

The refugees issue: between 'Fortress Europe' and solidarity

Antiracist Observatory of the University of the Aegean

The Antiracist Observatory of the University of the Aegean (AOUA) consists of professors and researchers of the University of the Aegean. It was established in 2012 with the aim to intervene in order to deal with racist manifestations or practices taking place in Greece, and focusing on the islands of the Aegean where the various departments of the University of the Aegean are based. The past years the AOUA has placed more emphasis on current issues related to the transition of refugees from various countries to the EU area, whose first stop is Greece. More specifically the AOUA has been focusing on the recent 'flood' of refugees mainly passing through the islands of the North Aegean.

The AOUA does not have a typical hierarchical structure or an authorisation and representation mechanism. It relies on a horizontal cooperation allowing each member to take the responsibility to coordinate specific actions and represent the AOUA, on the basis of the accountability of the person to the meetings of members. From this perspective, even though the actions of its members are voluntary and selective, they do require commitment to the basic principles and guidelines of AOUA which are summarised in the following: a) All humanbeings are entitled to help in their effort to acquire basic living conditions with dignity, and b) All humanbeings have the right to be respected and equally treated irrespective of their cultural, religious, ethnic, social or other characteristics.

In the summer of 2015 some of the Aegean islands (mainly Lesbos, Chios, Kos, Leros, Samos) received a huge influx of refugees, which by far exceeded existing capabilities in reception and hospitality. Typically, only last July Lesbos received nearly 55,000 refugees/migrants, while the number of arrivals on the island in 2014 was almost 12,000 and in 2013 less than 4,000 refugees/migrants!

This summer we experienced a real humanitarian crisis, a situation that could have led to an unprecedented tragedy if hundreds of volunteers hadn't mobilised and offered their unconditional and continuous solidarity to those who had come from war zones across the Middle East,

Central and Southern Asia and North Africa and were heading towards Europe.

Those rough summer days seem to have passed for now, but the alarm has not yet to be stopped. During the last few days we have had dozens of refugees drowned in the Aegean Sea. We are aware that hundreds of thousands of refugees of all ages are in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, waiting for the first opportunity to get into the European 'promised land'. Nevertheless, the painful events that have been unfolding in countries of the Balkan Peninsula and Central Europe, and the ensuing urgency for 'handling' the great refugee flows to northern Europe seem to have led the EU to a new strategy of 'refugee management'. This development does not

bode anything good for the future. The main objective of this strategy is to dramatically decrease the refugee/migrant flows, and for this purpose the so-called 'Fortress Europe' should be reinforced.

This goal is served by specific and centrally planned European policies that are to: (a) make a clear distinction between 'refugees' and 'migrants'; (b) strengthen FRONTEX, and the forces that deter sea travel as well as to 'militarise' sea borders both in the Aegean and the wider Mediterranean Sea; c) create 'hotspots' on the Aegean islands and elsewhere, aiming at an administratively effective separation between refugees and migrants, with the latter being deported expeditiously; and (d) to appoint Turkey as the regional 'policeman' so that deterrence policies are strengthened and crossing the waterways in the Aegean Sea can be discouraged. Thus it becomes conspicuous that the EU, in the face of the huge humanitarian crisis, with hundreds of thousands of refugees/migrants as its victims, has chosen to stick to the hard logic of previous years – that is, (a) the logic of a hermetically 'sealed' fortress that allows a very small and targeted number of persecuted people from war-ridden countries in Africa and Asia to come to the European land; and (b) the logic of these people's assimilation and their direct incorporation into the cheap labour market (of Germany and other countries) as a 'reserve army of labour'. Characteristic of this logic is the decision to permit the migration of only 160,000 refugees in the EU, an outrageously small number if the real needs are taken into consideration.

At the same time, drastic cuts in funding for food and health programmes by international organisations (eg the United Nations High Commission for Refugees) has worsened the already critical situation of refugees throughout the Middle East, and will surely create even larger refugee flows into Europe.

Whereas it is clear that only a single European emergency response could effectively address this refugee crisis, European states continue adopting a piecemeal approach, being reluctant and having a mood of retrenchment, which undermines any efforts to rebuild responsibility, solidarity and trust; this very attitude causes chaos and despair to hundreds and thousands of refugees - women, men and children. So far, the problem has been dealt with in a conscious but sporadic and isolated way, as it is limited in multiple initiatives of intervention that fail, however, to be converted into a strong common European response based on European values, so that people's basic humanitarian and social needs are met when they arrive at their destination, or when they cross a country. This support is also necessary in countries that are not EU members but

are rather transit zones of refugees and migrants.

At the same time, there is an urgent need for the adoption of measures so that the situation in the EU's neighbourhood becomes stabilised, including the provision of additional funding for humanitarian assistance and structural support to countries that host large refugee populations. This support can be implemented by endorsing institutional reforms that provide the refugees with increasing legal opportunities to enter the EU, including the permission to enter for humanitarian reasons, for family reunification or for study.

