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Workers Solidarity Movement
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For over a year, the European Union (one of the most prosperous areas on the planet), has been embroiled in a 'crisis of immigration' — the result of failed government responses to increased population inflows coming from the Middle East and Africa. The hundreds of thousands of migrants attempting to travel to Europe are refused conventional safe entry and are forced to rely on criminal smugglers and dangerous land and sea routes. The predictable result has been a massive humanitarian crisis, concentrated at bottleneck transit points such as the Greek islands, and in sprawling migrant camps within and outside Europe.

Since January this year, every day, eight people on average have drowned in the Aegean Sea alone, on transit between Turkey and Greece. Thousands more are killed on other sea crossings and excruciating cross-country journeys, by disease, exhaustion and exposure in small towns, cities, and in inadequate camps in Europe. Survivors go through hunger and medical deficiency as, often entire families travel with no money, protection, or access to shelter.

Each person travels toward an uncertain future; their hope of fair and decent lives in Europe degrades along with their spirit, with each incident of police brutality, each forced border stop, each night in a freezing wet camp that's likely to be under provisioned, often lacking even basic supplies.

They are herded and controlled like animals by 'state officials' who are granted the right by governments to stop and turn people away, and to employ violence against them should they resist.

In spite of the rhetoric used by the media — who frame this array of needless suffering and death as a "refugee crisis", or "migrant crisis" — it is an issue which is much more reasonably and logically observed as a border crisis. Discussing the problem as a "migrant crisis" does however have the convenient benefit of implying that the sole source of the problem is the migrants themselves. This in effect shifts the burden of responsibility from us, as residents of Europe, onto those suffering and dying in transit – victim blaming.

It also has the important benefit of narrowing the window of follow-on discussion to a conversation, focused not on the existence of borders and the policies enforced by our European governments, but on 'swarms' of foreigners attempting to gain access to your country – appealing to that base note of fear and xenophobia, which still permeates our societies.

The responsibility for the ongoing crisis rests unambiguously on the desire of European governments to manage and control the type of person allowed to gain entry into 'their' countries. Governments have claimed the right to police arbitrary, invisible lines on the Earth.

Using the threat of, or real violence against those who attempt to cross without having appealed to their power through bureaucratic channels, European countries overtly discriminate against people based on their nationality, wealth and by default their race and religion.

In the context of an external shock such as the Syrian civil war, where millions of people are forced to abandon their homes in search of new ones, a system of coercive exclusion naturally comes under strain.

The closed border policy then necessitates the employment of violence against migrants — the result being many thousands of men, women and children, murdered by the determination to keep them out — as well as the suffering of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, who cannot find the legal means to enter, forced to live along roadsides and in dangerous camps in transit.

In order to properly address the misery and death — the humanitarian crisis which now exists on our continent — it is necessary to address the totalitarian nature of the policies governing Europe's borders. An obvious challenge is the question of whether any group of people or institutions possess the right to forcefully exclude fellow humans from venturing onto specific areas of land, for the disadvantage of having come there second?

A second, more practical question is whether we have the right to maintain borders which openly discriminate against the powerless while being easily traversed by those of wealth, of 'good' nationality, or by capital and money — which flows seamlessly across nations to the detriment of working people everywhere?

Finally, do we as Europeans, who in general have profited from economic and military imperialism which has laid the ground for mass immigrations (to the detriment of those outside Europe), have the right to force children onto dangerous dinghies, to force people to live in camps more degrading and brutal than the worst prisons, to imprison and deport humans for crossing borders, and to deny people the right to live in dignity — while we possess such affluence, albeit poorly distributed? To answer, as any decent person would, 'no' to at

least some of these questions is to privately challenge Europe's policy of closed borders.

Aside from the moral implications of refusing people the right of safe passage, the governing powers of Europe are now being forced to address the feasibility of such closed border policies.

While governments enjoy maintaining a pretence of total control, it is clear that it is impossible to physically prevent population inflows at the same time as even paying lip service to the ideas of human rights. Europe's Southern coastline is several thousand kilometres long, borders North Africa to its South, and several Middle Eastern countries to its East. An operation actively preventing people from reaching Europe would mean spending billions, employing measures of militarism: navy patrols in the Mediterranean, militarised border construction along Eastern Europe, and the breakdown of the Schengen free travel agreement.

