

# The Baltimore bridge disaster: A product of profit-driven cost-cutting

**Tom Hall****27 March 2024**

The collapse of the Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore is an event which has shocked the world's public. In the course of a few seconds, the container ship MV *Dali* lost power and drifted into a support column, or "pier," causing one of the biggest bridges in a major American city to come crashing down into the Patapsco River.

As of this writing, six maintenance workers who were on the bridge at the time are presumed dead after search-and-rescue teams were called off Tuesday night. All were immigrant workers from Mexico and Central America. The enormous outpouring of grief and sympathy for the workers and their families contrasts sharply with the vicious anti-immigrant atmosphere being continually whipped up in official political circles.

The disaster is the type of event which exposes deeper social realities. The collision between the container ship and the bridge has also exposed the collision between private profit and the needs of a modern society, which has at its disposal the technical and economic resources to prevent such disasters.

The enormous growth in world trade over the past half-century has led to the emergence of a unified world economy, which has made possible immense increases in productivity through the international coordination of production. One of the main backbones of this economy is shipping, made cheaper than ever before through technical advances such as automation, containerization and the construction of the largest ships in history. The *Dali* itself, of relatively modest size by modern standards at "only" 95,000 gross tons, was en route to Colombo, Sri Lanka, on the other side of the planet.

In comments to the press, Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg declared that "a bridge like this one, completed in the late 1970s, was simply not made to withstand a direct impact on a critical support pier from a vessel [of this size], orders of magnitude bigger than cargo ships that were in service in that region at the time that the bridge was first built."

This is true, but that only raises the question why the

bridge, which sees ships the size of the *Dali* pass by every day, was not upgraded to deal with this danger. Bridges around the world routinely sink the piers into submerged islands, or use "dolphins" and other barriers to limit or deflect such impacts. Following a similar collision that destroyed the Skyway Bridge in Tampa, Florida in 1980, killing 35 people, engineers rebuilt the bridge with such countermeasures in place.

The issue is not a lack of technical ability, but the fact that the resources needed to ensure the safety of this global infrastructure are used instead to defend and enrich the financial oligarchy which controls it. According to one 2021 estimate by the American Society of Civil Engineers, America faces a backlog of \$125 billion in needed bridge repairs. Nearly half of America's bridges are more than 50 years old and over 7 percent are in disrepair.

But only this Saturday, President Biden signed a \$1.2 trillion spending bill, two-thirds of which, or \$825 billion, is devoted to the military. No expense is spared when it comes to the criminal enterprises of US imperialism, which have killed millions around the world, including tens of thousands in Gaza and hundreds of thousands in Ukraine. And any time Wall Street runs out of money, the government is there with trillions of dollars virtually overnight.

As always, ruthless cost-cutting and even outright corporate criminality likely played a direct role in the collision. The *Dali*'s sudden loss of power raises serious questions about the condition of the ship, which was already involved in a collision in 2016 and recently cited for propulsion issues.

Maersk, the global shipping company which contracted the ship, was also recently cited by the Labor Department for an illegal policy aimed at silencing whistleblowers, according to pro-Democratic news site The Lever. That comes amid the massive and ongoing scandal at Boeing over manufacturing and design flaws that have led to several disasters involving its 737-MAX aircraft. The unexplained "suicide" earlier this month of Boeing whistleblower John Barnett is an indication of the total ruthlessness with which

the ruling class is prepared to defend its interests.

Because so much of its wealth is squandered by the corporate oligarchy, disasters such as what took place in Baltimore are a recurring reality in the “richest country on earth.” One after another, from Hurricane Katrina in 2005, to the BP oil spill in 2010, the Flint water crisis which began in 2014, the East Palestine derailment in 2023 and the ongoing scandal at Boeing, corporate profiteering and neglect of infrastructure have led to disaster. Every time, it is the working class that has been made to shoulder the cost, while the government moves to shield the corporate criminals from any liability.

The most horrible expression of this is the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. The political establishment began winding down the inadequate public health measures in response to COVID-19 almost as soon as they began in early 2020, under the mantra, “The cure can’t be worse than the disease.” Both the government and the corporate media falsely claim the pandemic is long over, even though COVID-19 has killed at least 1,000 Americans every week since last August.

While spending on safety has been starved of funds, the ruling class is investing tens of billions in new technologies and supply chains aimed at cutting jobs through automation. In the shipping industry, massive investments in port facilities are aimed at eliminating supply chain bottlenecks that are not only threatened by accidents made inevitable by cost-cutting, but that could be used by the working class to its advantage during work stoppages.

Massive investments are currently underway in the Port of Brunswick, Georgia, which will lead to this small city supplanting Baltimore as the country’s largest auto port. Similar investments are being made at ports across the country, in particular, the South Atlantic region.

As with the pandemic, the ruling class will view the Baltimore bridge collapse as an exclusively economic event. The closure of the Port of Baltimore jeopardizes the global operations of US auto companies, which are locked in bitter struggle with their Chinese rivals over control of the emerging electric vehicle market. The bridge itself was also an important artery in the region’s economy and connected to the Sparrows Point industrial area.

There are also military implications to the closure of a major US port, which is critical to moving weapons and equipment overseas. The Biden administration is repeatedly invoking the economic mobilization during World War II to emphasize that it is aiming to place the whole American economy on a war footing for a new world war directed against Russia and China.

The trade union bureaucracy is a key extension of the military-industrial complex. The contract for more than

40,000 dockworkers on the East Coast, including at Baltimore, expires at the end of September. The International Longshoremen’s Association (ILA), in order to get in front of deep rank-and-file anger, has pledged to strike if a new deal is not in place by then. But there can be no doubt that it is working with the Biden administration to impose yet another sellout, as occurred last year on the West Coast docks. The union bureaucracy’s radical posturing mirrors the claims by the Teamsters and the United Auto Workers before they rammed through deals last year which paved the way for sweeping job cuts.

To the extent that anything is done, it will be pitched to returning economic operations to normal as quickly as possible. In the immediate instance, cargo will likely be rerouted from Baltimore to other ports through massive speedup and forced overtime imposed on workers.

The response of the working class to this disaster, by contrast, must be to fight against the domination of the banks and major corporations. Disasters like this are made inevitable by the anarchy of the capitalist market, driven not by social needs but by private profit interests. The trillions wasted on war and Wall Street must instead be put to use meeting the needs of all.

That requires a struggle by the working class for the socialist reorganization of society. The private ownership of the major corporations must be ended. They must instead be run democratically by the working class itself as public utilities.

The fight for socialism is also a fundamentally international struggle. The *Dali*—crewed by workers from around the world, run by a Singaporean firm, contracted by the Danish company Maersk, and traveling from the United States to Sri Lanka—expresses the fact that all social problems today are international problems, requiring global, not national solutions. Only through the international unity of the working class, on the basis of a socialist program, can such disasters be ended.



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