

Greek court acquits nine survivors of the Pylos ship disaster

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One year ago, in the early morning of June 14, 2023, a fishing trawler with over 750 refugees on board sank off the Greek Peloponnese peninsula. More than 600 people drowned, including many women and children trapped inside the ship.

The shipwreck off the Greek harbour of Pylos was not simply a tragic accident, but the result of a murderous “pushback” by the Greek Coast Guard, as research by journalists and NGOs has shown.

Despite knowing that the overcrowded trawler was in distress at sea, the coast guard did not initiate rescue measures in good time. According to the investigations so far, it then capsized the ship itself by tying it to a patrol boat and pulling it back and forth in order to tow the refugees into Italian waters.

The illegal pushbacks by the Greek government are part of a systematic policy by the European Union and its border police Frontex to seal off Fortress Europe. However, those actually responsible for this crime were not prosecuted, but survivors of the shipwreck were put before the courts.

Nine refugees from Egypt were arrested immediately after their rescue and charged as alleged “smugglers.” The case was based solely on interviews with some of the survivors directly after the shipwreck, which were conducted by the same coast guard suspected of causing the deaths.

On May 21, the court of appeal in the southern Greek city of Kalamata acquitted the accused refugees. The nine men, aged between 20 and 40, had served 11 months in prison, although they were innocent victims who had narrowly escaped death on the sinking ship.

The Kalamata court declared that it had no jurisdiction over the accusation that the defendants had formed a criminal organisation and caused the shipwreck. They accepted the lawyers’ argument that the ship was in international waters at the time of the sinking and not on Greek territory.

The judges also found that the allegations of human trafficking and illegal entry were not substantiated. The refugees had never planned and had never been paid to smuggle the passengers of the fishing vessel “Adriana” from Libya to Greece. Nor did they enter Greek territory themselves but were brought there by the intervention of the Greek coast guard.

According to a report by the Greek news website ThePressProject (TPP), the defendants testified that they had set off from Libya to Italy, not Greece. Their goal was “a better life to help their families. All of them testified that they did not know why they ended up in prison, while one of the defendants testified that he was taken from the hospital and immediately taken to prison.”

According to TPP, a sea rescuer and witness in the trial, Jason Apostolopoulos, said it was a shame that in the biggest shipwreck in Greek history the victims and not the perpetrators were on trial.

According to TPP, there were attempts to restrict the presence of observers and the press at the trial. In the courtroom, which was too small, those present had to stand and were repeatedly asked by the police to leave the room. Only at the request of the defence lawyers were 10

additional seats made available for journalists. Supporters and relatives of the Pylos victims had gathered outside the courtroom and demonstrated in favour of the acquittal of the defendants.

Despite the acquittal, the Egyptians initially remained in administrative detention on the grounds that their asylum applications had not yet been approved. The lawyers lodged an appeal against this. Four were finally released on May 29 and another four a week later. One survivor is still being held because his asylum application has been rejected.

Responsibility of the EU

At the same time, an investigation is underway at the Piraeus Naval Court, where 49 survivors have filed a lawsuit against the Greek coast guard and authorities. But even after a year, there has been little progress in the proceedings, although the facts are overwhelming.

The Greek coast guard is not the only perpetrator in this case. It is working on behalf of Frontex and the EU, in which Germany plays a leading role. Under the leadership of EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen (Christian Democrat, CDU), the imperialist pro-war policy and the asylum and refugee policies, which are two sides of the same coin, have been drastically intensified.

In April, the European Parliament adopted the “Common European Asylum System” (CEAS). As the WSWWS commented, this:

effectively suspended the right to asylum and turned the immigration policies of the extreme right into law. The measures adopted provide for Europe’s external borders to be hermetically sealed off. This means that refugees will have to undergo their asylum procedure outside the EU in closed, militarily guarded detention centres.

Von der Leyen, who is seeking another term in office and is hoping for support from the far-right camp, has worked closely with right-wing Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, Italian fascist Giorgia Meloni and the criminal regimes in Libya, Tunisia and Egypt to keep refugees out of Europe.

The nine innocent Pylos survivors had fled Egypt, where the dictator Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, known as the “Butcher of Cairo,” imprisons and murders political opponents.

French ministerial official Fabrice Leggeri, who headed Frontex from 2015 to 2022 and was responsible for covering up pushbacks, is now running for the European elections in third place on the list of the far-right Rassemblement National. He described his candidacy as a “logical step to

protect Europe's borders." According to an analysis by *Die Zeit*, which compared him to the former German head of the domestic intelligence service Hans-Georg Maassen, a notorious right-wing extremist, he uses the words "human rights" "like a swearword."

In Germany, all parties represented in the Bundestag (parliament) support the EU's deportation and asylum policies. This includes the Left Party, which, sitting in the state government in Thuringia, orders brutal deportations, as it did previously when in the Berlin state executive.

In the European election campaign, the Left Party attempted to present itself as an opponent of border policy in order to capitalise on the widespread outrage among young people about the inhumane Frontex actions. It therefore put up the well-known sea rescuer Carola Rackete, who had become a symbol of resistance to the EU's attacks on refugees in 2019, as its lead candidate.

Rackete had captained the rescue ship "Sea-Watch 3" into the harbour of Lampedusa with around 40 refugees on board—despite a ban by the Italian authorities. She was immediately arrested and vilified by right-wing extremists across Europe.

