

Cleanup begins on collapsed Baltimore bridge as Biden places official response in the hands of corporations

Tom Hall
31 March 2024

In the days following last week's collapse of a major Baltimore-area bridge after a collision with a container ship, the Biden administration has responded by shielding those responsible, while acting primarily to uphold the profit interests of American and world capitalism.

The Biden administration has pledged to reopen the Port of Baltimore, the country's largest vehicle port, and limit the impact of the disaster on supply chains. The White House responded immediately by releasing \$60 million in "quick release" Emergency Relief funds, while doing nothing so far to hold responsible the ship's operator Synergy Marine or shipping giant Maersk which contracted the vessel. However, there are indications that the poor condition of the ship, which lost power shortly before the accident, played a major role. The ship was involved in an earlier collision in 2016 in Belgium and was cited last year for propulsion issues.

On Sunday, work finally began on the removal of debris from the Francis Scott Key Bridge from the Patapsco River, the beginning of a lengthy operation. "This work is not going to take hours. This work is not going to take days. This work is not going to take weeks. We have a very long road ahead of us," said Maryland Governor Wes Moore.

The removal of the bridge's remains is not only critical for reopening the shipping channel leading to the Port of Baltimore. It is also necessary for the recovery of the remains of four construction workers, who were on the bridge at the time of collapse, which are likely encased in the wreckage. Two of the eight workers were rescued while the bodies of two more were recovered last week, before recovery operations had to be halted.

However, the capitalist ruling class views the disaster as primarily an economic event. The White House convened two sessions of the National Economic Council's Supply Chain Disruptions Task Force on Wednesday and Friday to discuss the government's "response to supply chain impacts stemming from the collapse of the Francis Scott Key Bridge and partial closure of the Port of Baltimore."

On Thursday, Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg chaired a "stakeholder listening session" involving representatives

from government agencies, major corporations and the union bureaucracy. Significantly, one of the companies in attendance was Maersk.

According to a readout of the Thursday meeting, discussion centered around "how to mitigate current and future supply chain disruptions stemming from the suspension of vessel traffic into and out of the Port of Baltimore." The statement then added that the Department of Transportation "continues to communicate with port, labor, and industry partners to advance collaboration at all levels—borne out of the lessons learned during COVID-driven disruptions."

In other words, the response to the bridge collapse will be modeled after the completely inadequate response to the pandemic, where schools and workplaces have been left open to mass infection and death to ensure the continued flow of profits. The government, having long dismantled all remaining public safety measures, falsely declared the pandemic over, even as it continues to kill more than 1,000 Americans a week. The working class, not the corporate elite responsible for the disaster, will be made to foot the bill.

Once again, the corporate parties to a major disaster are allowed to play a decisive role in the official response. This recalls last year's derailment of a Norfolk Southern train containing toxic chemicals near East Palestine, Ohio. The railroad, left in charge of initial cleanup, released and burned the contents of several cars in an attempt to reopen the track as soon as possible. This poisoned the air, ground and water supply of the town, while state and federal authorities systematically downplayed the disaster.

Norfolk Southern was also one of the companies invited to Thursday's meeting with Buttigieg.

As if to drive the comparison home, two other Class I railroads, BNSF and CPKC, have announced they will refuse to pay a paltry \$1 million safety fee to the government of Minnesota, a local news station reported over the weekend. The fees were part of a new law passed after a fiery crash in that state last year, only a few weeks after the East Palestine disaster.

The administration's response is being organized through

corporatist bodies, drawing together the major corporations and the trade union bureaucracy under the auspices of the capitalist state. These bodies are being set up in order to prepare for a worldwide struggle for the domination of supply chains, especially against China, a major element in the drive to world war. The Supply Chains Disruption Task Force includes government agencies from the military-intelligence apparatus, such as the departments of Defense and Homeland Security.

A key element in the Biden administration's domestic policy is the use of the union bureaucracy to impose "labor discipline" on the working class. In addition to Maersk and other major corporations, the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA) and other port unions attended Thursday's White House meeting.

According to the readout, "Labor unions discussed how they are communicating with ports to ensure each port has sufficient labor to cover increased traffic. Industry participants emphasized the jobs that are dependent on the Port of Baltimore and the urgency behind opening the channel."

In other words, the union bureaucracy has signaled its willingness to make up for the closure in Baltimore with speedup and overtime in other ports. In 2021, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), which covers port workers on the West Coast, signed an agreement with the port operators and the White House to run the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach 24/7 in order to work through massive shipping backlogs caused by the globally uncoordinated response to the pandemic.

Later, the ILWU kept workers on the job for more than a year, while the White House was heavily involved in behind-the-scenes talks. The union suddenly announced a deal, brokered by the White House only after wildcat actions by dockworkers threatened to disrupt the union's "no strike" agreement.

With the contract for over 40,000 East Coast dockworkers expiring this September, the ILA has threatened to strike if no deal is in place by then. But the union's role in working with the White House and port operators to ensure the integrity of supply chains shows this is so much hot air, designed to get out in front of rank-and-file opposition.

Other bridges across the US vulnerable

While Biden signed legislation for a record \$825 billion in military spending only days before the bridge collapse, US infrastructure is in an advanced state of decay. Around \$125 billion in repairs were needed for the country's bridges as of 2021, according to the American Society for Civil Engineers (ASCE). More than half of the world's bridge collapses between 1960 and 2015 due to collisions with barges and ships

took place in the United States.

Many other bridges are at risk of similar disasters. On Saturday, Oklahoma state police temporarily closed a bridge over the Arkansas River following a collision with a barge, although the bridge did not collapse.

The *Wall Street Journal* published a story over the weekend which identified eight other major bridges of similar width and height as the Francis Scott Key Bridge which are also potentially vulnerable to collapse in the event of a collision. These include world famous landmarks, such as the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco and the George Washington Bridge in New York City. The Chesapeake Bay Bridge in Maryland, which also intersects shipping routes in and out of the Port of Baltimore, was also listed.

"All but one are older than the Key, and all contain what is known as 'fracture critical members,' meaning the failure of even a single steel component in tension could cause a collapse," according to the newspaper. All these bridges were built before new federal guidelines adopted in 1991 to protect from collisions, rules which were not applied retroactively.

Similar vulnerabilities may also exist for older bridges over the Mississippi River, home to ports which service river barges as well ocean-going vessels. In comments to *Engineering News-Record*, Former ASCE President Norma Jean Mattei cited the Vicksburg Bridge in Mississippi as well as three bridges in the metro New Orleans area as in need of assessment.

However, while investments needed for public safety are put off for decades, substantial investments are being made to maximize profit-making through automation and to remove bottlenecks of the kind revealed by the Key Bridge collapse.

A \$232 million investment in the port of Brunswick, Georgia, currently the second largest auto port in the US, has been recently announced. Once complete, Brunswick will overtake Baltimore as the country's largest. Similar investments are being made at ports around the country, especially in the Atlantic and Gulf South. One of the functions of these investments is to whipsaw dockworkers across different ports, enabling shippers to easily redirect cargo in case of work stoppages.

The subordination of society's resources to profit makes these and other disasters inevitable. The only solution is the replacement of capitalist private ownership with the democratic control of the economy by the working class. This requires a mass working class movement directed against all the big business parties and the pro-corporate union bureaucrats, on the basis of a socialist program.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact