

Coal barge catches fire in Baltimore Harbor

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A CSX coal-carrying bulk carrier exploded near the Port of Baltimore, Monday evening, reigniting concerns over safety and infrastructure vulnerabilities in a critical East Coast hub. Explosions were heard around 6:30 PM Eastern Standard Time when the 751-foot vessel M/V W Sapphire exploded near the site of last year's Francis Scott Key Bridge collapse.

The Key Bridge collapse was caused by the container ship MV Dali losing power and colliding with a bridge support pier. Six maintenance workers, all immigrant laborers, died in the collapse. The disaster exposed the effects of profit-driven cost-cutting and inadequate infrastructure investment. The bridge was not designed to withstand impacts from modern large vessels, and safety upgrades were neglected, leading to this fatal event.

Reports from Monday's disaster indicated that a hatch blew off on the vessel, leaving damage signs consistent with those of fires and explosions. Fortunately, none of the 23 crew members and two Maryland pilots aboard were harmed.

A Baltimore community resident told WBALTV11 that the W Sapphire, sailing under the Liberian flag, had just recently departed the CSX Coal Yard in Baltimore when the explosion occurred. Residents living across the Patapsco River, including Anne Arundel County, reported hearing a loud boom and feeling vibrations that shook their homes.

Baltimore City Fire Department swiftly responded with firefighters on land and water, including their sole full-time fireboat, the John R. Frazier, which is capable of handling maritime emergencies on the Chesapeake Bay. Tugboats escorted the scorched vessel to a safe anchorage near the Bay Bridge for investigation by the Coast Guard. The cause of the explosion is currently under investigation.

While crew members were unharmed, this incident takes place amid growing fatalities among dock

workers in the maritime industry. On June 2, a crew member was killed aboard a platform supply vessel, the Tidewater Polaris, near New York, with the circumstances surrounding the death being withheld by both companies, Tidewater and Equinor. These catastrophes reflect the profit-driven, cost-cutting corporate demands that prioritize profits over functional infrastructure and worker safety.

The W Sapphire explosion is part of an unending series of preventable industrial disasters and near-disasters across the United States. This includes the August 11 explosion at the Clairton Coke Works near Pittsburgh, which killed 2 and injured 10, and the death of autoworker Ronald Adams Sr. at a Detroit-area plant in April.

In Baltimore, CSX, a major Class I rail operator in the eastern US, has been the culprit in various incidents.

In August 2023, two CSX conductor trainees died over a two-month period, where one was thrown off their railcar and run over. In May 2023, two CSX locomotives collided at the Curtis Bay Coal Terminal, resulting in a fuel diesel spill that contaminated the air around Curtis Bay and the greater Baltimore area.

Earlier that year, CSX was issued a wrist-slap fine of \$15,000 by the Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE), and was required to pay \$100,000 to South Baltimore Community Land Trust due to a series of air pollution violations following an explosion at the same coal pier in December 2021.

CSX's open contempt for the residents of the Curtis Bay area is being enabled by the trade union bureaucracy, which worked deliberately to block a strike in 2022, giving Congress time to impose a contract which workers had already rejected.

CSX narrowly passed a five-year contract earlier this year, providing a series of annual wage increases starting at 4 percent in 2025 and decreasing to 3 percent

by 2029, amounting to a total of 17.5 percent in raises over five years. This is a significant drop from the 24 percent wage increase imposed on railroaders by Congress in 2022.

The Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen (BLET), a division of the Teamsters, spun the contract as a win, claiming it represented an 18.77 percent “compounded” wage increase and a 21.4 percent total increase in wages and benefits. In reality, the agreement amounts to a wage cut under conditions of continuing inflation.

Similar proposed contracts that have been presented to rank-and-file railroaders from various other unions, such as BMWED and SMART-TD, have been rejected and have met with massive opposition.

Emboldened by the support of the rail union bureaucracy to defend the railroad’s interests, and with the support of the fascistic government of Donald Trump, the railroad and industry lobby groups are pushing for sweeping deregulation of the railroads, further automation, and the expanded use of artificial intelligence to cut jobs. This is occurring under the guise of “modernization” following Trump’s appointment of Patrick J. Fuchs, a former Republican congressional staffer, to the Surface Transportation Board (STB).

The erosion of working conditions for workers and the further deregulation of the railroads and ports will lead to more catastrophic incidents that will endanger working class livelihoods.

Workers must conduct a conscious and independent political struggle, outside the control of the capitalist Democratic and Republican parties and the trade union bureaucracy, in a fight against the capitalist system in order to safeguard their livelihood and lives.



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