

Italian Interior Minister Salvini orders removal of migrants from Riace

By Marianne Arens
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Italy's right-wing coalition government and its fascist Interior Minister Matteo Salvini have ordered the removal of all refugees from Riace, known as the "village of hospitality," in southern Calabria. On October 2, the mayor of Riace was placed under house arrest.

Last Saturday, the Interior Ministry issued a circular declaring that all migrants living in Riace should leave the village and move into various state refugee camps. Initially, the measure was to be executed this week but on Monday the deadline was extended for a period of sixty days. This leaves the refugees to an uncertain fate.

A week ago, several thousand people demonstrated against the detention of Mayor Domenico "Mimmo" Lucano and denounced the government's fascist immigration policy.

Due to Lucano's initiative to welcome migrants and refugees into his village, the former ghost town of Riace has been imbued with new life and is now known throughout Europe. In 2010, Wim Wenders shot his short film "Il volo" (The Flight), in which he honored the model-town on the Calabrian coast and its mayor. Lucano has been awarded several international prizes, including last year's Dresden Peace Prize.

Of the approximately 2,000 inhabitants of the village, more than 400 are immigrants and another 500 have returned from emigration. The first migrants came from Kurdistan twenty years ago and have largely adopted Italian citizenship since then. Refugees from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and Syria, Ghana, Eritrea, Somalia and other countries came later.

About 200 of them are directly threatened by the announced deportation. The Interior Minister's decree has caused great concern amongst the immigrant population. On Sunday, a group gathered in front of Lucano's house, where they kept emphasizing: "We

don't want to leave Riace. Our new life is here."

The locals support the immigrants, as Riace has gained greatly from its new inhabitants. Thanks to the influx of new residents, the local school did not have to be closed. Dilapidated houses were rebuilt and the whole town—with its cafes, shops, studios and services—was given new life. Lucano, who initiated the project twenty years ago as a teacher, was elected mayor in 2004.

For two weeks he has been prevented from leaving his house or receiving any visits. The government is demanding that the municipal council submit a new bill for all additional expenditures incurred by immigration, regardless of the fact that Riace has not received any state funds for special expenses in more than a year.

Thousands are taking to the streets against the government's pitiless refugee policy. On October 6, 6,000 people gathered in Riace to express their solidarity with the mayor; further demonstrations took place in Rome and Milan the same day. Several thousand school and university students also showed their solidarity with the migrants of Riace and its mayor on the October 6 and 12.

However, all these opposition protests have no voice in politics. Reports about them can be found almost exclusively in the blogs or Twitter accounts of the relevant initiatives and networks. The mainstream media either report them very scantily or not at all.

The merciless position of Salvini is an expression of the crisis and weakness of the government. It seeks to divide and intimidate the population while also diverting attention from itself as it prepares massive attacks on the entire Italian working class.

Salvini justified his tough stance in Riace by attacking mayor Lucano, stating, "Irregularities in the use of public funds cannot be tolerated." This is all the

more preposterous as Salvini's own party, the far-right Lega, has misappropriated 49 million euros of taxpayers' money in just three years (2008 -2010) and must now repay it in annual installments, as confirmed in September by the highest court in Italy, the Cassation Court.

This is awkward for the coalition partner M5S, which has always claimed to be against corrupt politicians and whose voters do not fully support Lega's witch-hunting of refugees. As a result, several M5S leaders have attempted to cautiously distance themselves from Salvini in public. While Roberto Fico (M5S), the President of the House of Representatives, has not distanced himself from Salvini's decree in Riace, he has criticized his migration policy in the past.

Salvini had recently praised the decision of Sarah Casanova (Lega), the mayor of Lodi, to exclude refugee children from school meals if they did not pay the maximum contribution. In a very short time, more than 60,000 euros were collected via the Internet for foreign children's school lunches in Lodi. Fico then called upon Lega politicians Salvini and Casanova to rescind their decision in Lodi, to apologize and to ensure "that these children return to the school canteen." In the case of Riace, the M5S has openly welcomed "the end of a model," as of October 7.

Fico is certainly not worried about the refugee children of Lodi, but rather the crisis of the Five Star Movement, which is visibly losing its support base. While it was still the strongest party in Italy in April's general election, it has now fallen behind, with 28.5 percent, trailing the Lega (33.8 percent).

While the Lega mobilizes its fascist supporters through its brutal immigration policies, Beppe Grillo's party owes its rise to a slightly different clientele. Claiming to be "neither right nor left," it benefits the most from the demise of the social Democratic Party (PD). According to the polls, the PD would currently only achieve 17 percent.

The M5S will not be able to fulfill its campaign promises to withdraw the Fornero pension reform and introduce an unconditional basic income. Italy's budget deficit, at 133 percent of gross domestic product, is already more than twice the EU target. This week, the Italian government must submit its budget for 2019 in Brussels and calm the financial markets to avoid the Milan Stock Exchange crashing.

To counter the growing popular opposition, PD and other opposition politicians and union leaders are responding to the inhuman government policy in Riace with hypocritical protests. For example, Naples mayor Luigi de Magistris described the decision as a "shame" and called on the government to "take action against the Mafia" instead.

The mayor concealed, however, that Salvini's refugee policy draws upon that of his predecessor, Marco Minniti (PD), and the decisions taken by the EU that have caused thousands of people to drown in the Mediterranean, die of thirst in the Sahara or suffer in the torture camps of Libya.

The trade union leader Susanna Camusso called the decision to deport the Riace migrants "not only a wrong decision, but an inhuman act of dubious legality. It is a malicious, disproportionate step. It must be prevented."

This comment reveals the full extent of the hypocrisy. The boss of the CGIL, a union confederation with five million members, including almost three million active workers in state-owned and metal working factories, let the matter rest with this comment. In reality, she supports nationalism and the right-wing politics of the government.

The previous government of the Democratic Party (PD) under Matteo Renzi had already canceled the special tax revenue for the village of Riace.

The case of the threatened deportation of the inhabitants of Riace demonstrates that the working class in Italy must become active independently of the old organizations. If it wants to defend its social and democratic rights and protect the refugees, it must join forces with the international working class and not with the nationalist parties and bureaucratic apparatus of Italian politics. To this end, it must establish a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

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