

Italy: Fire at working class housing occupation exposes Rome's housing crisis

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Late on the evening of July 29, a small fire broke out at Spin Time Labs, a self-managed social center and housing occupation in Rome's working class Esquilino district. The official cause of the fire has not yet been established. Fire investigators reportedly identified a technical room or storage area on the lower floors as the likely point of origin, with an electrical fault among the initial hypotheses.

Following technical inspections, fire authorities declared the building on Via Santa Croce in Gerusalemme unfit for habitation. Residents were immediately evacuated, while armed police guarded the building and permitted residents to enter individually to retrieve limited personal belongings before locking them out.

The consequences of the fire have been devastating. Around 400 residents, including more than 90 children, were left without their homes and forced to sleep in makeshift tents during Rome's fourth extreme heat wave.

Spin Time Resident Maria Cabrera told Al Jazeera English, "Many of us, me included, were on our feet for 40 hours without sleeping because we didn't know how it would end. We were anxious. We don't have anything grand; it's not a luxury home. We put up four walls. But for us, that is home, and we want to go back in."

The lockdown has intensified a long-running struggle over the building's ownership and future. A December 2025 court ruling reportedly ordered the Italian state to pay €21.18 million in arrears, together with a further €207,000 per month, to InvestiRE SGR, the private real-estate fund that owns the property.

Spin Time Labs occupies a former government building that once belonged to the state's INPDAP agency (National Social Security Institute for Public

Administration Employees, now dissolved). After the agency abandoned the property in 2010, the housing rights movement Action occupied it in October 2013. Over the following years, the occupation developed into Spin Time Labs, combining housing with a wide range of social and cultural activities. Residents from approximately 25 nationalities lived in the building, which also housed a theatre, a classical orchestra, medical services and other community initiatives.

The project became internationally known in 2019 when Pope Francis sent his almoner, Cardinal Konrad Krajewski, to restore electricity to the building after it had been disconnected by Acea energy company.

The cardinal's stunt was part of the Vatican's attempt to scrub its image after several high-profile Vatican real estate scandals, including the "Affittopoli" (celebrity rent-gate scandal), the London luxury property investment failure, and the Church's exorbitant expenditures in preparation for the Church's Jubilee Year festivities.

The far-right Meloni government immediately weaponized the Spin Time fire safety scare to demand the permanent eviction of the Spin Time Lab residents from the building. Fabio Rampelli, vice president of the Chamber of Deputies representing Fratelli d'Italia, stated unequivocally that "the fire that broke out at Spin Time confirms the need to address, without further delays, a situation that has gone on for too long," and emphasized that it remains entirely "unacceptable that men, women, and children continue to live" in an illegal occupation.

Joining the push to block reentry of the residents, Senator Maurizio Gasparri attacked the local administration of Rome Mayor Roberto Gualtieri (Democratic Party) via Agenzia Stampa Italia, asserting, "With Gualtieri's PD administration,

illegality becomes the rule for those who govern Rome ... Now that a fire has occurred, the safety conditions, which were perhaps always missing—no longer exist to tolerate this occupation.”

Meloni’s crackdown on the Spin Time Labs building is part of a coordinated “law and order” legislative campaign designed to systematically dismantle Italy’s squatter networks, criminalize social occupations and prioritize private property rights.

The Spin Time case therefore fits into a broader political effort to dismantle housing occupations and other forms of working class resistance to the housing crisis.

Gualtieri responded cynically by saying, “We have put forward a proposal to purchase the property and, to allow the return of people as quickly as possible, also a solution for the intermediate phase.”

Gualtieri has been mayor since 2021, and only in the face of the humanitarian disaster has he been motivated to find a solution for the Spin Time residents. More importantly, it is well documented that the Democratic Party is the architect of the current housing crisis.

The PD government of Matteo Renzi approved the *Salva Roma* (Save Rome) decree that laid the groundwork for an unprecedented assault on public workers and services, as well as the mass sell-off of public buildings. That sell-off is the direct origin of the situation at Spin Time. A state agency abandoned the building; the state sold it to private capital, and now the state deploys police to enforce the buyer’s property rights against the residents.

Since Rome’s bankruptcy crisis in 2014, there has been virtually zero budget allocated to build new public dwellings. Combined, the municipal government (*Comune di Roma*) and the regional housing agency (*ATER Roma*) own a total public housing stock of 76,000 units (28,000 communal and 48,000 regional), far short of what is needed. As a result, the waiting list for social housing has climbed to over 18,500 families waiting for an open unit.

The statement issued by opposition Alliance of Greens and Left (AVS) co-leader Nicola Fratoianni after meeting with Spin Time residents exemplifies the pseudo-left’s political function. Fratoianni calls for “all parties involved” to “work together,” thanks the Rome city council for “moving in the right direction,” and declares that “Spin Time is a common good for Rome.”

The AVS is the latest electoral vehicle of the political tradition that stretches from *Rifondazione Comunista* through SEL and *Sinistra Italiana*, the same forces that provided parliamentary cover for austerity, entered coalition governments with the centre-left, and whose function has always been to channel working class opposition back into the defence of the capitalist state.

Not one word of the AVS’ official response challenges the property relations that have left 400 people sleeping on asphalt in 45-degree Celsius temperatures. The entire statement is an appeal to the very institutions—the municipality, the judiciary, the capitalist state—that created the crisis, asking them to manage it more humanely. This is not solidarity. It is the political management of social opposition, ensuring that the anger of those who have lost their homes is channeled back into the framework of the property regime rather than directed against it.

The Spin Time occupation was born because the existing housing system failed working people, and the pseudo-left have enabled the government to shirk its responsibilities. Spin Time residents should not be romanticized as having solved the housing crisis through occupation, nor should they be demonized as criminals. Their struggle is an expression of a much broader social contradiction.

The fire at Spin Time should become the starting point for building a rank-and-file committee of affected tenants, housing activists and workers across Rome (outside the control of the trade-union bureaucracy and all capitalist parties) to demand the expropriation without compensation of *InvestiRE SGR* and other real estate funds holding vacant or underutilized properties, with these properties converted into publicly owned housing under the democratic control of residents themselves—not municipal or regional state bureaucracies.



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