

Justice Department reaches \$102 million settlement in Baltimore bridge collapse case

Ray Coleman
10 November 2024

On October 24, the US Department of Justice reached a settlement of nearly \$102 million with Grace Ocean Private Limited and Synergy Marine Private Limited, the owners and operators of the MV Dali, the container ship that collided with the Francis Scott Key Bridge as it was exiting the Port of Baltimore in the pre-dawn hours of March 26.

The settlement resolves a civil claim filed by the DOJ in September for the costs incurred by the federal government in responding to the collapse of the bridge.

The incident resulted in the deaths of six workers and caused significant damage. The victims were migrant workers Alejandro Hernandez Fuentes, 35; Dorlian Ronial Castillo Cabrera, 26; Maynor Yasir Suazo-Sandoval, 38; Carlos Daniel Hernández Estrella, 26; Miguel Angel Luna Gonzalez, 49, and José Mynor López, 37.

Thousands of tons of collapsed bridge and road materials needed to be cleared in order for large ships to be able to reach most of the port's import and export terminals. It took over a month for the shipping lanes to fully reopen.

Dive teams with the Coast Guard also spent weeks searching for the bodies of the construction workers who fell into the Patapsco River. About 8,000 port workers were furloughed during the time the shipping channels were closed.

The \$101.9 million settlement will go to the US Treasury and several federal agencies involved in the bridge cleanup efforts. The DOJ claimed the ship's collision with the bridge was "entirely avoidable" due to the fact that the Dali's electrical systems were "improperly maintained and configured in a way that violated safety regulations and norms for international shipping."

In the original filing, principal deputy associate

attorney general Benjamin Mizer contended, "The owner and operator of the DALI were well aware of vibration issues on the vessel that could cause a power outage. But instead of taking necessary precautions, they did the opposite."

He added, "Out of negligence, mismanagement, and, at times, a desire to cut costs, they [the ship's operators] configured the ship's electrical and mechanical systems in a way that prevented those systems from being able to quickly restore propulsion and steering after a power outage."

This negligence resulted in the loss of power that set off "a cascading set of failures," culminating in the bridge collision, Mizer stated.

For the ruling class, the bridge collapse was primarily an economic event whose impact was estimated at \$190 million per day, according to the Maryland Port Administration. The state's concern was the reopening of the Port of Baltimore as quickly as possible, and not focusing on how to prevent similar disasters or holding to account all those responsible for the disaster.

While the DOJ suit, based on its investigations in the wake of the incident, alleged extreme negligence on the part of the companies that owned and operated the vessel, it failed to address negligence at all levels of government regarding the subordination of society to the dictates of private profit.

The Francis Scott Key Bridge, built in the 1970s at a time when container vessels were far smaller than those such as the Dali, was not designed to withstand an impact from a 95,000-ton vessel. Although bridges around the world routinely build protective barriers, known as dolphins, around bridge columns, no such measures were taken in Baltimore. Nor did the bridge have redundant columns (piers) to prevent a total collapse if one of the supports failed.

Likewise, regulations do not require the use of tug boats to accompany large ships in the part of the Patapsco River where the Dali lost power and steering. The same vulnerabilities and lack of safety precautions that led to the collapse of the Key Bridge are present in bridges across the United States.

Crucially, the settlement does not cover the costs for reconstructing the bridge, which is the subject of a separate suit brought by the state of Maryland against the ship owner and operator. The cost of rebuilding the bridge, which is slated to start in early 2025, is estimated at \$1.2 billion.

Shortly after the incident, Grace Ocean and Synergy Marine sought to limit their liability from the bridge collapse to just under \$44 million. A judge for the US District Court in Maryland on Thursday scheduled the first of multiple civil suits brought against Grace Ocean and Synergy Marine to begin in June 2026.

Those suing the companies include the families of the six construction workers who were killed, as well as two construction workers who survived. Part of the trial will deal with whether the companies can limit their liability under the Limitation of Liabilities Act of 1851.

While the ship owner and operator are certainly culpable, the bridge disaster only revealed the decrepit state of American infrastructure. This is a result of the biggest criminals who are located in Washington D.C. and Wall Street.

While bridges, roads, dams, transit systems, school buildings and other necessary infrastructure are starved of resources, both corporate-controlled parties gave trillions to the financial oligarchy in the 2008 and 2020 bailouts, and squander nearly a trillion dollars every year on the Pentagon war machine. This looting of society's resources will only accelerate under a Trump presidency.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact