UK bombing in Syria beginning just hours later.

As for defending the rights of EU nationals living and working in Britain, in January, in yet another capitulation to the Labour right, Corbyn reversed his previous opposition to limits and quotas on immigration numbers. He stated in a speech in Peterborough, a city that voted strongly in favour of leaving the European Union in last year’s referendum and has a large Eastern European migrant population, “Labour is not wedded to freedom of movement for EU citizens as a point of principle.”

In line with their refusal to address the predatory role of Britain and the European powers, there was not a single reference to the crisis of capitalism or imperialism—which is responsible for the wars that have resulted in the creation of tens of millions of refugees globally—in the material produced by Stand Up to Racism for the event. Stand Up to Racism instead urged only, “Yes to a world free of racism, Islamophobia and anti-Semitism. Yes to a world where refugees and migrants are welcome. Yes to a world where black lives matter and we build bridges not walls.”

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