

Five railway workers killed on the job in northern Italy

Allison Smith
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Local authorities in Brandizzo, Italy have opened a murder investigation into the case of five railway workers who were struck dead by a train while performing rail line maintenance late last week.

Seven contract rail workers, employed by Si.gi.fer, were replacing segments of the train line connecting Turin and Milan when they were run over by a locomotive moving empty carriages from Alessandria towards Turin.

The empty passenger train is estimated to have been traveling upwards of 100 miles an hour, and witnesses say that the high-speed incident left a horrific scene with human remains found as far as 300 meters from where the incident occurred. Initial reports suggest it may have been due to a “communications error.”

The five victims, who died on impact, were all reportedly from the nearby town of Borgo Vercelli and have been identified as Michael Zanera, 34; Giuseppe Sorvillo, 43; Saverio Giuseppe Lombardo, 52; Giuseppe Aversa, 49; and Kevin Laganà, 22. They leave behind bereaved parents, spouses, children, friends and neighbors.

This is the third major train accident in Italy in recent years. In 2020, Two rail workers died and 31 passengers were injured when a train derailed near Lodi, south of Milan. In January 2018, three women died and about 100 people were injured when a packed commuter train derailed near Milan. Both incidents were due to poor track maintenance.

According to Statista.com, there were 76 rail accidents in Italy between 2013 and 2019. European Union statistics agency data shows that there were just over 1,500 rail accidents in the entire EU in 2019. That year, 687 people were killed and 568 seriously injured.

In July of this year, railway workers at the Italian state-owned Trenitalia/Italo went out on strike to

protest deteriorating working conditions and to seek redress for serious safety concerns. However, Matteo Salvini, far-right Lega party leader and current transport minister, ordered a reduction in the length of the strike, further undermining rail workers’ democratic right to take industrial action. The state requires advance notice of industrial action, with minimum service guarantees, to prevent any reduction in profit, preventing a unified struggle of railway workers.

Union response to Salvini was limited to lamenting his interference as “unacceptable and disrespectful” and suggesting Salvini “facilitate dialogue and bridge the gap between workers and employers.”

There was no union call for a unified struggle or mass walkout. Instead, in late July, the Fit Cisl, Ugl AF, Fast ConfsalGGIL and Orsa unions reached a short-term contract agreement with Trenitalia/Italo that by GGIL’s own admission does not meet members’ demands and gives workers a paltry “economic increase” worth €200 to €280 per month. The financial terms include a very small wage increase and bonuses. The agreement is due to expire in December 2024.

According to Glassdoor.com, the salary for a specialist maintenance operator at Trenitalia is €17,000 to €22,000 per annum. According to Tag24.com, Trenitalia CEO Luigi Ferrari’s salary is €1,400,000 per annum, making him the highest-paid executive in Italy.

Globally, railway workers, like other industrial workers, are increasingly facing dangers and deteriorating working conditions. In the United States, according to the Federal Railroad Administration, there were 8,076 train accidents in 2021, injuring 4,622 people and killing 753. Of those, railroad workers made up 2,568 injuries and 11 deaths. This is equivalent to 2 percent of the 120,000 workers on the seven Class I

railroads, an injury rate higher than in mining and oil extraction, construction and manufacturing, based on data from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics.

As in Italy, the US Biden administration last year undemocratically moved to impose a congressional ban on railway worker strike action and to impose a deal that ignores workers' demands for humane working hours, sick leave (the current contract provides for zero sick days), and an increase in wages that offsets inflation.

Earlier this year in Greece, 57 people, including eight railway workers, died in the country's deadliest train disaster in history. The victims, mostly young students returning from holiday, suffered horrific deaths when a high-speed intercity passenger train carrying 350 people—traveling from Athens to Thessaloniki—collided in the Tempi valley head-on with a southbound freight train. The collision was a crime resulting from a terrifyingly unsafe train network ravaged by years of cuts and its eventual privatisation in 2017 by the SYRIZA government.



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