The Left Party sought to use Rackete as a figurehead. However, Rackete recently told the press that she would not speak out against the refugee policy in the EU. "As an ecologist, I will not work on the topic of migration in the EU Parliament. That is not my political expertise," said Rackete at an event organised by the Italian Alliance of Greens and Left in Milan. In other words, anyone who voted for the left-wing candidate Rackete in the hope that she will stand up to the EU anti-refugee policy will be bitterly disappointed.

However, opposition to the attacks on refugees is urgently needed. The seabed in southern Europe is already a huge mass grave. In the last 10 years, 30,000 refugees have drowned in the Mediterranean. According to the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), at least 3,760 people died or disappeared on the sea route last year alone. The number of victims has risen significantly compared to previous years, although the number of unreported cases is likely to be very high. In addition, there are thousands of refugees who are abandoned in the desert in North Africa and die of thirst.

It will probably never be possible to determine how many people actually lose their lives while fleeing. Sea rescue and the recording and reporting of victims have been largely stopped and criminalised in recent years.

The human rights organisation Aegean Boat Report (ABR) was the most recent victim of repression. The Norwegian NGO has been documenting arrivals and pushbacks of refugees in the Aegean for several years and exposes the targeted violations of asylum law in Greece. In order to stop this work, Greece has issued an international arrest warrant against the head of ABR, Tommy Olsen, and against Panagiotis Dimitras from the NGO Greek Helsinki Monitor.

As has now become known, the authorities on the island of Kos initiated proceedings against the two human rights activists a year and a half ago. This was reported by the Greek newspaper *Efimerida ton Syntakton* (Efsyn). Among other things, the two are accused of forming a criminal organisation and facilitating the entry and stay of refugees simply because they had informed the relevant authorities about the arriving asylum seekers.

Olsen denied the accusations and stated that he would not be travelling to Greece for the trial because he had well-founded concerns that he would not receive a fair trial.

Meanwhile, Aegean Boat Report is continuing its work. According to the latest data from ABR, the number of refugees who arrived on the Aegean islands in May increased by 67.5 percent compared to the previous month of April. Overall, the number of arrivals this year has risen by 193 percent compared to the first five months of 2023.

In May, the organisation registered 50 illegal pushbacks by the Greek

Coast Guard in the Aegean Sea; 1,226 people, including children and women, were denied the right to asylum. During these pushbacks, the refugees are usually set adrift at sea on flimsy life rafts without engines.

Normalisation of death

This ongoing policy of death, which the EU has been pursuing for decades, is outrageous and inhumane. But as sad and angry as it is, it is necessary to understand its political logic.

The capitalist system is in a deep crisis worldwide, to which the ruling class of Germany, the EU and the US have only one answer: conducting war to enforce their geopolitical and economic interests by military force; pursuing class war to defend their profits and shift the costs of war onto the working class; and implementing dictatorial measures to suppress the growing opposition to war and poverty.

The death, abuse and demonisation of refugees, which dominated much of the final phase of the European election campaign, plays a central role in this:

- The deaths of thousands of innocent people are being "normalised." Any empathy with refugees fleeing from countries destroyed and shattered by imperialist wars is suppressed and criminalised. Just like the Israeli genocide against the Palestinians in Gaza and the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of soldiers in NATO's proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, the mass deaths in the Mediterranean are intended to inure the public to the fact that human life is worth nothing on the altar of profit and imperialist geopolitics.

- Refugees serve as a lightning rod for the social crisis. Although the costs of housing, educating and integrating refugees are low compared to the rising levels of military spending and exploding wealth of the rich, they are being scapegoated for the decades-long crisis in the education system, falling social spending and rising rents.

- The agitation against refugees is grist to the mill of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD). It strengthens the extreme right, which is needed by those in power to intimidate any social and political opposition and establish a dictatorship. This is why all the establishment parties—including the recently founded Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (BSW), a split-off from the Left Party—support the EU's isolationist policy inspired by the far right.

- The attack on refugees serves to divide the working class. They are living witnesses to the devastating imperialist policies in the Middle East and Africa. They know what war and dictatorship mean. They know how their homes and schools have been destroyed in the name of "human rights." They have been through the brutal asylum and refugee labyrinth and have often lost family members or friends. Today, refugees from Afghanistan, Syria and Egypt live and work side by side with European workers in factories, logistics and construction.

If the German government now again preaches "war-readiness," massively rearming and fuelling the war in Ukraine and the genocide in Gaza, then it must expect massive opposition from the working class, especially among those with direct experiences of war. The EU states therefore prefer these people to disappear before they arrive in the Mediterranean. It is a soundless and silent murder. Those who reach Europe despite the hurdles and dangers are to be deported as quickly as possible.

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) opposes this policy with an internationalist and socialist programme. Its manifesto for the European elections stated:

“Fortress Europe,” which is being expanded further and further with metres-high walls, barbed wire fences and inhumane detention centres at the external borders, is resulting in the death of thousands of refugees.

The SGP demands equal rights for refugees and immigrants and fights for the international unification of the working class. Justice for the victims and survivors of the Pylos tragedy and an end to the mass deaths in the Mediterranean can only be achieved if the workers themselves stop the pro-war policy of the ruling class. This requires the building of a revolutionary world party in which workers unite regardless of their origin.



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