

Petrol station explosion in Rome, Italy kills one and injures dozens, mass casualties narrowly avoided

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The working-class neighborhood of Prenestino in the southeast of Rome was jolted awake last Friday morning by devastating blasts at a nearby refueling station.

When the initial blast occurred, fire fighters and emergency operators were already on scene assessing a leak caused by a truck that collided with an underground liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) pipeline during a refueling or unloading operation in the early hours of Friday morning.

The collision led to a gas leak at the station's pump island, and the initial explosion was likely due to ignition of LPG vapours. Fire department officials described the primary blast as a BLEVE (boiling liquid expanding vapor explosion), which is common when pressurized flammable liquids rapidly ignite.

The blasts' fireballs and shockwaves caused enormous damage to the petrol station and surrounding area and injured 45 residents and emergency service workers, including several firefighters who faced intense heat from the blast flames. It took 15 firefighters to bring the fire under control.

At least two of the injured were listed in critical condition. On Thursday it was announced that Claudio Ercoli, aged 54—one of the critically injured—had died with over 55 percent burns to his body.

Had the blast occurred a few minutes later than it did, the injuries may have been a lot worse as the adjacent property houses a children's sports camp that was destroyed by the blast.

"If it had happened... half an hour later, it would have been a catastrophe," Fabio Balzani, president of the Polisportiva Villa De Sanctis sports centre, told Associated Press. A quick evacuation of children prevented a mass casualty event. He said around 60 children were due to be at the site for a summer camp, and

around 120 people had booked to use the swimming pool that morning.

Prenestino resident Massimo Bartoletti told local news outlet *Roma Repubblica*: "I saw the first explosion with the classic fireball. Shortly after came a second one, which was hellish. A fiery mushroom formed in the sky. It made the whole area shake. It looked like hell, everything was flying in the sky."

The *New York Times* reported that local hair salon owner, Roberto De Carolis, was just opening his salon when firefighters began evacuating the area. Surveillance video footage from inside his shop showed the windows had shattered, sending smoke and debris inside the building. "I can't imagine what it is like inside. Thank God it happened before the store opened," De Carolis said.

Rome prosecutors have begun an investigation into the cause of the explosion, which could be related to a previous gas leak during the unloading phase of liquified petroleum gas at the station. The investigation could now include charges of manslaughter.

Barbara Belardinelli and her daughter were slightly injured after the first explosion. After leaving their home to investigate, the next explosion struck them. Barbara told Associated Press, "As soon as we heard the second explosion, we were also hit by a ball of fire. I thought that a car near us exploded, metal fragments were flying in the air... We felt the fire on the skin, the arm of my daughter is still red, it was horrible."

According to news outlet *La Repubblica*, the refueling station belongs to a family-run business known as "Eco GasAuto," founded in 2005. The company, led by the nonagenarian Giovanni Pietroboni and his children, operates four fuel stations in Rome and generated just under €11 million in revenue last year.

Investigations by local authorities (including Rome prosecutors) are ongoing—not just into how it could possibly happen that a fuel truck was able to strike an underground gas pipe, but into other possible safety violations, licensing irregularities, and negligence.

Prosecutors and fire safety experts said they are analysing the pipeline's condition, safety systems, and CCTV/video and will determine if the refueling protocols were properly followed and decide if civil or criminal liability applies.

Cost-cutting, fragmented subcontracting, poor licensing oversight, and weak regulatory enforcement have led to record numbers of preventable, man-made workplace disasters in Italy in recent years.

Last December, five people died in Calenzano, on the northern outskirts of Florence, in a blast at a tank truck loading area. Prosecutors in the nearby city of Prato have opened an investigation to determine criminal responsibility for the Eni blast. Investigations are ongoing.

In February last year, three workers were seriously injured and five were killed in Florence, at an Esselunga supermarket construction site, after a concrete beam and layers of slabs collapsed, crushing the workers to death. Investigations showed that the site was riddled with safety violations.

Earlier this month, also in the Prenestino area, an out-of-service hybrid ATAC bus built in 2024 caught fire and exploded, damaging a nearby apartment building.

Rome has a long history of exploding buses, known as “flambuses,” and under mass pressure from Rome residents, ATAC is being forced to modernise its fleet.

The investigation into the hybrid bus explosion is highlighting ongoing concerns about electrical system reliability and poor maintenance standards across Rome's public transport vehicles.

A nationwide inspection last year of 310 farms, found that 66 percent had serious safety or labour violations. The human cost is born by workers such as Satnam Singh, an Indian farm labourer whose arm was severed by farm equipment. Singh was denied medical assistance and dumped at his home by his employer where he bled to death, leaving his grieving wife and children destitute.

Agricultural labourers toil as modern-day slaves under the infamous “caporalato”—an illegal labour system—widespread in the Italian fields.

In recent years, Italy has registered a record number of workplace deaths and serious injuries.

Italy's National Institute for Insurance against

Accidents at Work (INAIL) reports that in 2024, there were approximately 414,853 workplace injuries, a slight drop from 2023. Despite fewer accidents overall, fatal workplace deaths rose to 797 in 2024. Commuting-related incidents surged too, with fatalities while traveling to or from work rising from 239 in 2023 to 280 in 2024.

Italian unions only pay lip service to workplace safety and oversight. In an attempt to defuse public outrage over the tragic deaths in the Esselunga construction collapse, the CGIL and UIL unions called a toothless two-hour national strike.

When the COVID pandemic first hit Italy in 2020, wildcat strikes erupted across the peninsula, fighting to halt the spread of the deadly disease and defying Italy's corrupt union bureaucracy that worked hand in glove with the banks and the Conte government to demand that production workers stay on the job and continue working despite the threat that the disease could claim millions of lives.

In the 2024 ITUC Global Rights Index, Italy is ranked among the world's worst offenders of workers' rights—including the imposition of disproportionate restrictions on the fundamental rights of workers to strike, alongside Algeria, Armenia, Costa Rica, Senegal, and Thailand.

No confidence can be placed with the bourgeois Italian parties and trade unions to stop the carnage of injuries and deaths on the job.

The Rome explosion and injuries attest to the importance of the rank-and-file investigation into the April 7 death of US Stellantis worker Ronald Adams Sr. The circumstances surrounding his preventable death are being investigated by rank-and-file autoworkers with the support of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). The investigation is breaking the conspiracy of silence by the company, the United Auto Workers union and the Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration, and is fighting to hold those responsible to account.

This week, Italian Stellantis workers spoke to the WSWs giving their support for the IWA-RFC investigation into Adams' death.



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