

Baltimore-area bridge collapses following collision with cargo vessel

Tom Hall

26 March 2024

The Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore, Maryland collapsed into the Patapsco River early Tuesday morning after a massive container ship crashed into one of the bridge's main supporting columns.

Eight roadway repairmen were working on the bridge at the time of the collapse. Two were rescued, including one with serious injuries. The remaining six are still missing and presumed dead. All six victims were immigrant workers from Mexico and Central America who worked for a contractor doing repairs on the bridge's roadway.

On Tuesday evening, divers stopped their search-and-rescue efforts due to icy cold water temperatures, near-zero visibility underwater and the dangers posed by mangled metal structure and the potential that containers could fall off the damaged ship. Investigators from the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) will reportedly travel to the ship on Wednesday to conduct interviews with the 22 crew members on the vessel who have all been accounted for.

The bridge is 1.6 miles long (2.6 kilometers) and is the second-longest in the metro Baltimore area. It crosses a key shipping channel used by all shipping traffic in and out of the Port of Baltimore, which is now shut down for the time being. The Port of Baltimore is the largest port for automobiles in the US, as well as a major port for coal and agricultural equipment. The bridge is used by 30,000 people each day, and many rely on it to get to work, including at the major industrial area of Sparrows Point, just east of the bridge.

Details of the catastrophe are still emerging, but what is known so far is that the 95,000-ton container ship MV *Dali*, flying the Singaporean flag, lost power on approach to the bridge at 1:30 in the morning local time, less than a half hour into its voyage from Baltimore to Colombo, Sri Lanka.

At that point, the ship was under the control of a local pilot, whose job it was to bring ships through the channel in order to avoid accidents such as what occurred. It is unknown as of this writing whether the ship's steering was affected by the power outage. The ship dropped its port anchor at some point, but it is not known whether this occurred before or after the collision.

According to a port livestream capturing the accident, power appeared to have been restored only seconds before the collision. The *Dali* then struck the concrete column, also known as a pier, which rests on soil underwater and is part of the foundation. This caused the entire structure to collapse almost instantly.

Officials say traffic onto the bridge was halted after a distress call from the ship. Livestream footage, however, showed several vehicles passing over the bridge only moments before its collapse. Sonar also revealed multiple vehicles in the bay.

More details will emerge in the coming days, but it is already the worst bridge collapse due to a ship collision in nearly a half-century in the US. In 1980, the Skyway Bridge in Tampa, Florida collapsed after being struck by a 20,000-ton freighter, causing the deaths of 35 people.

In particular, the role of Maersk, the global shipping giant which

chartered the *Dali*, and the ship's Singaporean operator Synergy Group, will come into clearer focus. The Synergy Group has been implicated in three deadly accidents since 2018, including a collision last year in the Philippines which killed two sailors. The *Dali* itself was recently cited for a propulsion issue and was involved in another crash in 2016.

What is certain at this point is that totally inadequate safety measures, inevitably the result of cost-cutting and profiteering, played a central role in the disaster. In addition to issues surrounding the ship's systems, there were few safety measures in place to prevent collisions from occurring with the bridge. There were no tug boats to accompany ships passing under it, for example, to assist with maneuvering in case of a loss of steering.

The engineering measures taken to protect the bridge itself against collisions also appear to have been totally inadequate. "There are donut-shaped objects known as bridge pier bumpers that can minimize the shock when you have this kind of a hit," civil engineering Professor Hota GangaRao told *WVUToday*. "They're not common in the United States, but they're quite common in China, and my lab has helped design a composite bumper, which has a better shock-absorbing capability." Similar objects were installed when the Skyway bridge was rebuilt.

"There may have to be somewhat more stringent specifications to account for these kinds of incidents," he concluded. "It could be time to accept that more regulation is going to cost more money. While we cannot totally prevent accidents like these, at least we can minimize the damage, not only from the bridge design point of view, but also by developing novel bumpers for surrounding bridge piers."

The state of Maryland was reportedly planning major upgrades to the bridge that included protections for the piers. "Starting in the summer of 2025," Reuters reported, "the Maryland transportation agency planned to replace the bridge's deck and install a 'fiberglass jacket protection system at the water pier columns,' an agency report says."

Profit-driven disasters

The Francis Scott Key Bridge was completed in 1977, before the advent of much larger ocean-going freighters, which form the backbone of world trade today. The largest ship ever to visit the Port of Baltimore, the *Ever Max*, weighs more than 163,000 tons and can carry more than 15,000 Twenty-Foot Equivalents (TEUs) cargo containers.

