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Turkish ruling elite whips up chauvinism against Syrian war refugees

Syrian refugees, forced to flee to countries around the Middle East to save their lives from the NATO-led proxy war in their country, face increasing chauvinist attacks in addition to rising social misery. In Turkey, the entire capitalist political establishment is moving against them.

Before the re-run of the Istanbul local elections on Sunday, bourgeois politicians all tried to whip up hostility against Syrians. While Republican People's Party (CHP) leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu repeatedly stated in his pre-election speeches that "Syrians should return," AKP's İstanbul mayoral candidate Binali Yıldırım threatened "to grab them by the ear and throw them out."

Recently in Gazipaşa, Antalya, Mudanya, and Bursa, cities where the opposition CHP controls the municipal administration, local governments decided that refugees cannot enter the beach, and that their settlements should be removed from near the shore. The decisions were adopted by municipal council members from the CHP and its far-right ally, the Good Party.



President Recep Erdoğan's government keeps refugees from reaching Europe.

Credit: Wikimedia

While Gazipaşa mayor Mehmet Ali Yılmaz abstained from a vote and vetoed the decision, fearing potential political fallout, Mudanya mayor Hayri Türkyılmaz threatened refugees: “They will either adapt themselves to us or will return to their country... I will not allow our own people to be disturbed.”

On his social media accounts, Türkyılmaz continued: “While our children become martyrs [in Syria], our mothers cry, my country cries, and our economy is deteriorating, we cannot tolerate that they regale and disturb our people.”

This approach, which is the CHP’s official position, expresses its complicity with US and European imperialism, which provoked the war in Syria, and Turkey’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) government. The CHP and its allies have supported Turkey’s illegal military presence in Syria. Neither the Turkish army (TSK) nor its Islamist proxy force, the Free Syrian Army (FSA), were invited by the Syrian government or the Syrian people.

One prominent lie spread to whip up hostility against Syrian refugees is the claim that they receive salaries from the Turkish state. In fact, the overwhelming majority of Syrians do not have refugee status and work for half of the average salary, if they can find work. They therefore live in poverty.

According to official figures, about 1.5 million of the 3.6 million Syrian refugees in Turkey receive 120 Turkish Lira (about 20 euros) monthly from European Union (EU) funds. The Turkish state pays no cash aid to the Syrians. This meager EU assistance is the

outcome of a dirty deal between the EU and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's AKP government to keep asylum seekers from reaching Europe.

Previously, the CHP's Tanju Özcan, who was elected mayor of Bolu in the March 31 local elections, swiftly forbade any kind of aid to foreigners living in the city. He started his election campaign by kissing the Turkish flag and swearing on the Qur'an. During the campaign, he repeatedly pledged "not to provide in cash and kind aid to foreigners."

On Twitter on May 24, the so-called "dissident" journalist İsmail Saymaz stoked xenophobic hysteria by attacking Syrian refugees as "the most bizarre wave of migrants-asylum seekers in the world, who could go to their country on holiday and then return." In fact, the war is still ongoing in Syria. The country's economy has been shattered, it is impossible to find a job there, and social infrastructure, including health and education, have collapsed.

The purpose of this reactionary anti-Syrian rhetoric is to divide the working class along national lines and to block a common struggle of workers across the Middle East. To this end, the CHP, the Good Party and their media supporters have long called for holding referendums on sending Syrians back home or blamed them for unemployment, poverty and social inequality caused by capitalism. This allows the Turkish bourgeoisie to continue with its socially regressive policies and its collaboration with imperialist war policy.

This policy underscores the fraud of the "democratic" pretensions of the CHP, promoted by media in the imperialist countries and Turkey's petty bourgeois "left" parties as an alternative to the authoritarian AKP government.

In fact, both of Turkey's major bourgeois parties are deeply implicated in the imperialist war crimes committed against the Syrian population. The AKP government backed Islamist jihadist forces supported by the NATO imperialist powers and the Persian Gulf oil sheikdoms, aiming to topple Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

After the defeat of its Islamist proxy forces, Washington made Kurdish-nationalist militias linked to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), against which Ankara has fought a bloody counterinsurgency in southeast Turkey for the past 35 years, its main proxy force in Syria. This terrified the AKP government, who feared the growth of Kurdish separatism in Turkey itself. The Turkish army, with its own proxy force, the Free Syrian Army (FSA), invaded northwest Syria to attack Kurdish forces.

The CHP's role is not in any objective sense different. Although it criticized the AKP's support for Islamists at the beginning of the Syrian war and called for a negotiated settlement with Assad, it never opposed the NATO-led proxy war in Syria. It approved all the bills in parliament to fund Turkish cross-border military operations against the Kurds in Syria. The CHP also supported the Turkish air force's reckless shooting down of a Russian airplane in 2015.

The result of this bipartisan war on Syria is that millions of Syrian refugees, forced to flee the war to Turkey, now live in crowded apartments rented at exorbitant prices, sleep in parks, and work for Turkish capitalists at extremely low wages if they are to escape utter destitution.

The Syrian war refugees trapped in Turkey are moreover only a fraction of the over 70 million global population of refugees fleeing wars across the Middle East and Africa, as well as poverty and hunger afflicting growing masses of people worldwide. A network of concentration camps for refugees from imperialist wars in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and beyond now spans the Near East, the Mediterranean, and much of North Africa. Largely funded by the European Union (EU), these camps hold millions in horrific conditions, subject to abuse, rape, slavery and even murder.

In America, Trump is expanding a series of immigrant detention camps to prepare for mass arrests and deportations on an unprecedented scale, as an army of police and immigration agents prepare to descend on cities and towns across the United States. Washington separates parents from their children, and spouses from each other, to send them back to countries where poverty and violence are rooted in decades of corporate exploitation and US imperialist intervention.

The fate of Syrian refugees in Turkey underscores how the struggle to defend immigrants is inseparable from the struggle to oppose imperialist war.

The plight of these refugees, expelled from their homes by the bloody operations of imperialism, should provoke outrage at the role of Washington, the EU powers, and Ankara. They are held up as targets of chauvinist hatred by bourgeois politicians, whose hands are dipped in blood. Syrian refugees are the class brothers and sisters of workers in Turkey, whom the Turkish bourgeoisie will subject to the same conditions if there is a new upsurge of the class struggle.

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