As indicated by Britain's suggestion to cease rescue operations in the Mediterranean, so as 'not to encourage' prospective migrants — a system of closed borders is an explicit admittance of murder, and a move towards authoritarian state control over all of us.

As it has done in the past, the European Commission is opting for the use of 'soft power' in 'protecting' its populations and policing its borders. This takes the form of political deals with compliant non-European countries, who are enlisted to contain migrants before they can reach the EU, generally in exchange for some small political and/or financial concession.

In recent weeks European countries, including Ireland, have signed off on a deal with the Turkish government designed to cut off a key access point to Europe, between Turkey and Greece.

According to the deal, from March 22nd, all migrants entering the EU from Turkey will be forcibly returned and will be the responsibility of the Turkish state. In exchange, Europe

Eastern Europe. In Calais there are several grassroots efforts distributing basic aid, clothes and shelter, advising people of their rights as migrants, and offering protection to unprotected minors. In Greece, grassroots groups have been working on the islands as first point of call for people crossing from Turkey.

Has any insight or event left a particular impression?

The way in which those seeking refuge have managed to cross borders and survive conditions of neglect, detention, police brutality, cold and hunger. It is a real testament to their fortitude.

Seeing the many houses, restaurants, community centres and places of worship which are now being bulldozed in Calais camp were constructed with huge imagination and perseverance. And the bonds of family and community which they maintain in the face of racist attacks by far-right groups, tear-gassing by the police and general antipathy from the mainstream media speak of an all-mighty resilience.

Looking at the issue of migration and racism in Ireland in the future, what do you have to say?

Our convoy last October had a clear objective of 'justice, not charity,' when we were setting out. Bringing practical help to our brothers and sisters stuck in the Calais limbo is only part of the picture. 'What's it like in Ireland,' they'd ask us, 'maybe we'd be welcome there?' We had to tell them about direct provision and the very real chance that they'd be held in a detention centre for ten years without being allowed to work on twenty quid a week. And the sword of deportation hanging over their heads for all that time. The chance of our birth place determines so much of how our lives can be lived.

> *"You have to dare to look reality in the face and take a whack at some of the long-standing privileges. So long-standing in fact that they seem to have become normal, unquestionable.'*
>
> — Thomas Sankara

The formal platforms through which new ideas are presented to us, the education system and the media, are designed mainly to ensure detachment and to disempower personal inquisition and creative personal growth. What we must do is begin to educate ourselves, and each other on things like Syria and barbaric immigration policies, but also on things like the war in Darfur which left half a million people dead, yet which our media feels no onus to bring into public discussion.

An enlightened empowered public would be aware that much of the material wealth that creates such comfort in our daily lives, comes directly from circumstances in which people work sweatshop hours and conditions — or of the ongoing British arms trade (who according to their own government figures, exported over £ 27 billion of military equipment in the past five years alone).

And not to forget the systemic unequal set-up of a world where trade laws and spurious debt repayments favour the already rich countries and see the poor getting poorer.

How has your first-hand experience in activism shaped your feelings?

To meet the people directly impacted by the worst aspects of our system is truly enlightening. I can still see the Kurdish family with the little boy and hear their story of bombs, terror and flight.

A part of all of us who went to Calais remains in those tents. As a human being I can't pretend I don't know what's happening in our system — because of our system.

As activists it's important for us to talk directly to those fleeing persecution (economic or political), directly to those who are oppressed; we need to develop a bond of solidarity and respect, and have it manifest itself in practical ways. By expressing solidarity among ourselves we unite in the face of real entrenched power. A fantastic example of tangible solidarity is the heroic work which many grassroots organisations are carrying out on the ground in the camps in France, Greece, and

will admit a mere 72,000 Syrian refugees, a small portion of those currently in camps in Turkey — under a 'one for one exchange program'. Officials will take 'bad migrants' arriving in Greece (people not considered refugees by our standards) who have risked the perilous sea crossings and have been subjected to similar brutality, and send them back to Turkey, admitting a 'good migrant' in exchange.

The deal has been widely regarded as a blatant reneging on Europe's obligations under the United Nations Geneva Convention. Literally speaking, the planet's most affluent economic union, with a population of 500 million, is corralling a developing country with extremely dubious/criminal standards of human rights, into accepting the refugee and migrant fallout of failed and collapsing geopolitical arrangements. Human Rights agencies have naturally reacted with outcry.

