

Italian officials received prior warnings of catastrophic bridge collapse in Genoa

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In the month since the August 14 collapse of Genoa's Morandi Bridge, it has become clear that there were repeated warnings about the dangerous decay of the bridge's structural integrity. Although minor repairs were carried out, calls from engineers and other experts for major repairs and the decommissioning of the structure were ignored by the private operator and the government.

The most recent warning came in October 2017, when Carmelo Gentile, a structural engineering professor at the Politecnico di Milano, sent results of structural integrity tests to Autostrade per l'Italia, the bridge operator, and the central government's highways agency. Gentile warned of troubling signs of corrosion or other possible damage to the southern bridge supports.

These supports ultimately failed and collapsed a portion of the bridge, killing 43 people and making 150 residents homeless. In all, more than 600 homes were destroyed by the collapse. Countless more people rely on the major thoroughway in and out of Genoa.

In an interview with the *New York Times* published on September 6, professor Gentile commented, "Probably they [highway officials and Autostrade] underestimated the importance of the information."

Autostrade responded with a statement this month claiming professor Gentile's suggestions were included in a proposal to retrofit the viaduct that was approved in June, and the company blames the Ministry of Infrastructure for months of delays in authorizing the work.

The potential for a total collapse has been well documented, going all the way back to a 1979 report by the bridge's architect Riccardo Morandi, recommending constant maintenance of the structure to remove all traces of rust and fill in exposed patches on

the reinforcements.

Morandi's report, published 12 years after the completion of the bridge, noted a "well-known loss of superficial chemical resistance of the concrete" due to sea air and pollution from a nearby steel plant. The steel cable stays alone have been under continuous maintenance since the 1990s.

Evacuated residents who lived under or very near the bridge—designated as the "red zone"—raised concerns about the construction of the bridge, and over the years since it was built have repeatedly raised concerns about a collapse. These concerns went totally ignored by the state authorities.

The economic loss is crippling for businesses and residents alike. In a statement on September 11, Autostrade reported it has satisfied almost all the requests for compensation by residents within the red zone. The statement explains that it is offering various types of grants, on average within 24 hours of the request, to meet the most immediate needs of those who were forced to abandon their home: the purchase of furniture, payment of mortgages, reimbursement of rental payments, fees for school, and payments to craftsmen and traders.

This is cold comfort for the residents who are expected to never be able to return to their homes and businesses. In a RAI-TG1 Italia broadcast, displaced residents reported that they are relying on donations from volunteers, friends, and family to get by and are living in cramped quarters.

In an August 18 interview with the *Guardian*, University of Genoa Professor Antonio Bercich, who also warned authorities about the Morandi bridge, said, "We have used materials which are destined to deteriorate quickly, like those of the bridge in Genoa ... There are structures from those years that should now

be demolished.”

The situation is an indictment of the entire political establishment. After years of warnings and disastrous developments, the representatives of the capitalist state are unable and unwilling to address decaying infrastructure. Governments of the center-left and center-right alike, including members of the current executive, have ignored reports, neglected desperately needed maintenance and participated in the dismantling of public infrastructure regulations while they pursued its privatization.

In bitter struggles following World War II, the Italian working class won concessions from a deeply hated ruling class discredited by the crimes of fascism. These included the requirement that road infrastructure be operated as a public utility and maintained by the state.

In 1999, the center-left government of former Stalinist Massimo D'Alema privatized Società Autostrade, the public company overseeing transport infrastructure. The fashion brand Benetton Group took over 30 percent of the state assets, with the rest sold in a public stock offering.

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In 2006, the Benetton Group contributed €1.1 million in political donations to various parties. It donated €150,000 to the far right Northern League (predecessor to the Lega, the party of co-deputy prime minister Matteo Salvini) as part of a strategy to renew its roadway operator license. In 2008, Salvini himself, and his party, voted in favor of the renewal.

The consequences of this program of privatization have been disastrous. Twelve bridges have collapsed since 2004, and five in the past five years, including four in Sicily, one of the poorest regions in Italy. It is widely reported that at least 300 bridges and thousands of kilometers of roadways are at risk of collapse.

Last month, in an attempt to placate mass outrage over the disaster and the negligence of authorities, the central government called for the closure of the most dangerous bridges and roadways.

These closures—to the extent they are taking place—are carried out in the most arbitrary manner. In the city Nettuno, south of Rome, for example, officials closed a pedestrian bridge connecting the north side of the city with the train station as well as at least two residential roads, providing no advance notice to residents.

Residents reported that police officers came early in the morning and shouted and whistled for people to move their cars. Those who didn't come down immediately were fined. Since then, the government has not returned to evaluate, let alone repair, the closed roads or bridge. Some residents remain without legal access to their homes.

Any increase in Italy's social spending, including infrastructure, is opposed by the European Union, which is demanding that Italy maintain a “prudent” budget in 2019 to pay €2.1 trillion in debt to the banks and financial institutions.

The 2018 Italian budget allocated just €6 billion toward infrastructure. A report by the Bank of Canada suggests that the rebuilding of the Morandi bridge and paying out of damages from the collapse could reach €1 billion. In contrast to the insignificant funds allocated to the most essential infrastructure, the government spends €25 billion per year on the military. At the end of July, Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte met with US President Donald Trump, and indicated his support for increasing Italy's NATO military spending to €37 billion per year.



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