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The worldwide persecution of refugees

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14 May 2015

From Europe, to Asia, to the Americas, the world is witnessing growing numbers of refugees and a corresponding wave of state repression and violence directed at denying them their fundamental democratic rights.

The European Union this week has moved on two tracks to confront the flow of refugees from northern Africa, which has led to the drowning deaths just this year of nearly 2,000 of those seeking to make the dangerous crossing of the Mediterranean.

The first is a scheme unveiled Wednesday to parcel out between the EU member states a combined quota of 20,000 refugees over the course of two years. The number is pathetic in relation to the estimated half a million refugees believed to be gathered in North Africa in their flight to Europe, not to mention the 170,000 refugees who made the crossing last year alone.

Nonetheless, the proposal has triggered a sharp crisis within the EU, with the United Kingdom, Ireland and Denmark opting out of the refugee quotas. The very proposal provoked denunciations from Britain's Tory government. The quota system acts, in the words of Home Secretary Theresa May, as a "pull factor," encouraging people to attempt the Mediterranean crossing. Instead, she indicated, the migrants must be forcibly pushed back to Africa.

The quota scheme notwithstanding, the EU as a whole is concentrating on strengthening Fortress Europe and even preparing to carry out military action to halt the flow of refugees.

As the British daily *Guardian* revealed Wednesday, the EU has drawn up a 19-page strategy paper that calls for the use of naval, air and even ground forces to stop refugees from leaving Libya. Envisioned are not only a naval blockade, but air strikes against boats and boatyards involved in smuggling migrants across the Mediterranean, along with the potential deployment of special operations troops on Libyan soil.

The document acknowledges that such operations pose “a high risk of collateral damage, including the loss of life.”

It should be lost on no one that the imperialist powers of Europe are threatening to use military force in response to a crisis that they and their American ally created, aided and abetted by the “left” champions of “human rights imperialism.”

The flow of refugees is driven by the decimation of entire societies at the hands of the US and its allies, first in Iraq and Afghanistan through direct invasion and occupation, then in Libya through the US-NATO bombing campaign and support for an Islamist-led proxy ground force in the war to overthrow and murder Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi. Simultaneously with the Libyan intervention, the US and its Western European allies backed a proxy Islamist-led war for regime change in Syria, seeking the overthrow of the Assad government, an ally of Russia and Iran. These wars have produced millions of refugees, including large numbers of African migrant workers trying to flee the bloody chaos created by imperialism in Libya.

Amnesty International issued a report this week documenting that refugees trapped in Libya are confronting “widespread abuses by armed groups, smugglers, traffickers and organized criminal groups in Libya as well as systematic exploitation, lawlessness and armed conflicts.” The country’s social infrastructure has collapsed and it is being fought over by rival militias and two competing governments. Migrants in detention centers face torture, sexual assault, beatings, slave labor and summary killings. These are the conditions to which the European powers want to drive the refugees back.

Unfolding simultaneously with the tragic fate of the refugees in the Mediterranean, is a similar crisis in Asia, with an estimated 8,000 refugees stranded aboard small boats in the Andaman Sea and Malacca Straits. Most of them are members of the Muslim Rohingya minority fleeing persecution in Burma (Myanmar) and Bangladeshis escaping the impoverished conditions in their country.

The governments of Malaysia and Indonesia have been forcing these boats back to sea—a policy pioneered in the region by Australia. Many of the refugees have been on the water since March and face the threat of death by hunger and disease.

Finally, in the United States, whose government routinely postures as the champion of “human rights” to justify its endless military interventions abroad, the Obama administration has put forward a new immigration policy that is worthy of a dictatorship.

Faced with a court order to shut down massive new detention camps that it created to imprison child and family refugees fleeing north from the rampant violence in Central America, the administration has declared that its response will be to separate the mothers from their children. The mothers would remain imprisoned under this policy, while their children would be handed over to foster homes.

As in the flow of refugees from North Africa, Central Americans have been forced to flee their home countries by the murderous conditions created by decades of US imperialist interventions, from the “dirty wars” of the 1970s and 1980s through to the “drug war” violence that followed. The end result is that these countries now have the highest homicide rates in the world, and those turning up on the US border are literally fleeing for their lives.

As elsewhere, the response of the US authorities to this crisis of their own making is one of inhuman and illegal repression. In setting up its massive new detention centers—run for profit by private prison corporations—the Obama administration violated a previous court settlement that mandated standards of care and treatment of child migrants, barring their confinement to such centers.

The issue has come to the courts once again because of the protests, including hunger strikes, by mothers imprisoned with their children in these illegal and abusive camps. Treating refugees seeking asylum like criminals and locking up traumatized children is Obama’s method for dissuading other Central Americans from attempting to reach the US. Also crafted as a deterrent is the militarization of much of the US border, forcing migrants into ever more hostile territory, where many die. These deaths, like those in the Mediterranean, are meant to “send a message.”

The roots of both the surge of refugees and the repressive policies being unleashed against them lies in the global crisis of capitalism and the increasing turn by the major imperialist powers to militarism. At the same time, the assault on refugees is inseparable from the attack that is unfolding in every country against the democratic rights and social conditions of the working class as a whole.

A fight against the ruling class and its policies of war and counterrevolution is not possible without a defense of immigrants and refugees. This entails a relentless fight against the attempts of the ruling establishment in every country to scapegoat these most oppressed layers of the working class for the destruction of jobs and wages, and to pursue a policy of divide and conquer by whipping up anti-immigrant chauvinism.

The Socialist Equality Party and the International Committee of the Fourth International unconditionally defend the right of workers from every part of the world to live and work in whatever country they choose, with full democratic rights and without fear of police repression and deportation.

The defense of the rights of refugees and of the working class as a whole means a struggle to unite workers of every country in a common struggle to overturn the capitalist system, abolish the nation-state system and establish the foundations of a socialist world economy, rationally organized on the basis of social need, not private profit.