Colm O'Gorman of Amnesty International Ireland called the deal 'a historic blow to [human] rights' — 'The doublespeak this deal is cloaked in fails to hide the EU's dogged determination to turn its back on a global refugee crisis, and wilfully ignore its international obligations' he continued. Emergency humanitarian NGO, Medicins Sans Frontiers, plan to shut down their operations on the Greek islands in response to the deal, refusing to be complicit in plans which it considers 'unfair and inhumane'. In a recent press release, MSF spokesperson Marie Elisabethe Ingres stated: 'We will not allow our assistance to be instrumentalized for a mass expulsion operation, and we refuse to be part of a system that has no regard for the humanitarian or protection needs of asylum seekers and migrants.'

Two pertinent points have (unsurprisingly) gone virtually unreported. The first is that this method of outsourcing border policing is not new for Europe; in 2010, before NATO criminally attacked and destroyed Libya's government, the EU had agreed a deal with Muammar Gaddafi for $55million

to be paid over three years in exchange for transforming his security forces into de facto border police.

The EU has a similar deal with Morocco, and is currently developing such agreements with Tunisia and Egypt. The second point concerns the implicit compromise embedded in the EU-Turkey deal.

As well as a financial recompense of €3.3 billion and a pledge to (or at least appear to) entertain discussions of Turkish admittance to the EU, Europe is in effect turning a blind eye to the ongoing and mounting crimes of the Turkish state and the ever-increasing authoritarianism of its Prime Minister, Recep Erdoğan.

The crimes of the Turkish government include suppression of media and dissent, support for Islamic fundamentalist groups, and brutal and bloody oppression of Turkish Kurds. As well as having a history of mass imprisonment and assassination of dissident journalists, just weeks ago on March 4th the Turkish government seized newspaper Zaman Daily, which it accused of aiding 'the establishment of a parallel state'.

Zaman, a supporter of the Turkish government had become mildly critical of ruling 'Justice and Development Party' (AKP), after the party closed an internal investigation into charges of corruption against leader and Prime Minister Erdoğan. To discuss the history of Turkey's ongoing crimes against the Kurds would warrant a far greater space than can be given here.

Perhaps the most glaring hypocrisy has been Turkey's support for Islamic State and other religious fundamentalist groups in Iraq and Syria. These groups, which grew out of the political instability created by the US led invasion of Iraq, swarmed the relatively moderate rebel forces during the initial uprising against Syria's president Bashar Al-Assad in 2011.

The ideologies and barbarity of IS and similar groups are notorious. They have attracted extremist fighters from all over the region and from Europe, further fuelling the devastating civil war which has so far killed just under half a million people

and displaced around 11 million. About 10% of those displaced have fled to Europe, to be greeted with horror in what is so absurdly and egocentrically dubbed 'Europe's migrant crisis'.

The failure of our governments to meet the minimum standards of human rights for migrants, and the duplicity with which they shirk these responsibilities should come as little surprise. State structures are founded on force and oppression, and are responsive almost exclusively to the wishes of the highly privileged classes.

With this in mind the fallacy behind the argument that 'we should look after our own first' — the belief that we should first help Irish poor and homeless before considering the plight of migrants — becomes obvious. Migrants and poor Irish are victims of oppression by the same system. By making an arbitrary division we are weakening our argument and giving space to a voice of nationalism and racism: people who are more 'Irish' are more worthy of our solidarity.

Many Irish and other Europeans continue to organise solidarity campaigns with migrants and refugees, pushing the reality of closed border systems into public conversation, organising aid convoys and projects for people trapped in migrant camps in Europe, and fighting against the horrific program of Direct Provision at home, here in Ireland.

The below text is the result of series of questions we put to Cork Refugee Solidarity Activist, Bairbre Flood about her experiences and impressions working with migrants in Europe.

Reports of the border crisis and its victims seem to grow more shocking daily. How do you feel we as activists can begin to engage with the problems in society, particularly to problems of systemic violence against human populations such as refugees?

When you read news reports of bombings in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria, or accounts of government violence in Darfur and Eritrea, or poverty in Nigeria and Pakistan, it's easy to intellectualise it. To not feel it.