

Political recriminations as death toll rises in Genoa bridge collapse

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Following the collapse of a motorway bridge in Genoa, Italy, the death toll has risen to at least 42. The Morandi Bridge had subsided and broke over a length of over 200 metres on August 14, burying buildings and railroad tracks and plunging vehicles into the Polcevera River. So far, 16 people have been hauled out of the rubble with serious injuries and more than 600 have lost their homes.

Many of those affected spoke of an “apocalypse,” and some are reminded of the earthquakes that are well known in Italy. Everywhere there are mountains of debris, teams of dogs searching for survivors, the transport of the injured and dead, people weeping—and then the construction crews arrive with their heavy equipment. Thus, there is a growing fear that this catastrophe too will only exacerbate the social crisis, that the provisional arrangements will last for years to come, and that those affected and the impoverished population of Genoa will ultimately lose out.

The governing far-right Lega and Five Star Movement (M5S) were quickly on hand on Wednesday with fanciful but hollow accusations. Government officials are trying to deny all responsibility and drown out the growing unrest by loudly casting aspersions.

During a police conference in Calabria, Lega chief and Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini stepped in front of the microphones and first accused the EU of having forced Italy into excessive frugality. Then Salvini turned to the private operator of the affected highway, Autostrade per l’Italia, owned by the Benetton group. It had earned “billions but did not invest.” He threatened to do “everything possible to get the names and surnames of the guilty, because those who are guilty, will pay.”

Luigi Di Maio of M5S, the other deputy prime minister, who visited the debris-strewn scene in Genoa

on Wednesday morning, joined in the same chorus. The government would “analyse all contracts and concessions and if necessary withdraw them,” Di Maio claimed. “Every previous government has covered politically for Autostrade per l’Italia. The current government is the first not to receive any money from Benetton.”

On Wednesday afternoon in the prefecture of Liguria, Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte finally announced that the government would withdraw the concession from Autostrade per l’Italia. These frantic steps serve the transparent aim of quickly finding a scapegoat and at the same time distracting attention from the real causes.

The exact technical reasons that led to the disaster have not yet been clarified. However, the tragedy is a piece of a bigger picture, which is becoming clearer and clearer. It reveals a deeply sick society in which public institutions and infrastructure are underfunded and systematically looted.

For decades, changing governments have organized an unprecedented orgy of enrichment by the Italian bourgeoisie at the expense of working people. Every year, public investment is cut back and infrastructure support systematically pared down.

All political camps are responsible for this. This applies both to the four governments under Silvio Berlusconi, who, as the epitome of corruption, had declared self-enrichment a virtue, as well as to various centre-left governments that alternated in power with Berlusconi. From Mario Monti to Romano Prodi to Enrico Letta, Matteo Renzi and Paolo Gentiloni, these were the governments in which the Democratic Party (PD), flanked by pseudo-lefts such as Rifondazione Comunista, cut back on everything and everyone to fill the gaps in the budget. Public investment, social spending and infrastructure were allowed to deteriorate.

The resulting social catastrophe created the conditions under which the current government of the right-wing Lega and the Five Star Movement came to power in June. This coalition pushes the worst characteristics of previous governments to extremes. It is mercilessly building up the police state, attacking the working class and organizing mass murder in the Mediterranean refugee crisis.

The current government politicians from the Lega and Five Star Movement are themselves directly responsible for the neglect of public infrastructure. For decades, the Lega has been an integral part of the various Berlusconi governments. The Five Star Movement has also distinguished itself for years through attacks on social infrastructure and social benefits.

After the 2014 flooding in Genoa, then-M5S leader Beppe Grillo campaigned for the “No-Gronda” movement, a protest movement against a bypass project designed to relieve the now collapsed Ponte Morandi of heavy traffic. Grillo loudly protested against the “waste of public money” that the infrastructure project was supposed to entail, shouting, “We’ll stop them with the army!”

The Five Star Movement appealed to its sympathizers to block and prevent the Gronda project. When it joined the government, Minister of Infrastructures and Transport Danilo Toninelli (M5S) proposed that public projects, including the Gronda, undergo a “total revision, including the abandonment of the project.” This is the same Toninelli who is now wandering around shouting, “The guilty will pay, down to the last penny!”

The working class must not let itself be led astray by such commotion. This government will never shake the foundations of capitalism—on the contrary. Workers must ask fundamental questions and see things in context. The catastrophe is not the responsibility of a single “black sheep” among the corporations, and it is not just a question of whether the highways are operated privately and for profit.

Even in Germany, where the privatization of highways and the introduction of toll fees are only just beginning, many arterial roads and bridges are dilapidated because for decades, billions of euros have flowed not into their maintenance, but into the pockets of those in power and the rich. Neglected infrastructure

is by no means an Italian special case; in Germany, only one in eight motorway bridges is “in good condition,” while twelve percent of bridges are in dire need of renovation, or will have to be completely replaced.

The cause of the disaster is the capitalist profit system, which is bankrupt to the core and produces only catastrophes. The working class must take political power in order to reorganize the entire economy according to socialist principles.



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