

Yesterday we launched a rescue ship (the “Ionian Sea”) as part of an activist project to aid migrants in distress in the Mediterranean. In contrast to rescue ships operated by humanitarian NGOs, the “Ionian Sea” flies an Italian flag and is mainly operated by an Italian crew and can thus not legally be refused entry to an Italian port. Our object is not only to provide needed humanitarian aid to those who risk death at sea but also to intervene in the toxic political atmosphere of Italy and Europe.

We set off on the anniversary of the 2013 disaster in which almost 400 migrants drowned off the Italian Island of Lampedusa. In the years since that tragedy Italian and European policies have, in fact, made the passage of migrants across the Mediterranean even more dangerous and lethal while obstructing humanitarian aid efforts. As a result, migrants continue to die at sea in alarming numbers. A report released last Monday documented that eight migrants die every day in the Mediterranean.

This project takes place against the backdrop of an Italian government that has sought repeatedly to block and even criminalize humanitarian assistance. In June 2018, for example, Italy turned away the “Acquarius,” a rescue ship contracted by the NGO SOS “Méditerranée” carrying over 600 migrants rescued at sea, refusing to allow the ship entry to an Italian port. In August, the “Diciotti,” an Italian Coast Guard ship arrived at the port of Catania with 140 rescued migrants, but the Italian government refused to let them disembark and sequestered them on board. Finally, on October 1st, Domenico Lucano, the mayor of Riace in Southern Italy who is well-known for creating a program to aid and settle migrants in his town, making it a real sanctuary city, was arrested by national authorities for “aiding illegal migration.”

Italy’s anti-migrant campaigns, which this project contests, are parallel in several respects to those in the United States. Just as European governments have made the Mediterranean crossing more difficult and hazardous for migrants, making the sea into a graveyard, so too the US Border Patrol has made migrant routes through the desert more perilous and deadlier. Similarly, the cruelty of the Trump administration’s family separation policy finds echoes in the barbarity of Italian and European methods to make the lives of migrants unbearable.

Keep in mind that these anti-migrant campaigns on both sides of the Atlantic coincide with rising racism. Matteo Salvini, the Italian Minister of the Interior who has spearheaded these policies, declares them to be an essential part of his commitment always to put “Italy first.” When refusing to allow the rescued migrants to disembark in August, for instance, he echoed typical statements of the US President: “for me, Italians come first, then the rest of the world.”

By launching the ship we also seek to create a platform, called simply “Operation Mediterranean,” to facilitate and foster discussion and action to contest the current migration policies and moreover challenge the aggressive atmosphere of racism. A variety of activist groups and NGOs are collaborating not only to help migrants attain a decent existence but also to transform European societies to become more just, humane, and democratic.

We know that in many respects we are swimming against the current and we don't underestimate the difficulties ahead. In Italy, as elsewhere in Europe and North America, there is a growing hegemony that is hostile to migrants and, often in the name of security or the preservation of civilizational values, seeks to close borders and expel those who have already arrived. This fact only makes it more urgent, in our view, to act now with all the means at our disposal.