

Chattanooga school bus tragedy: The human cost of capitalist decay

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The Chattanooga school bus crash that took the lives of six elementary schoolchildren last Monday has called attention to the tragic cost of budget cuts, privatization of public services, and the daily risks facing the most vulnerable sections of the population.

Three dozen children from the Woodmore Elementary School in Chattanooga, a city of 175,000, the fourth-largest in the state of Tennessee, were headed home when their bus crashed into a tree and was nearly sliced in half.

Five of the children died at the scene and a sixth fatality was recorded in the hospital. The dead included 6-year-old D'Myunn Brown, his mother's only child, and Zyaira Mateen, also 6, whose two sisters survived and were hospitalized. A dozen other students remain hospitalized, six in intensive care with serious head and spinal injuries.

The bus driver, 24-year-old Johnthony Walker, was arrested and charged Tuesday with five counts of vehicular homicide, reckless endangerment and reckless driving. Authorities said they were awaiting the results of alcohol and drug tests on the driver.

Also on Tuesday morning, representatives of the National Transportation Safety Board arrived to conduct an investigation. They will be reviewing videos from two cameras on board the bus, as well as a data recorder.

According to the arrest affidavit, Walker "lost control of the bus and swerved off the roadway to the right, striking an elevated driveway and mailbox, swerved to the left and began to overturn, striking a telephone pole and a tree." It took rescuers two hours to complete the removal of injured students from the mangled bus.

As with all such tragedies, they must be considered within a broader social context and lessons drawn. The school bus tragedy was not simply an accident. The

social circumstances indicate that, whatever blame may be attached to the driver in this case, other individuals and institutions bear even greater responsibility.

Walker's mother, Gwenevere Cook, told CNN that she grieved for the victims, but added, "I am asking for compassion also for my son." She said he had called her immediately after the accident and said he had tried to rescue children after the crash. Walker had obtained his commercial driver's license only last April. Two months ago he was involved in a minor accident between his school bus and a car, and was cited for failure to yield the right of way.

Significantly, the bus driver also had a second job, at Amazon, one he had apparently been forced to keep in order to care for his 3-year-old son. A co-worker at Amazon reported that Walker was "respectable" and "a very nice person," although he often came to work tired.

Thus, in the current low-wage economy, the safety of small children is entrusted to exploited workers who may have trouble staying awake.

A second issue arising from the Chattanooga crash is that of privatization of public services, school bus transportation in particular. Every day 25 million schoolchildren are transported by 500,000 school buses, according to a report filed by the Associated Press. Much of this transportation has been privatized, contracted out by cities and counties to companies like Durham School Services, the Chicago-based company for whom Johnthony Walker worked.

Most often the privatization serves cost-cutting purposes, and the private firms are usually not supervised as closely as local school boards and municipalities when it comes to the screening of drivers or their training before they get on the road. Durham, contracted by Hamilton County, Tennessee, currently

transports about one million schoolchildren around the country. Although most recently given a “satisfactory” safety rating by the Federal Motor Carriers Safety Administration, Durham received a total of ten “driver fitness violations” over a two-year period.

Yet another important element involved is the absence of seat belts on most school buses. According to the AP report, only six states, including California, New York, Florida and Texas, require seat belts on such buses, and cost concerns are at issue in the resistance to adding them. The price of lap and shoulder belts is estimated at \$7,000-\$10,000 per bus.

Some have pointed to the low accident rate, with a total of 53 fatalities in the 10-year period between 2005 and 2014, as evidence that seat belts are not needed. Also, some bus drivers reportedly claim that seat belts could complicate rescues in crashes if students became trapped inside during a fire.

Last year, however, the head of the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration declared that there was no question that seat belts would save lives. Ten states considered legislation in the past year mandating the use of seat belts, but none enacted it. Tennessee had considered a bill on seat belts after two students and a school aide died in a 2014 crash near the city of Knoxville, but the legislation didn’t make it out of committee.

Various elected officials, including Tennessee Senator Bob Corker and Representative Chuck Fleischmann, whose district includes Chattanooga, quickly made their usual expressions of concern and added their prayers for the young victims and their families.

It is easy for these hypocrites to issue such statements, but they are defenders and representatives of a system that assigns the lowest priority to the safety of schoolchildren on the road, just as they consign the vast majority of the working class to inferior and cash-starved schools.



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