The emergency situation that Europe is facing nowadays (this year there have been over 500,000 new arrivals by sea) is primarily a refugee crisis. The vast majority of those who arrive in Greece and wish to continue their journey come from conflict zones such as Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. Such a state of emergency can only be addressed through a holistic and integrated approach, during which all EU member states can work together in a constructive way. The promotion of cooperation among EU member states may also positively affect the citizens of the countries, by strengthening solidarity for refugee populations and by preventing racist and xenophobic phenomena.

However, this is not the case.

Unacceptable

The 'Antiracist Observatory of the University of the Aegean believes that the core of the planned EU policies is the geopolitically arbitrary and politically unacceptable distinction of persecuted people into 'eligible refugees' and 'deportable economic migrants'. The EU and its hegemonic member states seem to have realised that their chosen policy of 'fortification' should be consistent, even marginally, with the humanitarian legacy of the European political tradition. For this reason, and under the pressure of increasing signs of solidarity shown by ordinary European citizens towards the refugees, the decision to close the European borders to 'outsiders' is accompanied with some 'touches' of humanitarianism, as is the decision to allow the migration of only 160,000 refugees into the EU (of 508 million inhabitants!). Within this context, the above distinction serves a double goal: on the one hand, it allows a substantial closing of European borders, and, on the other hand, it gives the impression of a European leadership that cares for the most vulnerable people.

Nevertheless, the distinction between 'refugees' and 'migrants' has been proven completely groundless, since it is based on an outdated conception of geopolitical reality that ignores

contemporary developments. Nowadays, wars have completely different characteristics compared to those in the 1950s, a period during which it was defined administratively what constitutes a 'refugee' or a 'migrant' at an international level. How can one classify (and handle) as 'economic migrants' people who, under the burden of war and terrorist threats, experience the fear of persecution, starvation and/or extermination, or simply do not possess the necessary means to educate their children? By what criteria is a person coming from Afghanistan or Iraq not a 'refugee', but only an 'economic migrant'? Who defines the content and limits of an unbearable life? Does the guilt of the EU's leadership make it forget very easily how long-lasting are the consequences of wars and other conflicts that Europe itself instigated? How can people's efforts to take refuge in other countries, hoping for a sustainable life, be divided between 'documented avoidance of risking death or persecution', on the one hand, and 'improving their living standards' on the other?

Who decides who will live and who will die, either within their countries or in the 'civilised West'? Who holds the power of life and death over the persecuted of this planet? Shouldn't various cliché terms found in international law regarding the status of refugees, such as 'well-founded fear of persecution' make us reflect on and try to define what 'fear', 'justified fear' and 'persecution' mean for those who experience those extreme situations? Who gives the right to the EU to decide which countries, nationalities and ethnic groups may be excluded from the 'refugee' status, implying that the members of the respective population groups are not entitled to flee unbearable conditions of life in their countries of origin? How can whole populations be collectively identified as 'economic migrants' but not as 'refugees', when even the existing refugee law prescribes that the procedures for recognition of a 'refugee' status should take into account the special conditions of each individual (likelihood of persecution), and this recognition is, above all, a humanitarian act?

Nowadays, as far as the refugee issue is concerned, the European continent is confronted with a big dilemma, which entails two opposing perspectives. On the one end, we have the neoliberal alliance of political and economic oligarchy with racism and, sometimes, fascism. On the other end, we have the forces of solidarity towards refugees: democratic citizens, ordinary people: the 'underdogs' of Europe. Those of us who belong to the solidarity side need to fight to prevent the militarisation of sea borders and the setting-up of 'hotspots' that will decide, usually with unsubstantiated and arbitrary demarcation criteria, who will stay and who will return to a situation of

continuous risking of one's life (ie through the perpetuation of all the risks associated with the dangerous conditions of illegal travelling). At the same time, we need to fight both to open up legal and safe migration channels to Europe, and to immediately stop the wars and disasters that cause massive exoduses of civilian populations.

Where we stand:

Post-16 Educator seeks to defend and extend good practice in post compulsory education and training. Good practice includes teachers working with students to increase their power to look critically at the world around them and act effectively within it. This entails challenging racism, sexism, heterosexism, inequality based on disability and other discriminatory beliefs and practices.

For the mass of people, access to valid post compulsory education and training is more necessary now than ever. It should be theirs by right! All provision should be organised and taught by staff who are trained for and committed to it. Publicly funded provision of valid post compulsory education and training for all who require it should be a fundamental demand of the trade union movement.

Post-16 Educator seeks to persuade the labour movement as a whole of the importance of this demand. In mobilising to do so it bases itself first and foremost upon practitioners - those who are in direct, daily contact with students. It seeks the support of every practitioner, in any area of post-16 education and training, and in particular that of women, of part timers and of people outside London and the Southeast.

Post-16 Educator works to organise readers/contributors into a national network that is democratic, that is politically and financially independent of all other organisations, that develops their practice and their thinking, and that equips them to take action over issues rather than always having to react to changes imposed from above.