

Driver plunges bus into a Chinese reservoir, killing 21

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A tragic bus incident that led to the death of 21 people, including the driver, gives a glimpse into the mounting social tensions in China. On July 7, Zhang, a 52-year-old bus driver, deliberately drove his vehicle and its passengers through a roadside guardrail and plunged into the Hongshan Reservoir, located in the city of Anshun, Guizhou in southwest China.

In the video footage of the incident, the dam wall was divided into six traffic lanes, three in each direction. About a minute before the incident, the bus was moving very slowly on the outermost lane, with all five lanes occupied with busy traffic. After about half a minute, the bus came to a halt for ten seconds for no obvious reason. Then, when the traffic on other lanes started to thin out, the bus made a sudden and sharp 90-degree turn, cut through the other five lanes, and plunged into the reservoir.

Even though dozens of people and divers from Guizhou Fire and Rescue Corps searched for passengers in the reservoir, 21 people were killed and another 15 injured.

While this tragedy triggered wide discussions on the internet, the first report on its cause appeared in *Caixin*, a Chinese news journal. The investigative report into the background of the bus driver indicated that he had deliberately driven the bus into the reservoir.

According to *Caixin*, the bus driver, Zhang, originally worked in the diesel industry in Anshun before becoming a bus driver. He used to live in housing assigned to him as part of the benefits for workers at state-owned factories—a legacy stemming from the period before capitalist restoration in China. Even though such housing technically belonged to the factories, many workers and their families have been living there for decades and considered the places as their own.

Zhang had been living in factory housing until 2016, when he moved to an apartment that belonged to his sister. On the morning of the incident, Zhang learned that his old home at the diesel factory was being torn down. He hastily went to the site but was not allowed to go inside. *Caixin* reporters later found out that Zhang's old house had been completely torn down. At the site, there were only piles of bricks and, buried under them, a TV, a sofa, and a bed.

The forced demolition of homes has been widespread in China for decades, causing conflicts and confrontations, sometimes violent and even deadly ones. As part of urbanization in China, the State Council implemented the *Regulation on the Dismantlement of Urban Houses* on June 13, 2001. This was replaced on January 21, 2011 with *Housing expropriation and compensation regulations on state owned land*, which controlled the reorganization and re-planning of state-owned land, including the demolition of old residential houses.

House demolitions have sometimes been carried out without any previous notifications to the residents or without previous negotiation of proper compensation, leading to forced displacement and physical confrontations.

Caixin revealed the difficulties that Zhang faced in his life. The state-owned bus company where he worked, the Anshun Public Traffic General Company, combined two privately-run companies. After the merger, all drivers had to sign a new contract. *Caixin*'s interviews with bus drivers revealed that their monthly salaries went from about 5,000 RMB (\$US715) to 3,000 RMB. After the COVID-19 pandemic, their salaries dropped to 2,000 or even 1,000 RMB per month, barely a living wage.

On July 12, five days after the incident, the police in

Anshun announced the result of the official investigation, confirming the driver had intentionally caused the crash and providing further details.

According to the report, Zhang signed an agreement on June 8 with the local Bureau of Housing and Construction to receive 72,542.94 RMB (\$10,363) as compensation for his demolished 40-square-meter house at the diesel factory, three times lower than the average price for second-hand housing in the local district. He never claimed this compensation.

Zhang had also been applying for state-owned or collectively-owned housing since June, but his application was not approved. On the morning of the incident, Zhang called the hotline for government service to express his opposition to the demolition of his house as well as the denial of his application for new housing.

During his shift that morning, Zhang sent a voice message to his girlfriend, saying that he was tired of this world. Then, a few minutes before the incident, Zhang took a drink from his bottle, which was later confirmed to be liquor. The police report concluded that Zhang deliberately drove the bus into the reservoir due to “discontent with his life in general and to the demolition of his house.”

What happened to Zhang reflects the plight of millions of workers: deindustrialization, forced displacement, constant inroads into wages and living conditions have been intensified by the pandemic and bureaucratic and often corrupt decisions about housing and other services.

The Chinese Communist Party regime is well aware of this brewing social cauldron. Incapable of resolving the social problems facing working people, it responds with police-state measures and expanding their surveillance apparatus to try to prevent an eruption of social discontent.

On July 9, before any investigation had been completed into crash, the Beijing Public Transportation Group began conducting background checks into all its bus drivers. *Phoenix New Media* report that this measure was an emergency response to Anshun’s bus incident.

Management intends to identify, follow up on, and monitor all drivers who could “potentially be involved in any conflicts.” What it will not, and cannot do, is provide decent wages, secure jobs, proper housing and

other essentials.



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