Such disasters are inevitable in a society where all decisions are totally subordinated to profit interests. Last Monday, March 18, the 145,000-ton *YM Witness* knocked out four cranes following a collision at the Turkish port of Evyap. The same day, a worker died at the Port of Los Angeles after being struck by a forklift.

In 2021, the 220,000-ton *Ever Given* struck the side of the Suez Canal,

blocking one of the world's most critical shipping lanes for nearly a week. While the economic impact of the Baltimore disaster is not as severe, it still has substantial repercussions for US shipping on the East Coast.

While such disasters are a global reality, they are particularly prominent in the US. The rational and progressive use of the resources of the world's richest country is stymied by the unprecedented concentration of wealth in the hands of the billionaires and massive corporations. According to a 2018 report to the World Association for Waterborne Transport Infrastructure, 18 of the world's 35 ship or barge collisions with bridges between 1960 and 2015 took place in the United States.

The 2021 Infrastructure Report Card by the American Society of Civil Engineers gave America's bridges a "C" grade, noting that 42 percent of the country's bridges are over 50 years old, and 7.5 percent are in poor condition. The estimated backlog of repairs is \$125 billion, but at current rates all currently necessary repairs will not be completed until 2071.

Cover-up already under way

On Saturday, President Biden signed a spending bill providing for six and a half times that amount, or \$825 billion, in military spending for just the next year, underscoring that limitless resources that are being redirected towards war.

On Tuesday afternoon, Biden spoke for a little more than five minutes, during which he pledged that the federal government would front the entire cost of rebuilding the bridge and returning the port to normal operations as quickly as possible. Predictably, Biden said nothing about the lack of safety precautions on the bridge and the otherwise miserable state of infrastructure in the US.

He also has a long record of preventing corporations from paying for the disasters they create. Last month, Biden visited East Palestine, Ohio for only the first time, more than a year after a train derailment and deliberate and completely unnecessary release of toxic chemicals by Norfolk Southern that poisoned the entire town. To date, not a single person has been held criminally responsible for the disaster, made inevitable by relentless cost-cutting across the entire railroad industry, and residents have been largely left on their own.

To the extent that promised federal assistance materializes, this would be more due to geopolitical than humanitarian considerations. The closure of the Port of Baltimore for any significant length of time would jeopardize the global operations of US automakers, which are seen as key to the growing trade war with China. The continued operation of the ports is also a major military question, as they are used to transfer weapons and equipment to battlefields across the world.

Biden's domestic policy is dominated by preparations for a third world war, as evidenced by his repeated invocations of the so-called "Arsenal of Democracy," or the war economy during World War II.

Far from fighting for "democracy," US imperialism's aim was then and is now the domination of the world by American capitalism. A decisive element of war production was the trade unions signing the "no-strike pledge," which Biden is replicating today by working closely with the union bureaucracy.

It is significant that the disaster in Baltimore comes shortly before the expiration of the contract for East Coast dockworkers at the end of September. The International Longshoremen's Association (ILA), while claiming it is prepared to strike, is no doubt in close touch with the White House, just as its West Coast counterpart in the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) was before imposing a sellout last year.

Jerry White, SEP candidate for US vice president, responds

In response to Tuesday's disaster, the Socialist Equality Party's vice presidential candidate Jerry White issued a statement which declared, in part:

Tuesday's collapse of the Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore and the deaths of at least six workers is a disaster that exposes the real state of American capitalism. The corporate and government officials whose negligence led to this disaster must be held fully accountable, and all those affected by this disaster must be made whole. The surviving family members of the six immigrant workers who were tragically killed must be provided economic security for the rest of their lives.

Workers can have no confidence that a real investigation into the causes of this disaster will be carried out by the Biden administration, the governor of Maryland, the myriad of federal and state agencies or the trade union bureaucracies ... That is why I call for rank-and-file maritime, dock, construction and public sector workers to organize an independent investigation in collaboration with trusted engineers and safety experts who are dedicated to bringing out the truth.

... The catastrophe Tuesday morning expresses the collision between the needs of a modern, mass society and the outmoded capitalist system. The Port of Baltimore is a crucial node in the world economy, whose growth has made possible incredible advances in productivity as well as in science and technology, all of which could be used to make such disasters a thing of the past.

Instead, the tens of trillions of dollars created by the global working class are used to enrich the corporate oligarchy and defend its interests through wars abroad and repression at home...

The question is not a lack of resources, but who controls them. The giant shipping companies and major corporations must be transformed into public utilities, collectively owned and democratically controlled by the working class. The ill-gotten fortunes of the financial oligarchy must expropriated and the military industrial complex dismantled. By taking political power into its own hands, the working class will be able to allocate the necessary resources to upgrade and construct bridges, ports, roadways, airports and other critical infrastructure necessary for a thriving, safe and sustainable world economy.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact