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Thousands protest against Italian government's closure of ports for refugee ships

Thousands have taken to Italy's streets over the last week to protest against the June 10 decision by Interior Minister Matteo Salvini, leader of the far-right Lega, to close all ports to non-governmental organization (NGO) ships saving refugees stranded in the Mediterranean, putting at risk the lives of hundreds aboard the rescue ship Aquarius.

The inhumane decree was also signed by Five Star Movement Transport Minister Daniello Toninelli.

Although the Aquarius reached the Spanish port of Valencia on Sunday after a seven-day odyssey, the situation in the Mediterranean has continued to worsen. Italy has now refused entry to its ports for another two ships, the Lifeline and Sea Fox, two German ships sailing under Dutch flags which have been rescuing migrants off the Libyan coast.

The order is obviously specifically directed against civilian emergency rescuers, since on June 12, the Italian Coastguard brought over 900 refugees and two bodies into the Sicilian port of Catania. Forty-one refugees and 12 bodies rescued from the sea near Libya by the US military vessel Trenton were also allowed to go ashore on June 15 at Lampedusa.

By contrast, NGO rescue ships have been consistently turned away and boycotted, even though the mayors of Reggio Calabria, Messina and Palermo declared their readiness to allow the ships to dock. Salvini declared on Facebook that Italy would no longer be an "accomplice in the illegal refugee business." He accused the NGOs of collaborating with smugglers.

These accusations are breathtaking in their cynicism and conjured up out of thin air. In reality, the refugees are not boarding small dinghy boats because the presence of rescue ships is an attractive “pull factor” for them, as German media outlets also falsely claim, but because they are trying to escape Libya’s torture camps. They risk the crossing knowing full well that they could drown on the way, but believe that anything is better than being raped, tortured and beaten to death in Libya.

The unspeakable tragedy playing out in the Mediterranean will only be made worse by the new restrictions on rescue ships. Responding to Salvini, Sea-Watch president Johannes Bayer reminded him that the refugees rescued by NGO ships have already endured horrific conditions on the boats.

“They are often completely emaciated when they board a smuggling ship. Their health often worsens while they are at sea, meaning they have to be brought to a safe port as soon as possible,” he noted. “The fact that people who have literally been pulled from the water and had to watch as their friends drowned are not being given a safe port is unacceptable and a devastating indictment of the European Union’s refugee policy.”

The virtual declaration of war by the Italian government against refugees and civilian emergency rescue workers has triggered passionate protests in Italy. The Five Star Movement (M5S)-Lega government has only been in power for a few days and protests are already taking place daily against its right-wing policies.

Just hours after the decree from Salvini and Toninelli on June 10, protests took place in the Sicilian cities of Catania and Palermo. “Open the ports!” shouted thousands of Palermo residents, who organised a sit-in at the port late into the night. “Borders kill,” read their main banner. One slogan declared, “Hands off the NGOs—save the people!”

With calls of “Vergogna!” (Shame!) thousands of residents gathered in the capital, Rome, for a demonstration on the following Monday. Police initially tried to stop the protest march and prolonged clashes broke out. But they ultimately allowed the demonstration to proceed.

On Tuesday, June 12, demonstrations took place in Milan, Turin, Rome, Genoa, Savona, and Catania. In Milan, over 5,000 people took part in a march and rally in front of La Scala. The handmade placards included slogans such as “Open the ports!” “People first” and “No person is illegal.” Many young people, especially young women, and retirees took part in the protests. Referring to the conditions in Libya, an elderly woman told a reporter, “You read about slavery in the history of the 17th and 18th centuries, now it’s happening all over again.”

A reporting team asked residents in Catania who stood at the side of the street watching the protest what their opinions were. Most expressed their sympathy with the young demonstrators, with one retiree declaring, “I think the ports have to stay open. This is a war against the poor. Everything is being blamed on the migrants.”

Throughout the rest of the week, protests and meetings took place in several cities, including Bergamo, Como, Parma and Rimini. In every city, people met in the centre after finishing work, with many bringing handmade placards reading, “Open the ports!”

In Bergamo, a group of women carried a placard stating, “The cause of this is the wars—be angry!” This was a reference to the imperialist wars in Iraq, Libya and Syria, which have laid waste to entire societies. The majority of refugees come from these countries. And at the very moment protests are spreading across Italy, the war against the people of Yemen is expanding. The siege of Hodaidah is assuming the dimensions of a genocidal assault, with the Western media taking little notice of it.

The protests in Italy were not organised by any political party and politicians generally stayed away. The slogans were not only directed against the current M5S-Lega coalition, but against previous Democratic Party (PD)-led governments under Matteo Renzi and Paolo Gentiloni.

In Bergamo, for example, the crowd chanted, “Mittini and Salvini—both assassini (murderers),” making a direct comparison between former PD Interior Minister Marco Mittini and the Lega’s Salvini. During his time in office, Mittini negotiated a despicable deal with the Libyan coastguard.

Along with the growing port protests a rally on Saturday was organised by the USB (Unione Sindacala di Base) trade union for the murdered agricultural labourer Soumaila Sacko. The 29-year-old Malian campaigned in Calabria for the rights of African day labourers and was murdered in cold blood on June 2—with a farmer linked to the Mafia being accused of the killing. The first trade union-organised demonstration since the change of government turned out to be much larger than expected. Hundreds of young people and immigrants joined in, and organisers estimated the total participating at over 20,000.

While protests and rallies are breaking out across Italy, and large sections of the Italian population are displaying their anger and readiness to fight the new government’s racist policies, the response of top European politicians has been entirely different. In essence, they agree with Salvini’s inhumane policies.

German Interior Minister Horst Seehofer (Christian Social Union, CSU) offered Salvini his support. At a meeting with Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz (Austrian People's Party, ÖVP) on Wednesday, Seehofer stated he would collaborate with Kurz and Salvini "on the issues of security, terrorism and migration." Kurz demagogically called for an "axis of the willing" to deal with "illegal migration." Kurz governs with the far-right Freedom Party and will assume the EU Council presidency for six months on July 1.

Salvini's racist policy initially appeared to draw criticism from France where President Emmanuel Macron criticised Italy's "cynicism and irresponsibility" and praised Spanish Prime Minister Sanchez, who allowed the Aquarius to dock in Valencia. Italian Foreign Minister Enzo Moavero Milanesi subsequently called the French ambassador to the Italian Foreign Ministry on Thursday.

Less than a day later, Macron made sure that any disagreements were ironed out. He met with Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte on Friday for a working dinner and both came to the conclusion that the European Union has to "create more European controlled centres in the countries of origin." In the event of a sea rescue, the ships would then have to bring those rescued back to Africa.

This is the same policy as German Chancellor Angela Merkel: with German support, a huge migration centre described by Merkel as a "light of hope" opened in Tunisia last year. But hope for whom? It is the hope of the European politicians to be able to outsource the refugee problem to North Africa.

The reality is that the far-right determines the European Union's refugee policy. Europe is being sealed off with military equipment. Frontex is being strengthened on the EU's borders, while the member states focus increasingly on interning and deporting refugees.