

Seven killed in bus accident in St. Petersburg

Andrea Peters
22 May 2024

Seven people were killed and six injured in a bus accident in St. Petersburg, Russia on May 10, when an overworked driver lost control of his vehicle and plunged into the Moika river. Video footage shows the bus crashing through a median, colliding into a car, and breaking through a bridge guardrail, before pitching into the current and sinking within seconds. Those who lost their lives ranged in age from in their 30s to their 60s. Several remain unidentified.

The death toll among the 20 passengers on board would have been greater had it not been for several passersby who immediately jumped into the frigid water and began helping those struggling to escape through windows. The men, Russian citizens from Dagestan on their way to Friday prayers, told the press afterwards that they were not heroes but “just fulfilling [their] civic duty.” They come from a population who are the object of relentless racism by Russian nationalists and regularly branded as “foreigners.” The late Alexei Navalny, critic of the Kremlin and darling of the American State Department, famously posted videos in the 2000s advocating the shooting and deportation of these and other “immigrants.”

Even as he lay in the hospital in “moderately serious condition” with a concussion, head wound, and broken nose, authorities began questioning the bus driver, Rakhmatshokh Kurbonov. He has since been arrested on charges of traffic violations and will be in detention for at least two months, until July 9. Objecting to this punishment, his attorney noted that it was ordered even before authorities had inspected the bus or questioned the company. It will devastate the ability of the driver, who suffers from a serious illness, to provide for his three children.

Kurbonov had worked a 20-hour shift the day before the accident, his wife explained to the press on May 11. Despite physical exhaustion, however, he has not said that he fell asleep at the wheel. Rather, Korbunov

insists that his brakes failed. A second film clip of the incident that has surfaced points “in favor of this version,” noted press outlet *Novyie Izvestiia*. The driver was clearly trying to regain control of the vehicle in the moments leading up to the disaster.

The company that owns the bus line, “OOO” Taksi, claims that the vehicle in question had just passed a state safety inspection, Kurbonov only worked a 12-hour day on May 9, and the driver’s daily shift included 4 hours for rest and time to eat. These statements by the firm, whose owner has also been arrested, are implausible.

The courts fined “OOO” Taksi 23 times—for a total of 3.6 million rubles (\$39,000)—for violations between June 1, 2022 and the day of the accident. Among these were “gross violations of its license” for failing to use government-mandated trackers on its buses that record and monitor vehicles’ movement. Records uncovered since May 11 show hundreds of violations for the company. Of all the private bus operators in St. Petersburg, “OOO” Taksi is among the three worst offenders in terms of accidents according to the news site Octagon.

In an effort to contain public anger over the lack of safety standards in St. Petersburg’s privatized public transportation system, prosecutors report they are investigating whether “OOO” Taksi’s owner failed to comply with “labor and transport discipline,” including “the drivers’ work and rest regime.” The city transport committee says it has also initiated a system-wide safety check of local carriers. Thus far it has found, out of 120 inspections, 150,000 violations.

The fact that Kurbonov was made to work extremely long hours is not an unusual phenomenon in Russia. A just-published study by Rabota.ru of workers 18 and over across every region of the country found that 56 percent report doing overtime, including 71 percent of those employed in the transportation and logistics

sector. Of those who take on extra hours in this industry, 44 percent do not receive any additional compensation. While the Russian government touts the country's officially low unemployment rate and economists emphasize that there is a shortage of manpower, no mention is made of the fact that the companies make up for the latter by squeezing ever-more out of their existing employees.

In St. Petersburg, the super exploitation of bus drivers intersected with profiteering to create the May 10 bus disaster. The public transportation system in Russia's second largest metropolis has long-been privatized. For years, bus lines were dominated by mini-vans, known as marshrutki. Drivers, having effectively rented a vehicle from an owner, ran a sort of shared-ride service in which passengers were charged a set fee and could get on or off the vehicle at any point along a route. Marshrutki operators were in competition with one another and under pressure to pick up as many people as possible as quickly as possible in order to pay off their debts. This resulted in wild driving and dangerous conditions along the city's roads.

In 2022, officials instituted a "reform," whereby the city government now contracts out bus services to private operators, who are then paid according to various performance metrics. The result has been that it is in the interest of firms to follow enough rules to meet their metrics, but grossly violate others. Speaking to Octogon Media, industry expert Dmitri Popov explained in a May 21 article, "In this new economic model, it turned out that the carrier's income fell, because the owners of bus fleets lost the opportunity to install more buses. How do you get your revenues back? Reduce the driver's salary, reduce the number of drivers, make them make more trips on the same salary, save on maintenance, technical staff, and so on."

Officials and the press are attempting to whip up anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim chauvinism against the bus driver, as well as terrorize him with the danger of immigration-related charges. The head of the Investigative Committee of Russia, Alexander Bastykin, told the media just one day after the accident that authorities are looking into "the legality of obtaining Russian citizenship" by Kurbonov. The same day, news outlets reported that the driver is also being charged with "factiously registering at least 10 foreign citizens in his apartment for monetary remuneration." If

found guilty, he could be fined as much as 500,000 rubles or sentenced to forced labor or imprisonment for up to three years.

Violations of residential registration laws provide a regular means for Russian officials to persecute the poorest and most oppressed sections of the working class. Those who come from former Soviet countries of Central Asia, recruited to Russia to labor in some of the worst and most dangerous jobs, are labeled as "illegals," even though they live and work in a country that, until the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, used to be their own and of which their own culture and history is an integral part.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact