

The mass drownings off Libya and the fight to defend refugees

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The ongoing wave of atrocities against refugees demonstrates that it is impossible to defend immigrants without a mass, international movement against the capitalist system. Despite mounting outrage at crimes committed against refugees by the world's wealthiest states, these governments are determined to continue anti-immigrant policies condemning tens of thousands of innocent people to death.

On Thursday, a ship carrying 270 to 300 refugees fleeing Libya capsized and sank in the Mediterranean, en route to Italy. Fishermen who spotted the boat called the Libyan coast guard, who rescued around 140 refugees from the waves. The remaining are missing and presumed drowned.

Sabah Youssef, a survivor of the shipwreck devastated by the drowning of her seven-year-old child, declared: "I don't want anything now except to go back to my country, Sudan, to die there."

An Eritrean survivor made an international appeal for help: "We rescued ourselves. No one could help us, and no one came to rescue us, and here we are in a big problem, so we need your help."

The refugees who survived the shipwreck are still in grave danger. Like all refugees delivered to Libya's coast guard—a force built and funded by the European Union (EU), after the 2011 NATO war against Libya destroyed that country's government and armed forces—they risk internment in EU-funded concentration camps. There, they face assault, rape, being sold into slavery, or murder, as the United Nations, human rights groups and major media have repeatedly documented.

Those who survive the abuse meted out by camp guards risk falling victim to the civil war that has devastated Libya since the NATO war. Earlier this month, dozens died when aircraft loyal to Khalifa Haftar, a military strongman backed by French President Emmanuel Macron and Egyptian dictator Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, bombed a refugee camp in Tajoura as they attacked the

Italian-backed official Libyan government in nearby Tripoli.

Yesterday, UN High Commission on Refugees Spokesman for Africa Charlie Yaxley tweeted shocking news that of the survivors of the shipwreck, "84 were taken to Tajoura detention camp, where more than 50 died trapped inside during an airstrike just weeks ago. ... They must be released and action taken so that no one is brought back to detention centers."

Responsibility for refugee drownings in the Mediterranean, which have claimed 14,000 lives since 2016, lies with the European Union (EU) and the capitalist system. Faced with a global upsurge of the class struggle—mass protests in Puerto Rico, US teachers strikes, "yellow vest" protests in France, and strikes against EU austerity in Portugal, Germany and Poland—the capitalist class is viciously stoking anti-refugee chauvinism to divide the workers. At the same time, it builds up a police state for mass repression of the entire working class.

Imperialist governments on both sides of the Atlantic pour hundreds of billions of dollars into their military machines, and impose austerity to enrich billionaires like Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos (net worth \$165.6 billion) and LVMH owner Bernard Arnault (\$104.2 billion) at workers' expense. Yet, echoing the fascist regimes of the 20th century, governments and bourgeois parties of all political colors insist that everyone must blame their troubles on immigrants.

America's fascistic president, Donald Trump, has detained hundreds of thousands of immigrants in a network of US concentration camps and is threatening police raids on US cities to deport millions of undocumented immigrants. The Democratic Party has played a key role in supporting Trump's far-right policy, voting \$4.6 billion to fund the US concentration camp system in the US House of Representatives despite protests against immigration raids across the United

States.

The drownings off Libya have provoked outrage in Europe at Italy's far-right interior minister, Matteo Salvini, who proclaims his admiration for fascist dictator Benito Mussolini.

Salvini, who has threatened mass raids to deport illegal immigrants and the Roma people, blocks all ships bearing refugees from Italy. He ignored protests by 200,000 people this spring in Milan in defense of refugees. Having arrested German captain Carola Rackete of the Sea Watch 3 vessel for landing refugees in Italy, and released her amid a wave of protests in Germany, he now refuses to allow an Italian coast guard ship bearing refugees to land until other EU states agree to accept all immigrants aboard.

Yet responsibility lies with the entire EU. In 2015 it launched "Operation Triton," ending rescue operations and stepping up warship deployments in the Mediterranean, and accelerated construction of a vast network of concentration camps. Millions of Middle East and African refugees are imprisoned in horrific conditions in EU-funded camps stretching from Italy and Greece to Turkey, Libya and Niger.

Statements of Berlin and Paris criticizing Salvini's fascist outbursts reek of hypocrisy. While the Macron government has called Salvini "disgusting," Macron has hailed fascist dictator Philippe Pétain and his officials boast to their fascist base in the security forces and the financial elite about grounding the migrant rescue ship Aquarius in Marseille, to keep refugees from reaching France. Its police brutally broke up a protest by African refugees in Paris on July 14, the anniversary of the French revolution, as they savagely attacked "yellow vests" protesting social inequality.

Having briefly extended an open door in 2015 to migrants fleeing the Syrian war via the Balkans to Germany, Berlin has adopted an anti-immigrant policy. As it rearms, and right-wing extremist German professors call to rehabilitate Hitler and German militarism, violent neo-Nazi groups are flourishing in the police apparatus. The unsolved murder of politician Walter Lübcke, who faced multiple death threats from neo-Nazis after publicly defending refugees, amounts to a barely veiled threat against anyone supporting refugees in Germany.

In 1940, two years before European fascism launched the genocide of the Jews, the great Marxist revolutionary Leon Trotsky wrote: "Today decaying capitalist society is striving to squeeze the Jewish people from all its pores; seventeen million individuals out of the two billion

populating the globe, that is, less than 1 percent, can no longer find a place on our planet! Amid the vast expanses of land and the marvels of technology, which has also conquered the skies for man as well as the earth, the bourgeoisie has managed to convert our planet into a foul prison."

Eighty years later, Trotsky's words sound as a warning. After three decades of imperialist war in the Middle East and Africa since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and a decade of economic crisis since the 2008 Wall Street crash, tens of millions have fled bloodshed and poverty across the planet. Last year, 70.8 million people were displaced around the world, the most since World War II.

The relentless state repression and police-state build-up are signs that the ruling class are firmly set on a fascist course.

The way forward is the fight to mobilize ever broader layers of the international working class in the developing struggles, and to arm these struggles with a socialist and internationalist program. This means rejecting attempts to blame immigrants for the social crisis produced by capitalism, and defending their right to travel, live and work in any country of their choosing. Above all, it means rejecting illusions that fascist anti-immigrant policies can be fought in alliance with any section of the ruling establishment.

Only a perspective for mobilizing the working class internationally for the socialist transformation of society can free humanity from the diktat of the corporate oligarchy, defend democratic rights and guarantee a high standard of living to all.

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