

The European Union Uses Death to Deter Immigrants

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On November 1, the Italian government officially ended the naval operation Mare Nostrum, which has retrieved more than 100,000 refugees from the Mediterranean Sea in the course of the past year. The termination is a deliberate decision of the European Union to permit thousands of refugees to die at sea in order to deter others from trying to set foot on European shores.

The Italian government commenced Operation Mare Nostrum on October 18, 2013 after nearly 500 refugees drowned in one week off the coast of the Italian island of Lampedusa. The operation was aimed at preventing similar catastrophes by an improved system of maritime surveillance.

In practice, sea rescue was always of secondary importance to Mare Nostrum. Deployment of the Italian Navy was intended as an act of deterrence, to detect refugee boats off the coast of Libya and Tunisia at an early stage and escort them back to Africa.

Nevertheless, when those picked up by merchant vessels off the coast of Italy are included, a total of approximately 150,000 refugees were rescued under the Mare Nostrum programme. Thousands more lost their lives attempting the dangerous passage across the sea. In just the first ten months of this year, more than 3,000 refugees drowned in the Mediterranean. Since 2000, the total stands at about 25,000.

Although the other European governments and the European Union claimed they wished to prevent any repeat of Lampedusa, they refused to provide a single euro for rescue operations in the Mediterranean Sea. EU Commissioner Cecilia Malmström castigated Mare Nostrum, “because the probability that refugees will be rescued has increased” and they would therefore be induced to attempt the crossing in even smaller and more unseaworthy boats.

Baroness Joyce Anelay, minister of state in the British foreign ministry, went so far as to claim that the rescue measures: “create an unintended ‘pull factor’ thereby leading to more tragic and unnecessary deaths.”

When the Italian government then declared it was no longer able to finance the monthly €9 million for military vessels engaged in the operation, its European partners refused to share the costs. The operation was terminated.

By comparison, in just the first 43 days of the 2003 Iraq war the US expended ammunition worth \$2.7 billion. This sum would be sufficient to finance Mare Nostrum for 20 years. The

US and its European allies spent similar sums in the succession of wars in Afghanistan, Libya, Gaza (in military aid to Israel) and now Syria— the regions where most of the refugees crossing the Mediterranean come from.

Since 2007, the European Union has provided €4 billion for a fund bearing the name “Solidarity and Management of Migration Flows.” Most of this money, however, has been allocated to the military enhancement of border protection, i.e., construction of fences and border guard posts, deployment of infrared and thermal imaging cameras, and drone and satellite-based surveillance of external borders.

Mare Nostrum will be succeeded by Operation Triton under the overall control of the European border agency Frontex. However, Triton’s mandate is not the rescuing of refugees, but the securing of borders against “illegal” immigration and the entry of refugees. “Frontex is responsible for the surveillance of borders and has not been tasked to rescue refugees,” said the agency’s director Gil Arias Fernandez in a recent interview with the *Tagesspiegel* daily, adding: “Unlike crews of the Mare Nostrum ships, we will not deliberately go out to search for refugee boats.”

Frontex’s draft paper on Operation Triton, which differs from Mare Nostrum in only covering the Mediterranean within 30 nautical miles of the Italian coast, makes no secret of the fact “that the withdrawal of naval forces from the sea area near the Libyan coast ... will probably lead to a higher number of deaths.”

The paper actually asserts that this result is preferable, since “significantly fewer migrants will attempt to cross the Mediterranean in bad weather and prices for the crossings will rise.” The number of refugees would thus decline to “the level of previous years.”

Francois Crepeau, UN special rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, fiercely condemned the EU’s approach to refugee policy, declaring: “It is appalling to claim that an increase in the number of fatalities will have the effect of deterring future migrants and asylum seekers. It is as though one were to say: Let them die, because that is a good deterrent for others.”

The deliberate decision to stop the rescue measures in the Mediterranean and allow refugees to drown as a deterrent, shows the real face of the European Union. It does not embody the “unity of Europe,” but rather the dictatorship of the most ruthless capitalist interests over Europe.

The EU is employing the same ruthlessness against the continent’s working population and its international rivals as it does against refugees at its borders. Following the financial crisis of 2008 the EU has dictated one austerity package after another in order to recoup the trillions handed over to bailout the banks, all at the expense of working people again. In Ukraine it has provoked a confrontation with Russia and it is preparing a new war in the Middle East that will have even more disastrous consequences than the current military interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya.

The working class can only effectively oppose the EU and European governments by joining forces internationally and fighting for a socialist Europe, for the United Socialist States of Europe. The unconditional defense of refugees is a precondition for the defense of the democratic and social rights of all working people.

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