

Rome: Buses explode due to lack of maintenance

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Last week two Atac company transport buses caught fire and exploded in Italy's capital city of Rome.

The first fire happened when sparks began to fly in the back of a bus packed with tourists en route through the historical centre of Rome. The driver quickly escorted passengers off as the bus caught fire and exploded, causing serious damage to nearby shops and sending one shopkeeper to hospital. The bus was completely destroyed by the fire.

Later in the day, a second bus carrying school children in the southwestern Rome suburb of Castel Porziano caught fire.

Last year, 22 buses were destroyed by fire—all caused by lack of proper maintenance—and 2018 is already on track to being far worse, with four bus fires in a single month. All of this year's fires are believed to be caused by lack of maintenance in a fleet that is overwhelmingly beyond its life expectancy.

Using the hashtag #flambus, which rhymes with Tambus, Atac's former name, Romans took to Twitter to condemn Atac, with many saying that in Rome when a bus explodes people immediately blame Atac, with no thought whatsoever about terrorism.

According to an internal Atac report, at any given time, 36 percent of the company's buses are broken down and undergoing maintenance. Currently, 50 percent of the city's trams are also offline for maintenance.

For years Atac, as with all of Rome's public services, has been the target of a relentless campaign of vilification aimed at placing responsibility for Rome's budget crisis on the agency, or, more correctly, on its workers, often portrayed as inefficient, lazy and guilty of absenteeism.

Contrary to the common mantra echoed by the servile media that workers as well as inept administrators are

the main cause of Atac's budget imbalances, the role of finance capital and derivative schemes has emerged as the main component of Rome's budgetary crisis.

In fact, since the onset of the 2008 world financial crisis, Rome's administrators have either sought to find short-term solutions or have been involved in shady financial derivative transactions that further deepened the Eternal City's budgetary crisis and starved its agencies of critical funds.

In 2014, Rome narrowly averted bankruptcy under Democrat Party (PD) prime minister Matteo Renzi, who collaborated with Italy's three main trade unions to approve the *Salva-Roma ter* (Rescue Rome 3), the Detroit-style bailout implemented under the guise of "adopting innovative models for service management," including "resorting to liberalization." The bailout paved the way for the privatization of crucial social services, including Atac.

The following year PD party mayor Ignazio Marino announced that the city would seek a minority corporate partner to buy a stake in Atac, with a goal of ending in-house management by 2019. Marino resigned amid a scandal of fraudulent personal expenses and mismanagement of city services.

Last year, Bruno Rota, the former head of Atac, said that Atac was €1.3 billion (\$1.54 billion) in debt and should declare bankruptcy. Critics of Atac have tried to blame Atac's debts on employees and the non-paying public.

For their part, the Atac trade unions, especially FILT-CGIL (Federazione Italiana Lavoratori Trasporti), have focused their efforts on ensuring "continuity of service" by colluding with Atac management and Rome's government to impose the diktats of Rome's creditors, most recently by increasing the number of continuous driving hours without a break by two hours.

This year, as Italy struggles to form a national government after elections in March, public opinion has rapidly shifted against Rome's current mayor, right-wing Five Star Movement (M5S) party politician Virginia Raggi for the continued deteriorating condition of the city's infrastructure and waste management.

Raggi, who promised a "radical new beginning in the name of honesty and transparency," has been engulfed in a string of scandals since taking office in 2016.

M5S, which arose amid the 2008 global financial crisis, in response to the political bankruptcy of the official left and its pseudo left appendages, won the popular vote in this year's Italian national elections. However, due to the change in electoral law that replaced the majority vote (or first-past-the-post) system with proportional representation, M5S must form a coalition to govern.

Despite its anti-establishment rhetoric, M5S, stating its "sense of responsibility" to quickly form a government and reassure Italy's creditors, is now negotiating with right-wing extremist party Lega, the long-term ally of Italian oligarch politician Silvio Berlusconi.

As the WSWS explained on May 11, the task of an M5S-Lega government would be to impose the dictates of the international financial markets in a country characterized by high levels of poverty and unemployment, a deep banking crisis, and extremely high levels of public debt. The national debt crisis will be used to impose further cuts to Atac and all of Rome's services. Italians should reject the notion that the working class must pay for a crisis it did not create.



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