

# At least ten die in ferry blaze in the Adriatic Sea

Stefan Steinberg  
30 December 2014

At least ten people have died following a devastating fire Sunday aboard a roll-on-roll-off ferry sailing from the Greek port of Patras to Ancona in Italy.

The fire broke out before dawn local time Sunday in the car-hold area of the ferry Norman Atlantic, which was carrying 422 passengers and 56 crew members. The ship was situated about 45 nautical miles off the northern coast of Corfu.

While the exact cause of the fire has not yet been determined, it is clear that the car deck was highly combustible. The ferry was carrying 222 vehicles, including several tanker trucks containing olive oil to Italy. Gasoline is currently cheaper in Greece than in Italy and it is suspected that many of the car tanks were filled to the brim. The fire spread rapidly, and pictures of the ferry Sunday showed thick clouds of smoke billowing out of the stricken vessel.

Emergency forces from Italy and Greece were able to rescue several dozen passengers on Sunday, but the majority of those on board were forced to spend two nights in freezing temperatures, rain, gale-force winds, and the thick smoke caused by the fire.

Passengers, huddled on the vessel's upper decks, spoke to the Greek media by phone: "We are outside, we are very cold, the ship is full of smoke." The same passenger, Giorgos Stiliaras, told Greek Mega TV that the passengers were awakened by "the smell of burning plastic," and the heat from the fire made it feel like the floors were "boiling."

The Norman Atlantic is relatively new, just five years old, but has changed owners and its name on a number of occasions. It is currently owned by the Italian ferry operator Visemar di Navigazione, which had chartered the ship to Greece's Anek Lines to run a low-cost service between Greece and Italy. The ferry had been sailing its new route for just 10 days.

According to media reports, a number of safety problems had recently been reported on the ferry. The Italian organization for checking the ships, Rina, had issued the ferry a security certificate to sail on September 1. Normally such a certificate is valid for five years. Just 10 weeks later, however, a security inspection by officials in Patras on December 19 revealed six deficiencies. Among the defects listed was the dysfunction of security warnings against the spread of fire on the car deck. The emergency lighting on the ferry was also criticized.

Greek ferry services have been under massive pressure to reduce operating costs against a background of austerity measures dictated to both Greece and Italy by the European Union and International Monetary Fund. Workers on Greek ferries have taken repeated strike action in 2014 over not receiving their wages for months at a time.

The ferry services are vital for the transport of goods, passengers and tourists to Greece's scores of inhabited islands but, like the other forms of public transport, the ferry system has seen heavy financial losses during the past five years of austerity.

Following the disaster Sunday, the Greek Minister for Shipping, Miltiades Varvitsiotis, declared that it was too early to look for scapegoats and that the main priority was rescuing passengers. But earlier this year, the same minister ruled out any extra financial support for ferry lines struggling to meet their costs.

Speaking at a business lunch, Varvitsiotis said that it was not the right time to seek further funds from the treasury. According to the minister, redrawing the map of services in the Aegean Sea would enable the current level of government subsidies to meet the demands raised by increased traffic.

At the same meeting, Varvitsiotis also denounced

“populist criticism” of the country’s shipping industry. While starving the ferry services of funding, the government of Antonio Samaras has continued to hold a protective hand over the country’s billionaire ship-owners who are virtually freed from any obligation to pay taxes.

A recent article in the German magazine *Der Spiegel* wrote that since 2002, 140 billion euros in revenues made by the ship-owners had gone completely untaxed. The article also stated that, thanks to 58 different special measures written into Greek law, the 800 families controlling the Greek shipping industry pay hardly any tax on their fortunes.

The article also notes that of the 275 ships commissioned by the ship-owners in 2012, not a single order was placed with a Greek shipyard where the shipbuilding industry has effectively collapsed.

Many ship-owning families also control influential media outlets in Greece and are at the heart of the system of “diaploki”—the “intertwining” of business and political interests.

According to the French newspaper *Le Figaro*, an Italian prosecutor intends to launch an investigation into the causes of the fire on the grounds of possible criminal negligence. Invariably, such investigations identify and prosecute certain individuals involved in the incident but fail to examine the broader social political background to such tragedies.

In a separate incident, the Italian Coast Guard announced it had rescued six of the 11 crew members of two merchant vessels that collided in the Adriatic off the north-eastern Italian port of Ravenna. The two ship—one Turkish and the other flying the flag of Belize—collided on Sunday in thick fog, heavy seas and gale-force winds.



To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**