

Two dead after 26-year-old mother jumps off Tennessee overpass holding infant

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A ghastly event that took place in the early morning hours of Monday, January 4 just north of Jackson, Tennessee, highlights the degree of social misery and despair that has overtaken untold numbers of the world's population amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Around 12:30 a.m. local time, callers from the gas station northeast of Jackson, in the western part of the state, informed 911 dispatchers that a woman had just tried to crash her car into a gas pump. Then, calls came in from witnesses saying the woman exited the vehicle carrying a child and proceeded to walk to the edge of the nearby overpass before disappearing from sight.

The woman and child's fate were confirmed minutes later, when a truck driver moving westbound on Interstate 40 called 911 reporting something had hit his truck. When the authorities responded to the scene, they found two people dead on the roadway. The woman callers reported seeing has been identified as Tonisha Lashay Barker. She was 26. The child was later identified by relatives as her 21-month-old son, Jonathan Jones.

The incident remains under investigation by the Madison County Sheriff's Office. In a statement the day of the incident County Sheriff John Mehr said, "It's heartbreaking to have that situation this morning, especially when someone loses their life. It's hard on everybody, especially the driver of the vehicle. It's just a bad situation that we hate to ever receive."

Commenting on the investigation, MCSO Public Information Officer Tom Maples said Barker "evidently chose to jump off with the child in her hands." Barker's grandmother told local Memphis TV station WREG that Barker was depressed in the period leading up to the incident on the highway overpass. Barker, a 2018 science graduate from Tennessee State University, had recently lost her job at a state

COVID-19 testing site in December.

On social media, friends remembered Barker as a reliable and caring person who was there to help others in times of hardship. Her family said they were shocked by the incident and did not realize the extent of her depression.

While the immediate motivation of Barker's actions has yet to be fully explained, the social backdrop within which the young mother chose to end both her son's and her own life are an indictment of the socially criminal role played by the representatives of the capitalist class in both the Democratic and Republican parties and their response to the pandemic.

As of January 9, just over 1 million people in Tennessee had filed new unemployment claims since March 15, which was about when the coronavirus pandemic took off in that state. Barker's LinkedIn page still listed her job as a medical screener employed by the Shelby County government. She was new in the position, having started in June 2020. Her previous professional experience is listed as a lab tech with Aegis Sciences for three months between June and August 2018.

During the period in which Barker was employed as a medical screener at a county test site, the total number of COVID-19 cases in Tennessee rose from around 25,000 to numbers approaching half a million confirmed cases, which the state surpassed on December 19. In Shelby County alone, where the city of Memphis is located, confirmed COVID-19 cases rose from around 5,000 at the start of June to over 63,000 by the Christmas holiday.

As of the beginning of this week, Tennessee has a total case count of 710,000 cases. The daily new case rate is over 1,500 and the daily number of new deaths is over 100 per day. The middle and eastern portions of

Tennessee have experienced similar explosions in new cases and deaths.

Although the state's Republican governor Bill Lee has touted the rollout of new vaccines and their distribution by Memphis-based FedEx, along with United Parcel Service, the vaccine administration efforts have been moving at a crawl. As of January 26, only 1.58 percent of the state's residents have been fully vaccinated. This amounts to about 105,000 people, based on state and health department data compiled by *The Tennessean*.

Furthermore, even though the state began vaccinating people on December 16, only 4.7 percent of the state's population, or about 313,000 people, have received at least one dose of vaccine. A second dose about three weeks later is required for most to complete their vaccination.

Meanwhile, as the World Socialist Web Site has noted, virtually all the major employers in the Memphis area, from FedEx to GM and Volkswagen, have resumed production close to or exceeding pre-pandemic levels. FedEx has benefited strongly from the pandemic-related surge in online shopping and package delivery.

On January 3, the day before Barker's suicide, the WWSW reported on workers in Shelby County being forced to choose between their job and their health. A study conducted by the region's COVID-19 Task Force found three-quarters of workers infected with COVID during November went back to work for at least one day after testing positive.

In Shelby County, the test positivity rate is 9.55 percent, indicating the government's testing and contact tracing efforts are increasingly unable to contain the spread of the virus. As of August, the whole state of Tennessee had just 1,700 contact tracers, according to the state Commissioner of Health. As a county front line medical screener herself, Barker undoubtedly was impacted by the immense pressures of this miserable situation.

"People are more depressed than usual. We usually get three or four hundred screenings a month; last month alone we had over 5,000," Tom Starling, the president and CEO of Nashville-based Mental Health America of the MidSouth, told local news outlet WREG. Starling added that the first weeks of the New Year following the holiday season are a particularly stressful time for many people.

The pandemic has created a situation where surging numbers of young people report being depressed, anxious, or having suicidal thoughts. A recent study by a group of universities found the number of young people in the US aged 18-24 with depressive symptoms has multiplied tenfold compared to before the pandemic.

In Tennessee, mental health funding has been a political football for the past year, especially funding for mental health resources in schools. After proposing to cut \$250 million in annual funding from the state's mental health trust fund last February, Lee's administration was able to push through the cuts, citing the need to balance the budget.

Workers are rightfully distressed and outraged by the horrific and criminal handling of the pandemic by the ruling class. The opposition to the ruling class's policies of austerity and herd immunity has found its most politically articulated form in those workers who formed the Tennessee Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee. The committee calls for the spending of the state's "rainy day" fund and CARES Act funding to help achieve precisely the goals of fighting the virus and ensuring people do not have to choose between a paycheck and their lives.

Workers must take up a consciously anti-capitalist and socialist opposition to the socially criminal policy of herd immunity in order to reverse the mass death and social catastrophe afflicting society due to the subordination of human lives to profit by the ruling elite.



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