

Earthquake on Italian island of Ischia: Grief is mixed with anger

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Two dead, 42 injured and 2,600 homeless—this is the terrible result of the recent earthquake on August 21 on the Italian island of Ischia in the Gulf of Naples. The quake occurred almost exactly one year after the disastrous earthquake in Abruzzo, which claimed the lives of 299 people on August 24 last year.

Compared to this, the earthquake that shook Ischia last Monday just before 9 p.m. was relatively weak. Registering 4 on the Richter scale, it should not have caused buildings to collapse and whole communities to lose their homes.

“It is not normal for a magnitude 4 earthquake to bring down houses and lead to the evacuation of hospitals,” commented Egidio Grasso, head of the Regional Geological Association. Francesco Peduto, president of the National Geologic Council, said it was alarming that “people died from a tremor of this strength.” Had more time and resources been put into prevention, Peduto said, it would not have come close to such consequences.

The journal *Spectrum of Science* writes: “The fact the shock was only around magnitude 4, about one thousandth of the energy of the devastating quake at Amatrice in August 2016, is a bit bewildering. One of the richest countries in the world cannot manage to protect itself against a truly harmless natural event.”

What the comments do not mention is that there are earthquake-proof buildings in the affected region. However, they have only been built where the “rich and beautiful” live and go on holiday, or where wealthy property owners have the say. The grand hotels and tourist resorts by the sea, famous for their luxury and quality, experienced virtually no damage on Monday. These hotels, in which German Chancellor Angela Merkel spends her holidays, have undoubtedly been built to be earthquake resistant.

This proves that the destruction was not the product of a natural catastrophe but of the class nature of capitalist society.

Those who are not so rich must live with the ignorance and corruption of the building authorities and the Mafia structures in the construction industry. According to research carried out by the Legambiente environmental association, the Campania region, which contains the Naples area, is especially riven by corruption in the building industry. The consequences are now appearing again in the residential areas on Ischia in which working class families live. Numerous houses collapsed there, with schools and public buildings being turned into ruins in a matter of seconds.

The places most affected are Casamicciola and Lacco Ameno in the north of the island. These should be the best protected in the whole of Italy because they are situated in the Flegrean islands, a region of high volcanic activity near Mount Vesuvius. Over 130 years ago, in Casamicciola, the 1883 earthquake caused the complete destruction of the village and killed more than 2,000 people. The danger of earthquakes is well known here.

This is why a large school complex had been fundamentally redesigned in recent years by the Special Fund for Earthquake-Resistant Construction. The school was inaugurated in September 2016, and was considered “earthquake-proof” ever since. With the first weak quake on Monday, the building was again badly affected. Significant damage to the building structure has been established. The walls have moved several centimetres from the foundation, cornices and gables have crumbled, the concrete lintel over the entrance gate is cracked, and inside, everything is covered in plaster and glass shards. Starting school after the summer holidays is now unthinkable.

The school is just one example of many. In the same place, the town hall and an observatory were only recently renovated from the earthquake fund. Both buildings had to be evacuated, and since then entry to both has been forbidden. During the earthquake, the electricity supply failed for wide sections of the population. The hospital was also affected and had to be temporarily evacuated.

This was also very similar in Amatrice last year, where a recently renovated school and a hospital collapsed. A church tower, which had also been renovated by the earthquake fund, collapsed and buried a family of four in the ruins. In Amatrice, the investigating attorney concluded that corruption and the almost unbelievable indifference of the authorities dominated large parts of the construction industry, so that many buildings were built “with more sand than cement.” This has obviously not changed to this day.

More than 21 million people live in earthquake-stricken regions in Italy. They are sitting on a time bomb that can go off at any moment. However, governments of all parties have failed to implement effective safeguards. From Silvio Berlusconi, Mario Monti, Enrico Letta, Matteo Renzi to Paolo Gentiloni, every government has concentrated for years on the interests of the ruling class. In the name of the corporations and the Italian and European banks, they have implemented austerity measures and social attacks. In agreement with the EU, they had closed the borders to immigrants and provided the army and the police in the Mediterranean and the interior of the country with new powers and weapons.

For working people in the earthquake regions, they have at most a few fine-sounding words. “The government stands on the side of those affected!” declared incumbent premier Gentiloni on Tuesday after the quake. His predecessor, Matteo Renzi, had said the same a year ago in Amatrice. At the time, Renzi had promised everything would be rebuilt quickly according to new, earthquake-proof guidelines.

The result of these promises could be seen on Thursday, August 24, the anniversary of the earthquake disaster in Abruzzo. While in Amatrice, Accumoli, Arquata and Pescara del Tronto the communities were thinking of the victims, their mourning was mixed with anger: after a year, not even the debris of the previous quake has been removed, let alone buildings rebuilt.

One year after Renzi’s promises, thousands still live in shipping containers, caravans, hotels, or with relatives far from home. Of nearly 4,000 prefabricated houses needed for those currently homeless, only 456 have been erected.



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